

Chris Ramsay Collection, Composition, Contemplation

BY GLEN R. BROWN



Fossils: Patterns of Organic Energy
(wall piece), 1994
copper, wood, patinas, found
objects, Oklahoma brachiopods
diameter 26"



ReCollection (table),
2006 (detail)
mixed media
90 x 30 x 34"



ReCollection (table), 2006
mixed-media
90 x 30 x 34"
PHOTO: MICHAEL STANO

THE DIVERSE ARTIFACTS and bits of nature in Chris Ramsay's expansive table-like sculpture *ReCollection* are personal. Collected over the course of a lifetime, these objects are of scant monetary value, but have been of infinite import to the formation of his worldview and the development of an artistic career that has employed assemblage as a metaphor for the unfolding of meaning.

Like so many others, Ramsay has pursued his passion for collecting with direction and purpose. As a collector he has been an arranger as well as an acquirer. In fact he may have become an acquirer specifically to satisfy a desire to arrange, inherent in his personality since childhood. "I'd go for walks and to school," Ramsay recalls, "and I'd pick things up and put them in my pocket, then bring them back to my bedroom and arrange them on a shelf. Often I'd take a rock and set a piece of glass or a coin on it. I always wanted to integrate the objects, to have a dialogue with them so that my hand would be part of arrangement as well."

The role of the hand in initiating this dialogue is crucial to Ramsay's understanding of art, which implicitly perceives creation as composition rather than as the generation of form. His decision to major in metals and jewelry as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan in the early '80s was, Ramsay asserts, "a way for me to figure out how to work with these things I'd been collecting." Later, as a graduate student at Texas Tech University, from which he received his MFA in 1986, he experienced an epiphany in the studio. "I realized that it wasn't really the pin backs that I was putting on the pieces that made sense to me," he remembers. "It was more the objects themselves. So I did a whole series of pieces that were designed to go in pockets and be taken out and explored."

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Tactile gratification was not the purpose of these early works; they were no mere worry stones. Ramsay had long regarded the objects



as conceptual triggers. Carriers of biography or of scientific narratives, they prompted ontological reflection, a grappling with ultimately unanswerable questions about the meaning of being, both that of the cosmos at large and that of Ramsay himself as one small part of it. His compositions of found objects began to conform to the confines of circles, which since the time of petroglyphs and cromlechs have served as symbols of cosmological order.

Ramsay's connection to the circle was far more personal as well. As a young man, he had befriended a former high-school classmate tragically diagnosed with terminal cancer. He recalls that following his friend's untimely death:

We all went out at his request and completed a garden that he and I had been working on over the course of the previous year. That night, after a big feast with family and friends, I returned home and went to bed. I was awakened in the middle of the night by a slap in the middle of my forehead. I had this sensation that something was over my left shoulder near the

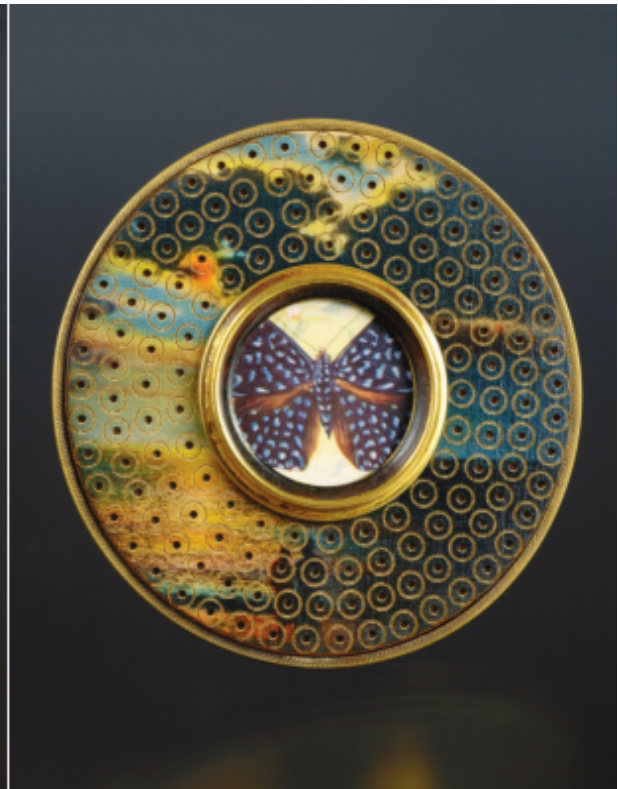
wall. I brought the sheets down and I turned, and these two absolutely perfect rings of whitish blue light came right at me. They just vibrated, and it was incredible... I really felt that it was my friend Peter who had come back and shown me something incredible about life in this form of energy: a soul.

The "Circles" series, begun in the 1980s, comprises both round brooches and large basin-shaped wall sculptures studded with found objects. The latter works, ranging up to 26 inches in diameter, are formed from raised copper etched or stamped with textures that recall fossil beds, swirls in smooth beach sand, or quaint illustrations from 16th-century natural history treatises. The relationship between the objects inlaid in the often lushly patinated copper surfaces and the etched or stamped imagery is one of presence and haunting absence.

This same relationship is inherent in fossils—which are formed over the millennia as the voids left by decaying organic matter are filled with mineral sediment—and reinforces the



Earthen Relic Series: Aquatic Past, (brooch), 2014
recycled wood, ephemeral images, binocular, found Oklahoma crinoids and fish vertebrae
diameter 3"



Romantic Vision (brooch), 2014
brass, recycled wood, ephemeral images, binocular, glass, found butterfly
diameter 3"

Relic Series: Aquatic Past, in which the surrounding image of a primordial landscape—in faint pastel hues and obscured by a field of circular perforations—suggests the receding of Paleozoic seas and the beginnings of a new chapter in the earth's history. As if continuing the epic sweep across the millennia and into a recent era, the brooch *Romantic Vision* replaces crinoid fossils with a butterfly. The spotted blue wings of this insect echo the field of circles that extends outward over images of dark clouds, a tranquil sea, and a

glowing beach. Illuminated by the soft solar light of a sunrise or sunset, a couple—who appear to be either the progenitors of the human race or the last iteration of its countless generations—stands in silent silhouette.

Ramsay's brooches are conceived as more than

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ornaments. Condensed in their tiny confines are the tenets of a worldview that raises even the smallest and most mundane of objects to the status of talisman. The brooches seem to relate narratives about a secret inner life that pulses beneath the surface of ordinary appearance. The binocular lenses surround and protect objects like windows, offering glimpses into the very nature of things. The association of the lenses with magnification suggests an intensely focused way of looking, both literal and metaphorical. In contrast to the ordinary vision that grasps the world in empirical terms, the way of seeing implied by Ramsay's brooches pierces the veil of quotidian appearances. It is no accident that the landscapes in these works are set between the rims of the brooches and the rims of the binocular lenses, as if to confirm the embrace of the cosmos by concentric rings: an emblem of the energy of the soul.

Many of Ramsay's sculptures, particularly those that exchange the plane geometry of the circle for the spherical geometry of the globe, offer a glimpse into otherwise hidden



A World View: Fruits and Vegetables, 1999
steel wire, fabricated bronze armature,
wood and brass fabricated stereoscope,
battery-operated light, marble and iron,
cast bronze, early 1900s fruit and
vegetable stereocards
27 x 17"



A World View: Birds, 1999
steel wire, fabricated bronze armature,
wood and brass fabricated stereoscope,
battery-operated light, found ceramic
birds, cast bronze, early 1900's bird
stereocards (detail below)
27 x 17"



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As You Save... So You Prosper, 2000 (detail)
10 globes of similar size and shape,
displayed side-by-side on a 4' shelf,
each featuring a different National
Park postage stamp from the 1934–35
commemorative series
12 x 60 x 10"

interiors. An early example of his "Globes," the 1999 sculpture trio *A World View* (subtitled *Birds, Insects, and Fruits and Vegetables*) was fabricated by weaving steel wire over bronze armatures and equipping the spheres with found object stands and handmade eyepieces. Like Marcel Duchamp's cryptic *Étants donnés* (translated *Given*), Ramsay's *A World View* sculptures offer the viewer access to "truth" in the ironic form of optical illusions. In Ramsay's case, these illusions—three-dimensional views of flora and fauna in a strange black-and-white stasis—are created by Edwardian stereopticon cards purchased at a library deacquisition sale. Among Ramsay's recent "Globes" is the implicitly admonitory *As You Save...So You Prosper*, an

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array of vintage globe-shaped banks, each of which contains not secret images but rather earth from one of the country's national parks.

The synergy between meditation and conservation

is clear to an artist who has long contemplated a hidden energy within objects. After all, the inclination to preserve follows naturally from an animistic perspective on the world. For Ramsay, an immaterial unity—whether the stuff of souls or something more like gravity or a magnetic field—binds existence together across space and time. If that unity, the ordering principle of the universe, is the key to the basic processes of creation, growth, death, and decay, it is also key to the meaning of Ramsay's collecting and arranging of ordinary objects encountered in his walk through life. Finding the objects is only half of the process. "I'm trying to arrange [objects] in a way so that they can complement each other, so that they can speak," says Ramsay. "There's that connection, I have no idea what it is, but it's there connecting the inner workings of things. In the process of arranging, every so often I hear it."

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