A PUBLIC ART INITIATIVE FOR WALLSEND DISTRICT LIBRARY 2006
The public art program at the Wallsend District Library is a timely reflection of the growing importance and cultural significance of libraries to local community. Wallsend District Library is not only a splendid collection of resources, it is a true community hub celebrating local knowledge, heritage, the arts and culture. The Library provides a rich and vibrant centre that welcomes all members of the community.

This project was funded from Newcastle City Council’s Percent for Art Policy.

The Wallsend Artbox Collection is one element of the Library’s public art program and fits neatly within the historical and community perception of the experiences that libraries offer. These artboxes celebrate story-telling, reading, collecting, archiving and memory.

I am delighted to have these fascinating artboxes in the Library’s Collection and look forward to the curious pleasure they will give to many library users and visitors.

Noelle Nelson  
Library & Cultural Development Manager  
NEWCASTLE CITY COUNCIL
A goodly, huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept; shall be sorted and included. *Francis Bacon*

Popular from the 16th century onwards, the cabinet of curiosity or Wunderkammer (wonder room) became the repository of marvellous treasures arranged to reveal the wonders of the world. The notion of the curiosity cabinet as an archive of the world’s curios has provided inspiration for this project.

The curiosity cabinet evolved in two ways, into both the art museum and the library as we know them today. The library’s role as a repository for knowledge was the starting point for the artists involved. Each was commissioned to add to the collection by producing a cabinet of curiosity. Each of these boxes is part of a volume linked by disparate stories and the love of materiality, narrative and memory.

Artists have had a long standing love affair with the museum, the curious and the miniature and we see this reflected in the Wallsend Artbox Collection. Each box contains the tricks that trigger memory and association; from the red plastic torch in Lauren O’Brien’s diorama to the war medals to an unknown soldier in Peter Tilley’s archive. All of these components are trapped under glass as a simulation of the museum display case.

By placing these objects within the glass cabinet, these artists create a distinction, a marker between the everyday object and the marvellous. Ideas of categorisation, taxonomy and the miniature meet a clever end. Under a glass exhibit, these works have a transformative power, revealing the breathless enormity of all the knowledge contained within the walls of the library and taking us away and outside it.

Gerry Bobsien

Public Art Coordinator

Newcastle Region Art Gallery
Ischerwood and Me
Brett Alexander, 2005

Sometimes we read something that creates an enormous impact on our lives. A cry for change or an affirmation of our place in the world. For Brett Alexander, the words of writer Christopher Isherwood were vindicating.

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. (Christopher Isherwood, Goodbye to Berlin 1939)

Isherwood, an Anglo-American novelist and playwright, is best known for his stories about Berlin in the early 1930s. These stories later inspired the Broadway hit Cabaret. For Alexander, this writer was a brave Queer voice in an otherwise conservative era.

Constructed from embroidered fabric squares, the quilt like arrangement of text in Alexander’s work directly references Isherwood. Language appears consistently throughout Alexander’s practice with conscious markings on fabric that subvert the traditional passive expectations of textile crafts. Sculpted letters form a code for the viewer to decipher. A secret language not all will grasp. A reference to a covert life and language existing within the subtext of what Alexander sees as an essentially homophobic culture.
Transformations
Joy Longworth, 2005

Joy Longworth has a hearty passion for the flotsam and jetsam she collects, she transforms the discards we find in the shed out back. Curious objects, principally made of slate, wood and glass, are meticulously selected and arranged. Her work is an unwitting collaboration between the hand crafted forms of cut and sanded wood and the natural form and colour of the slate. The wooded clothes pegs she says are the “newest addition to my collection and a thrilling find.” Longworth describes the hunt for objects as pure satisfaction for these are her treasures.

The slate in this work was sourced by Joy from hail damaged slate roofing tiles from the historic gaol in Darlinghurst. Each piece has its own story from the sand tumbled glass from Merewether Beach to the painted timber wood from an old Adamstown miner’s cottage. Of particular interest is the timber handle off-cuts from the old Hely Bros Factory in Hamilton, a fascinating part of the region’s industrial heritage and a site that Longworth talks about with melancholic respect.

Finding beauty in these objects and arranging them almost like a landscape is a particular skill that brings to life these humble objects of the everyday.
Building altars everywhere
Lauren O’Brien, 2005

This extravagant diorama is a shrine to the art of writing and a personal response to the impact of writer Helen Keller on the artist’s path. The primary text is a play on a quote from Keller “One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.” Huddled under the sheets O’Brien would clutch the standard issue kiddy torch shining it on the Keller’s words that helped inform her future. The red plastic torch is O’Brien’s own childhood escape tool.

This is Lauren O’Brien’s altar to books. Like an extravagant Bollywood set design it is a theatre of kitsch and colour. The plastic donkey, a symbol of humility, quietly contemplates the red torch. Flying cameras are like playful angels cavorting around the iconic image of Mary, used here more as a reference to popular religious iconography rather than to specific Christian doctrine. As a photo media artist, O’Brien is informed by the tension between the ultimate untruth of the photographic image and the perception of reality it generates. This winged camera’s play on the colloquialism ‘when pigs fly.’
Reified Sasser.worm (Vermivirtualus sasser)
Ken O’Regan, 2005

Using the vocabulary of the Natural History Museum, O’Regan has constructed an animal-machine hybrid and ushered it into a virtual taxonomy. He has given physical form to the Internet Sasser Worm virus, transforming an intangible threat into a predatory organism.

ABLE TO RAPIDLY REPLICATE ITSELF IT CAN SOON PROLIFERATE IN ITS ENVIRONMENT REACHING EPIDEMIC PROPORTIONS AND WREAKING HAVOC. Ken O’Regan

The worm is a play on the idea of the bookworm as well as mimicking a natural history exhibit. Throughout the work of Ken O’Regan we see an interest in the displacement of objects and images captured in strange contexts. This hoax is given all the authority of the museum and our belief in the wall text we read and the bottled specimens we inspect.
Collecting Mail
Niomi Sands, 2005

These poetic miniatures are replicas of letterboxes in Bunn Street, Wallsend, home of the new Wallsend District Library. Niomi Sands has not only archived these domestic objects but enshrined them as tools for objects of social and cultural significance. The letterbox is loaded, a collection point for delightful or despairing news, it is an apparatus of our everyday lives that Sands has simulated to great effect.

Through the meticulous carving of paraffin wax and other surprising materials in her work, Niomi Sands attempts to engage with reality in new and increasingly laborious ways and by doing so exploits the seductive power of the hand crafted object. Like a growing number of contemporary artists, Sands has returned to a level of formality in her work yet her materials are not bound by the fine art tradition of carving, modelling and casting but rather in the techniques of craft, set design, industry and hobby.

The delicate and luminescent quality of these carvings is set against the optical designs of envelope interiors.
TIME IS EMBEDDED IN BEE MEMORY. Jessica Schaad

With a sensitivity for material, Jessica Schaad has crafted an installation in beeswax; a poem to knowledge, memory and the passing of time. She has taken the inspiration of the beehive as a metaphor for memory. The cellular form of the beehive is a natural archive and library. Schaad captures it in glass pippets, wax and paper.

The detail in this work helps to focus our attention. The timepieces are trapped under magnifying glass and we can’t quite read the pages of unknown text. For the artist, these elements extend the notions of curiosity and discovery and encourage a childlike search for secret knowledge.

Each element in this work, smelling evocatively of beeswax, brings us closer to an experience of contained space that she calls the ‘cellae’. Jessica Schaad has provided us with an inner sanctum, a sacral space to contemplate the discovery of knowledge.
Once Upon a Time
Peter Speight, 2005

Once upon a time… at a dockland weighing station with an audience of excited apartment dwellers, a group of unsurprised and fastidious looking blokes in dust jackets pose in front of an unseen camera with a killer from the deep… bound for the deep fryer.

With inspiration drawn from an innocent fairy tale and realised in crude timber, Peter Speight’s diorama spins tales and pays homage to the great fishing conquest. Exaggeration is critical to the listener’s enjoyment.

The doll-like timber characters evoke the crude marionettes of Mexican folk art and are often featured in Peter Speight’s smaller dioramas of macabre delight. These are the playthings that bring an instant childlike response, and looking at them closely seems to bring them to life.

Looking into this artbox is like looking into a dolls house - we can only stand outside. We register new meaning with distance and this shift in scale confuses our idea of the world and how we fit into it. For many children, I suspect this will be a thrilling tale of adventure yet for the artist, it holds a sinister secret. This concept was formed in response to the 2005 terrorist attacks in London where the shark is a symbol for an unknown predator.

“…it was this big…”
Collective Behaviour
Peter Tilley, 2005

Like Bruce Chatwin’s passionate collector in Utz, Peter Tilley is consumed by the objects he collects. He has a network of friends around the country who continually send him uncanny finds to reinvest with meaning. Through the compartments and within the ‘rooms’ of this artox, strange objects collide to trigger narrative and memory.

Here the artist is curator, arranging the world according to love of material, form and history. This is a celebration of not only the natural world (bones, shells and coal) but also the machine (oil can, small crucible and wheel). The arrangement of these improbable bedfellows is very similar to the antiquated Wunderkammer where the abutment of the natural, mythic and scientific produces a surreal effect. The multiple frames in this cabinet bring order to a world of chaos by enforcing the artist’s own system of categorisation.

…it is like a shadow cast by the ‘unknown’, an unknown that dissolves into a shower of objects. It offers an inexhaustible supply of fragments and relics painstakingly slotted and fitted into the elected space, heavy with meaning, of a secret room… Patrick Mauries

As a repository for a miniature world, this collection is a fitting home for Peter Tilley’s ‘secret room’.
The Book of the Face
Ross Woodrow, 2005

This figure represents the striking similitude between man and the ass. A round and convex forehead, says Aristotle, is a sign of stupidity…

The Pocket Lavater: Signs of Physiognomy 1832

This artbox links two very different libraries; the collection held at Wallsend District Library and the curious and specialised library of local artist and academic, Ross Woodrow. The absurd yet compelling ‘science’ of physiognomy fascinates Woodrow and he has amassed a private collection of Renaissance and early texts. His particular interest in the curious yet persistent correlation of animal and human traits and characteristics is the subject matter of his artbox installation.

Woodrow’s cabinet is realised as a book printed with rubber stamps based on original woodcuts taken from original key texts by Battista Della Porta, John Casper Lavater and others. He has furthered the scope for the cabinet with a lever that adds the power of language to an already loaded image. Slide the image of the animal head and you are left with a literal representation of the portrait.

…sly as a fox, glutinous as a pig, brave as a lion…

Those wanting to explore these ideas further can source the accompanying text produced by Woodrow to complete his exhaustive project The Book of the Face.
Search and Discover
Vera Zulumovski, 2005

In Search and Discover Vera Zulumovski translates her signature black and white lino prints into embossed, overlapping forms. By manipulating the paper Zulumovski makes reference to the traditional craft of bookmaking and bookbinding. The delicate, raised forms are also reminiscent of the folded pages of a book and Braille patterns. They tease the viewer, encouraging us to discover language through touch. This sense of touch returns us to the artist’s act of burnishing the lino blocks. Prints are physical traces of actual objects in the world.

Zulumovski attempts to reconcile many worlds in her work. The world of the past is represented in the folk patterns of her Macedonian heritage. These patterns morph into industrial and architectural resonances, representing Newcastle in its current state of transition.