

Seen in the Mirror: Things from the Cartin Collection

Mickey Cartin is par excellence a collector.

Collectors are solitary. They sit alone at the center of the universe of the things they have gathered, coolly, logically ... instinctively ... compulsively, obsessively. A collection radiates from that one person, with every object or work of art now relating individually to the man or woman who has chosen it, who has perceived its particular meaning within the mass.

Collectors are connected. Their acts of acquisition are collaborative, networked within a community of experts and dealers and agents, advisers, official and unofficial, and—friendly or competitive—of fellow collectors. And, if the collection is of modern art, of artists.

Collectors are connective. They make links. The works they own are joined up and arranged into groups and sequences: histories, families, series, schools, species, patterns, categories, hierarchies. That mapping might still be highly intuitive, the processes destined always to remain open-ended, or it can help us determine order in the chaos of existence, and to understand the governing principles of common structures, of resemblances. That kind of sequence and grouping might even, on accession, be completable, and it can provide the spaces and logics, the taxonomies, in which to insert the things that are as yet unknown.

In other words, collections almost always provide methods by which we can better understand the collector, and, simultaneously, the universe (however that is defined) and our place in it. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cabinets of curiosities—those omnium-gatherums of the natural and the man-made—valued the rare, the precious, the unusual and the exotic, the exquisite masterpiece and the freak of nature. The cabinet absorbed the spirit of the princely treasury, the protected place for precious stones and metals worked by great artisans into marvelous jewels. So it was in the cabinet that the unicorn's horn and the made-up mermaid might jostle for space with textiles and carvings from Africa and the Americas, where the nautilus shell could be honored with an elaborate silver mount, where a tiny masterpiece, a painting on copper or parchment, for example, could be celebrated as a work of exemplary genius.

Specialist Enlightenment collections of the kind that gave rise to modern museums, and the separated departments within them, imposed discipline. Indeed they created disciplines: paleontology, numismatics, botany, the history of art itself. Stones, butterflies, prints, miniatures, medals. These series usually posit forms of progress, processes of one thing begetting another as complex and sequential as any Old Testament genealogy. They measure evolutions. They define. They insist upon system. And, above all, they reflect our world back to us in ways that find—or even impose—order.

And collections are also acts of autobiography. They chart the collector's encounters and flowing enthusiasms, their crazes perhaps, their passions always, whether permanent or fleeting. Thus they're cabinets of a person's own curiosities, in the metaphorical sense of the word. They're both private and revealing, mirrors of the self.

Mickey Cartin's collection does all those things and it does them together, in ways that are deliberate and instinctive. Certainly, it has its sequences and groups, its things staged in cases, some of them made or made up by artists, by Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), for example, or Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), or Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994). Or by the mid-sixteenth-century painter of the amazing Wunderzeichenbuch—the Augsburg Book of Miracles. And Cartin extracts works from sequences artists have envisaged. One thing can still beget another, and he is the Linnaeus, the Bernard Berenson, of the human creative interior made visible. His collection charts the places from which our creativity emerges: the visionary and the insane, the idiosyncratic and perceptive, the illusory, from moments of chance, intensity, imitation, and insight. He wants to know artists (he feels compelled to talk to them, a lot, and perhaps even when they're dead), insiders and outsiders, in the academy or the studio, working at the kitchen table, in a field or asylum. He wants to see beneath their surfaces and to see how they see beneath surfaces, to analyze their subjectivity and their obsessiveness, perceived here as complementary opposites. Cartin's pattern making is consequently wonderfully unstable and unsettling. It breaks down hierarchies and it makes discoveries, not least of artists themselves. His chains of being are often dreamlike; his mirrors can be misty.

Let us think then about the artists whose works are represented in Cartin's collection, what kinds of things they have made, and what their still individual outputs put together might—just might—tell all of us, rather than just Cartin himself. What, I should ask more simply, have they told me?

Mickey Cartin's organized, disorganizing self-portrait contains many self-portraits, images of Selbst. I find in these works a useful starting point, a kind of center to the collection. Max Liebermann (1847–1935), Peder Krøyer (1851–1909), Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916), Josef Albers (1888–1976), Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), and Otto Dix (1891–1969) are all giants of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, but not necessarily figures who fit into the too-easy sequence of modernism, the traditional tracking of art's *translatio imperii* from Paris to New York. John Kane (1860–1934) is, as the artist himself explains in his title, *Seen in the Mirror*. But these are all pictures that are about much more than mirroring mere physical appearance. They are self-analyses, acts of significant self-revelation. A painting of an artist is not just a surface image; it can be an opening up, A Doorway [for example] to Joe [Coleman]. These pictures reflect but they penetrate too.

They can also distort. Cartin seems also to be interested in partial or unreliable witnessing, in object making that leads us somewhere but also misleads. Tom Sachs (b. 1966), for example, makes a Mondrian from gaffer tape and plywood. Victoria Gitman (b. 1972) creates a series of Beauties, painstakingly rendering in oils the effects of graphite in the drawings of women by Ingres and the other old masters she copies. Cartin has extracted just one of this series for his collection, putting it into a new set of sequences. So our expected realities disintegrate almost as quickly as they are established. Series can be broken up, we are reminded. Meanings change. This is a collection that is profoundly uninterested in quotidian experience. It rejects the impersonal, the rule-bound. As an aim for painting, observing or recording isn't nearly enough.

Artists' self-portraits extend, of course, far beyond the painting of themselves in mirrors. If an artist chooses he—it is usually "he" here—can reveal himself as much or as little as he wants in works of all kinds. Those are the artists whom Cartin wants to get to know. And sometimes his choices are less than obvious. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), for example, was a Renaissance rationalist seeking rules that would lead to the depiction of ideal human proportion and investigating the microscopic details of plants or an animal's fur. But the two prints that have caught Cartin's eye show a more mystical Dürer. Or rather an artist whose scientific looking was at the service of something larger, as he envisages the ways in which the miraculous can be interwoven, contained within or sit alongside the apparently workaday. In one print, the appearance of a crucifix between the antlers of a stag, encountered while out hunting, seems mythical. In the other work, the birth of Christ happens in a corner, tucked away under peeling paint and crumbling plaster, while someone draws water from a well outside.

Josef Albers, at first sight, might seem to be another cool-headed analyst. But his theory of color actually critiques or transcends the scientific. "In visual perception a color," he wrote, "is almost never seen as it really is—as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art. In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually." More deceit. More mysticism. More transcendence. And a system provided for all three.

"This is not a seascape" is inscribed on a work by the performer, philosopher, and painter Thierry De Cordier (b. 1954), labeling what seems to us exactly that, an image of the seas—albeit a grandly turbulent and chillingly empty one. He means, I think, that he is setting out to paint something much bigger than simply what waves, water, and sea-foam look like—that this is an emotional and imaginative representation of the great forces of nature, swirling, powerful, more enormous even than the sublime. He is imaging Mer-mère. Lucas Arruda (b. 1983) paints, he says, states of mind rather than landscapes as such. And for Joseph Yoakum (1890–1972), once a circus runaway, providing multiple unreliable origin stories, and only working intensively toward the end of his life in the late 1960s, Nature and God were the same thing. He had traveled, or at least that's what he said, and his landscapes are identified with real places. But they are fantastic, conjured, the names taken from his atlas and his Encyclopaedia Britannica. His own art-historical classification is—rather drearily I think—as an outsider artist. I don't think Cartin is particularly interested in that taxonomy—one that excludes what it pretends to embrace.

Cartin's collection instead reveals all three artists as players within a continuum, successors to painters like the extraordinary nineteenth-century German Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) or Peder Balke (1804–1887), a Norwegian urban idealist and creator of intensely worked panels of sea and cliffs, of moonlight bursting through clouds, of Scandinavian Sturm und Drang. Carus is another particularly fascinating figure from the past who transcended his own rationalism to take great imaginative leaps into the unknown. Carl Jung stated that it was Carus who originated the idea of the unconscious as an essential part of the human psyche. He was a precise scientist—an obstetrician and the first observer of the vertebrate archetype, so important for the theory of evolution. But he also invented the concept of Erdlebenbildkunst—the pictorial art of the life of the earth—in which the inner workings of geology were to be expressed as a more than Romantic vision. The results are thrilling.

Cartin's painters are uncanonical. In a way, they too have been overlooked, and this is a collection that makes the less noticed precious. Some indeed may perform in some ways as artistic curiosities, as freaks and one-offs—the bezoar stones and bearded

ladies of the history of art—but our task is to see their larger significance. Charles LeDray (b. 1960) makes collections—and he makes the objects in them—of the pointlessly little, as exhibited in his huge ceramic miniatures installation, or by replicating the displayed detritus of the homeless. Ed Ruscha in 1969 classified a series of stains. They both remind us of the power of the apparently trivial, or the disregarded.

And, in parallel, indeed as a kind of counterbalance or corollary, Cartin's collection proposes taxonomies of the visionary, the illusory, the prophetic, the dreamt, the monstrous, and the miraculous. Joachim di Fiore (1135–1202) was an early medieval interpreter of prophecy and a great and influential apocalyptic thinker. Though his writings were roundly condemned—by Thomas Aquinas no less—they went on being copied and imitated for centuries after his death, as in Cartin's mid-Quattrocento manuscript by a pseudo-Fiore, which is illustrated with the impossible made real. And the presence in the collection of a *Resurrection of Christ* by the anonymous Master of the Virgo inter Virgines (active 1483–1489) reminds us of the enormous miracle inherent in this much-painted, taken-for-granted scene. They're the historical preface to all kinds of vision in the collection.

This is a collection that is therefore carefully calibrated to bring out the marvelous, the exceptional, and the portentous in works that in more ordinary contexts might be seen as small acts of artistic peculiarity. Michele Pace del Campidoglio's (1625–1669) monumental hound becomes odder, larger in our memory and imagination. Carl Dahl's (1812–1865) ships become monstrous foreshortened hulks, vast and weirdly unfamiliar. Fernand Khnopff's (1858–1921) portrait of a sweet little girl turns out to be Comte Roger van der Straeten-Ponthoz. This is a way of looking, of understanding otherwise mundane things as all separately extraordinary. It's a way of responding to art that, in Cartin's collection, can even incorporate the printmaking of Rembrandt (1606–1669). In these prints, Rembrandt's elderly sitters are imbued with such an intensity that they become more than themselves. Cecilia Edefalk's (b. 1954) sequence of statuary paintings float into our consciousness like a recurring dream.

A dream? Or an Elysium? The context of this collection restores the visionary to the use of a gold ground in a medieval Italian painting by Giovenale da Orvieto (active early 1400s). The *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine* becomes mystical indeed. We are in no doubt as to the heavenly setting and it is fascinating and provocative to see Christian legend treated as the equivalent of the more personal belief systems that spur artists. It's enormously stimulating too to trace a thread between primitive panel painting to Albert York (1928–2009)—another hidden-away, overlooked artist. He is a

wonderful discovery within Cartin's collection, set on making an earthly paradise. And he is another artist whose pictures have the strange, extra reality of the dream. Even Giorgio Morandi's (1890–1964) potentially solidly grounded still lifes become transcendent and indeterminate. The unreality of painting itself is heightened here.

Begets. This collection begets ideas, reveries, and it goes into unexpected territory, makes unexpected leaps. I would not have expected to re-encounter Algernon Newton (1880–1968) here. And yet his description of strong shadows in a wide street is revealed as beautiful and strange. There is beauty to be found everywhere, even in a gasometer, he thought, depending on the artist's vision. Vision again—and still used in a way that can contain the visionary.

Newton seems, at first sight, the absolute artistic antithesis of Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930), who, sexually abused as a child, became an abuser of children and was confined to a psychiatric hospital, where he had hallucinations and where he drew intensively, minutely, insanely. The lunatic as artist. The artist as lunatic. Is there always real space between them? In Cartin's example, Wölfli describes a ladder to heaven—as intricate as any medieval jewel, and perhaps containing another self-portrait in place of the expected Jacob.

Forrest Bess (1911–1977) is a key protagonist here. He also had visions that he turned into paintings, images with symbols that could, he believed, transport the viewer to different states of consciousness. A convinced disciple of Jung, a believer in the power of Australian Aboriginal rituals (as he understood them), he underwent self-performed surgery to turn himself into a pseudohermaphrodite, to arrive at what he believed was a perfect state. Another lunatic? Or a kind of prophet? These artists appear the antithesis, as I say, of Newton, but actually they share with him an intensity of vision. All of Cartin's artists have that.

This is a collection of works concerned with the psychological, the metaphysical, the pathological. And it ventures, I'd venture, into the adventurous realm of pataphysics, the parodic neo-science of imaginary solutions invented by Alfred Jarry. There's a clue in Cartin's painting of Wittgenstein by Thomas Chimes (1921–2009), one of a series of forty-eight panel portraits that Chimes began with Jarry himself, which grew rationally at first in depicting members of Jarry's cultural circle and then pseudo-scientifically through the artist's own associations. This is a pseudo-philosophy that goes beyond the metaphysical to explore (unsystematically? logically? both?) the virtual or imaginary nature of things as revealed by heightened vision of poetry or love or science, which can be grasped and lived as real.

Mickey Cartin is a collector. This is his collection. So we are tempted to ask: Is that how he lives his life, by the ungraspable laws of pataphysics? Or has he provided the means whereby we might find our own inspiration in this body of work to leave behind the ordinary, the dully real, if only for a spell. That's what I think he's done. He has for me.

"Roll up! Roll up!" Cartin seems to cry, "Welcome to my odditorium, to my imaginarium, to my cabinet-circus of artists and visionaries and lunatics! Watch ... relax ... while they take you to my brilliantly constructed universe of the spirit!"

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