

**Re: Collection Interview with MAD Chief Curator Emeritus David Revere
McFadden by MAD Museum Educator Carli Beseau**

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1. Why are the works you selected for *Re: Collection* pivotal in MAD's history?

Over the past 16 years since I became chief curator at MAD, the museum has explored an enormous range of materials, techniques, and ideas in both contemporary and historical studio practice. The objects that entered the collection were chosen as emblematic of significant issues in the arts, and to build upon the legacy of historic works already found in the collection.

The process of choosing the works to be shown in this exhibition was challenging; nearly 3,000 works were added to the permanent collection—both gifts and purchases—in the last 16 years, so paring down the selection to around 70 pieces was no easy task. I made every effort to choose them to represent several aspects of the museum mission: first, to highlight the diversity of the collection—not only American artists, but a growing number of international creators from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Second, to document the diverse cultures and backgrounds that these artists represent. Third to continue to collect works by both women and men—since the founding of the museum in 1956 we have acquired equally from both genders. Lastly, to celebrate the rich variety of materials and techniques central to contemporary visual arts, while underscoring the meaning and content of these works; visual significance and technical proficiency were always balanced by a focus on the narratives and contexts conveyed in the works.

So all of the works in the show tell a story of what they are made of and why they are made and who made them. There are multiple narratives going on.

2. When helping to make acquisitions for the museum over the last 16 years, did you have any list of characteristics or qualities, or main motivators to guide you?

We were looking at as many things as possible. I would go to the galleries and artists' studios. Once an artist's work came to my attention that intrigued me and was memorable – meaning a week later I was still thinking about the object or the artist – those are the people I tended to go after. They had done something unique that spoke to me very personally, and I hoped they would speak to a larger museum audience, especially when we're dealing with living artists and we're including their own words and their own ideas as part of the presentation of these pieces.

So I'd say quality and integrity were first and foremost and then, secondly, the way in which things were executed and made.

3. How would you describe the importance of the museum's permanent collection at MAD and how have the works in *Re: Collection* helped us achieve our institutional goals?

I think the collection is an evolving concept and idea. We did not have an enormous backlog of a collection to start with. There were less than 1000 pieces in the permanent collection when I joined the staff of MAD in 1997. So it was rather small and it focused very clearly on some major periods in the museum's history, the '60s and '70s, but it was relatively unrepresentative of the '80s and '90s and into our own time.

So the goal has been to clarify our current situation by looking primarily at contemporary work - who are the new people, what are the new pieces that 50 years from now people will look back on and say it was an important piece to have.

The founding collections were critical in that sense because of many of the people who became major luminaries in the field – Peter Voulkos, Wendell Castle, Sam Maloof, June Schwarz - all of these great names were represented by early work. That's what I hope we do now with the contemporary collection. It is to find works that may address an artist's emerging period or early years and become that kind of document that down the line people look back on and say it's an important beginning to a process.

4. Considering the works in *Re: Collection*, but also the permanent collection more broadly, what were the important milestones for the museum while you were Chief Curator?

I think being able to acquire major works that were outside of the economic reach of the museum for some time. We were fortunate to get marvelous support from foundations and, certainly, from individuals, and over the years, to work with artists to create new work that became part of the museum collection.

The challenge was, first of all, coming from a relatively modest acquisitions' budget to try to do major things and then, secondly, to earmark funds to get the best of whatever it was we were going after. Whether it was a piece of furniture or something made of digital technology from Ron Labaco's show, *Out of Hand*, or something from *The Global Africa Project*, or something

from *Dead or Alive*, we wanted to find the best object we could to represent the moment in the museum's history.

5. Beauty seems to be a big part of your ethos and also the works selected for this exhibition. Can you describe more about your approach to beauty, aesthetics, formal qualities, and visual enjoyment of objects as central to this exhibition and how these ideas have shaped MAD's acquisition over the last 16 years?

It's a very complex question because beauty, of course, is defined differently by everybody. It's a very subjective idea. But I think what I looked for were works that made me stop and take note that an artist or a designer or an artisan had done something with a material that I had not seen before. There was a breakthrough there. Something became unusual.

Someone can take something as humble as deer antlers and buffalo teeth, like Jennifer Trask, and make that into a contemporary version of a glorious 17th century still life—a *memento morir* for our own times—or achieve technical triumphs in the use of a material like Mary Lee Hu, whose wonderful bracelet woven of gold is in the show. Or use a most traditional technique, like tapestry weaving, and transform it into a stellar work of powerful significance, like Judy Chicago did in her magnificent "The Fall" tapestry. Those are the pieces that stuck in my mind, and I hope that as people see the show, they would also respond on a purely visual level to these pieces that have incredible textures, colors, forms, and shapes. At the same time, I hope they will then think a little bit about what it was to make that piece come into existence - what these artists had to do with the material. It can be as humble as Paul Villinski's found gloves from the streets of New York, which the artist made into a wall sculpture, or as politically provocative as Stephen Dixon's "21 Countries" plates, which record the countries that the U.S. has invaded since the Korean War. In all the works, the basic message is that the ultimate "value" of the materials used by these artists is found in how and why it was used. And I hope that lesson is underscored in this exhibition.

6. Museum curators, designers and educators frame exhibitions in a way that conveys a distinct idea and intention, that is, exhibitions create narratives. Describe the journey from an exhibition's idea to the selection of objects.

I think when an exhibition idea occurs there are always almost unlimited possibilities of what to include. I think for any curator working on a thematic exhibition, the hardest part is editing because you inevitably find more than you can ever show or realistically bring into the museum.

Cutting these pieces out is like cutting off digits on your hand because sometimes you're so taken with a piece and so committed to it that when you realize that it has to be eliminated as a part of the editing process, it is truly painful. Any writer goes through the same thing, too-- every word is valuable. Same thing is true in exhibitions.

The ideas for exhibitions come from watching what's going on out there - what are people interested in at the moment. We've been in an unusual position in the new location of the museum since 2008, at 2 Columbus Circle, to be able to welcome audiences that would never have come to us at 53rd street. We have a much more general museum audience, which is great. Before, people kind of had to know who we were before coming into the galleries. Now that's not true.

So, the challenge is to find a subject, or a topic, a material, a process, something that piques peoples' curiosity and makes them go through the same process of saying, "I've never seen anything like this before, that's fantastic or marvelous," or even "I don't like it. I don't like what the artist has done with the material." It's important to encourage some kind of interaction with the public.

7. Do you personally collect anything? If so, what do you collect?

I've never actually been a collector. I have stuff in my house, but I always said that, in my case, I got all of my collecting urges out by working for museums because I've done it all my life. I got every pleasure of collecting but didn't have to have the responsibility of owning the work. So the things I live with are objects that found me - they collected me, I didn't collect them - so many of them are intensely personal and some of them are little bits of detritus from an artist that I enjoyed.

For instance, during the *Slash: Paper Under the Knife* exhibition, one of the artists did a piece that was entirely removing pieces of paper from large sheets. He gave me all the leftovers and those were a prized possession because it's the history of that work in reverse. It was like the negative image of what he made for the show. That kind of thing appeals to me, so I am not a personal collector of any note. But I say the stuff that is around me has joined itself to me through other relationships.