

# The nature of things

Caroline Blais  
carves out a quiet place  
to reflect on stuff



## Caroline Blais: Domestic Memorabilia

Video Pool Media Arts Centre

- 300-100 Arthur St.
- To Dec. 15

ART REVIEW

By Steven Leyden Cochrane

THE height of holiday pandemonium seems like an appropriate time to consider our relationships with things — the possessions we accumulate or simply covet — to step back and take stock of the stuff around us, how it defines us, and how it shapes our experience. *Domestic Memorabilia*, the installation at Video Pool Media Arts Centre by visiting Montreal artist Caroline Blais, provides a welcoming, reflective setting to do just that.

I like things, personally. I'm interested in how everyday objects take on new meanings and uses over time, how we attach memories to our possessions, how the things we accumulate give insight into our values and interests, how they bring people together and set them apart. I get the sense that Blais likes things too, for similar reasons.

*Domestic Memorabilia* is the capstone to a three-month residency in Winnipeg that, among other things, saw the artist assemble a "cabinet of curiosities" from photographs and actual objects collected in various secondhand stores around town. The surprisingly understated installation that resulted puts that material to use, guiding us to consider what these objects (and objects, generally) could mean to us and how they might come to do so.

Given its junk-store origins, the installation is remarkably uncluttered. The exhibition space is virtually empty, the walls lined with floor-to-ceiling black curtains. Apart from the table lamp lighting the entrance, the only object in sight is a smallish occasional table with turned wooden legs and a haphazardly hand-cut circular top. The only sound you hear is the hushed crackling of a record player, the music either recently ended or just about to start. A ceiling-mounted projector casts brightly coloured shapes across the table surface, and that's it.

At first, the projected image is a

rotating circle, its wonky edges echoing those of the tabletop, that quickly reads as the spinning label of a vinyl record. This gives way to a cascade of things, and soon stylized cut-outs of socks, sweaters, books, postcards, coffeepots, mugs, mittens, and a somersaulting Slinky are jittering and shuffling across the upturned "screen." While their shapes stay constant, the objects buzz with flickering imagery lifted from Blais's collected photographs, including textile patterns, swatches of knitting, and fragments of typewritten text.

A degree of nostalgia is central to the work (the objects skew "comforting," the patterns discernibly "vintage"), but its overall effect on opening night, with clusters of four and five gathered around the projection making small talk or watching together in silence, was markedly different the next morning, when I came back alone. In a group, the focus seemed to be on com-

ing together, the shifting table-setting seeming like an apt visualization of shared experience. Alone, *Domestic Memorabilia* takes on a subtle sadness — it seems to be more about absence. The various "objects" are just patches of light. You "observe" the work differently, like time-lapse footage of some unseen someone's kitchen table, the arrangements of cups and kettles marking out the passage of time, indifferent to your presence. Both experiences are gently challenging and, in their own way, comforting.

While "mindless consumerism" might not be the reason for the season, it's undeniably a feature of it. In that light, it feels like a real gift to have a quite space set aside to actually think about things.

Steven Leyden Cochrane is a Winnipeg-based emerging artist, writer, and educator from Tampa, Fla.



The exhibit focuses on a small occasional table, on whose surface images are projected.