

MARTIN CHMARA: THE COLLECTOR AS ARTIST

The Martin Chmara collection of modern and contemporary European art does not exist. *Dixit* Martin Chmara.

Standing barefoot at the end of a weathered jetty that juts out from the right bank of Lake Zurich, the fortyish Chmara projects an image of patrician privilege and serenity as he motions overhead to the mottled grey sky that lends this early autumn afternoon an atmosphere of delicious melancholy. Moored to one side of the jetty is an immaculate mahogany Pedrazzini Capri runabout half-shrouded in a tarpaulin and flying a Swiss flag at the stern above a nameplate that reads AMNESIA in polished metal letters. With his close-cropped salt and pepper hair and rumpled grey linen suit offset by a loose white shirt that flaps in the gathering breeze, Chmara blends chromatically into his native habitat and the resulting snapshot looks like nothing so much as a portrait from the advertising campaign for a particularly Helvetic wealth-management fund.

Turning back from the jetty and heading towards the cubic lakefront villa with its indoor pool, roof terraces and variegated green walls, Chmara leads me towards a vast ground-floor studio invaded by dozens of bubble-wrapped packages, packing crates and filing systems stacked high along three walls. His assistants, identically dressed identical twins Melanie and Milena, are busy cataloguing recent acquisitions and it is his housekeeper who wheels in a plastic Kartell trolley with an array of refreshments.

Returning to our conversation on the jetty, I am curious to know why the Martin Chmara collection of modern and contemporary European art does not exist.

“Well not in so many words, no. I mean, not only has it no legal or official identity, it hasn’t any public exposure, and its taxonomic borders are, shall we say, porous...”

Chmara’s English is hypnotic in tone, surprising in the breadth of its vocabulary and the richness of its idiom, and only very slightly accented. From time to time throughout the interview he confers with his assistants in a muffled German, responding to their cataloguing doubts.

Porous in what sense? “Look, I collect in many different areas and I’m not at all sure where one area intersects with or flows into or can be confused with another. If you

remember, it was you who proposed the terms “modern”, “contemporary”, “European” and “art” but I don’t necessarily operate with those pre-established concepts in mind. Perhaps, if I wished to define a more all-embracing notion of collecting, I might have included something like this.

Chmara picks up an opaque plastic storage cube from the coffee table and extracts a cellophane-wrapped pack of six vintage boxed Dinky Toy Volkswagen Beetles, stacked three high and two wide.

“These have never been removed from their dealer packaging—they were delivered like this to the toy stores in 1956. I just find something mysterious about the doubly inviolate—but obviously not inviolable—nature of the object and the objects within the object. Something both trivial—after all, they were manufactured *en masse*—and marvellous, a little like the hidden tomb of a Pharaoh. Of course I could, if I were an artist, “appropriate” the pack, maybe enclose it in a third level of protection—a glass vitrine, for example—and present it as an “original” work.”

A readymade, in essence. A readymade whose “pharaonic” nature could, I suggest, be read as a metaphor for his own secretiveness, for the fact that virtually his entire collection is itself private and buried away. Because unlike the vast majority of collectors, not only does Chmara have no interest in opening his collection to the public, he has very little interest in displaying it in private. Upon acquisition, each work is ritually photographed and then placed in storage. The collection subsequently exists at a second, virtual degree, visible only in the vast ongoing *catalogue raisonné* he and his assistants are constantly compiling. And yet even this catalogue is maddeningly virtual: it has never been published in hard copy, although Chmara takes a wicked delight in allowing me to page through it on his iPad.

Nevertheless, when I first proposed publishing a book (the one you are now reading) with a more or less representative fraction of his collection—or non-collection, as the case may be—Chmara was immediately enthusiastic and allowed me to choose freely up to one hundred works from a total of over six thousand. (By the same token, the 40 artists represented here were chosen from just under five hundred.)

“Yes, a readymade, why not? But bearing in mind Duchamp’s own homophonic

French rendition of *readymade* as *redîmé*—that is, “redeemed”. The object in its everyday banality is retrieved and redeemed as art.”

But isn't this sort of sacralisation of the object just another, “ironic” manifestation of fetishism? And as a collector, how does he respond to Baudrillard's contention that collectors “invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them?”

“A very interesting comment but if you remember the larger context, Baudrillard precedes that remark by saying that somebody who doesn't collect anything at all is equally impoverished and inhuman. So there is always this tension, which perhaps defines in some sense our very humanity, between collecting and not collecting. I mean, is it really possible to not collect anything at all? It's also interesting that in this essay Baudrillard is more concerned with the pathos involved in completing finite collections rather than open-ended ones. One can collect all the postage stamps of Nazi Germany ever issued but one can't collect all the modern or contemporary art that has ever been made. In that sense, I'm not a closed collector, I'm an open collector, and consequently have no neurosis or anguish regarding closure. I mean, I'm not like some pathetic and perhaps entirely imaginary philatelist who considers putting his head in the oven because he can't get his tweezers on the mint 1935 fifty-pfennig upside-down Zeppelin or whatever it is that will complete his collection.”

Looking around the room and seeing an enormous number of artworks wrapped up and others evidently hidden from view, I'm wondering what Chmara's reaction might be to a website for art collectors that I chanced upon a few days earlier. The slogan on the homepage proclaims: “We think art is not made for storage.”

“Art is not made for storage...A rather presumptuous pronouncement, don't you think? I mean, I could perfectly imagine an artwork being created expressly for storage. Besides which, this whole contemporary obsession with publicness and publicity and transparency and visibility is something that has never exerted much attraction upon me, I must confess. Bring everything into the cold hard light of day. Why?”

Has Chmara, I wonder, ever stopped to psychoanalyze himself? Not perhaps in the literal sense of committing himself to the couch but rather an in-depth interrogation about the origins and signification of a very peculiar collecting passion.

“Yes, well, of course I have and much of it is pretty transparent. I am fortunate enough never to have worked in the traditional sense (apart from several minor and doubtless forgettable films I acted in in my early twenties) and to be cushioned by considerable inherited wealth, largely derived from Genevoise des Pompes Funèbres, a prosperous funeral business founded by my maternal grandfather Alois Graber in Geneva in 1939, of all years. My father Felix was from an early age designated as heir to the family fortune, which was strange because he was basically a *bon vivant* and a misfit, and was packed off to California by grandfather Alois in the early 1970s to study what I suppose might be called state-of-the-art undertaking methods. On his return to Switzerland he revolutionized the funeral industry here and the money just kept rolling in.”

With something approaching mirth, Chmara details his father’s introduction of the “eco-casket”, an environment-friendly, bio-degradable coffin of some description that sounds terribly futuristic for the time and that was efficiently absorbed into the earth and of which virtually no trace remained just months after inhumation. And then later, in the early 1980s, the construction of the Crans-Montana Hypogeum, a daring architectural project executed by eternal Pritzker Prize candidate Eberhard Gschwind. Built on—or to be more accurate, beneath—three hectares of astronomically expensive turf beside Lake Moubra in the heart of the famed Swiss mountain resort, the Hypogeum was designed and marketed as an ecumenical but hardly economical last resting place for “individuals of high net worth” whose vanity and general desire for self-aggrandizement exceeded what could reasonably be accommodated at any of the existing cemeteries in the region. The subterranean vault conceived by Gschwind consists of just 56 burial plots of varying size and configuration, the more spacious among them offering the defunct tenant or tenants ample opportunity to dramatize their posterity by means of statuary and other visual representations. Among the first to be housed in the Hypogeum was the billionaire brewery heiress Baroness Hannelore Stanfield-Tripovich (*née* Heidi Schmidt), flatteringly embalmed and placed inside a perspex dome at the wheel of her blood-red 1968 Ferrari 500 “Superfast” Coupé. Taken to witness the inhumation by his father at the tender age of thirteen, Chmara was profoundly moved

by the experience and has no hesitation in recognizing it as a defining moment in his development as a collector.

Given the extraordinary eclecticism of Chmara's collection, what *isn't* he interested in acquiring?

"*Grosso modo*—and here the exceptions prove the rule—anything that is not a fixed image. Call me old-fashioned but I'm primarily interested in pictures and not in hour-long videos of ice cubes melting, or dozens of strips of tangled neoprene hanging glumly and meaninglessly from walls that would be happier if they were empty, or upside-down passenger vehicles, or blocks of raw beeswax, or quadrophonic speakers amplifying the heartbeats of baby baboons, or dissected animals of any persuasion, and I could go on..."

And what about painting? After availing myself of the *catalogue raisonné* for a few minutes, I notice the comparative scarcity of painting in favour of photography and photo-based works, drawing, collage and text art.

"There are many painters I like, although I have a definite aversion to sloppy abstractions because it's just too difficult to establish reliable criteria of aesthetic worth. Geometric abstraction, on the other hand, I find more intriguing."

I ask him whether his sizeable collection of works by the Hamburg-based painter Gerhard Duft doesn't fly in the face of these declared preferences.

"Interestingly enough, Gerhard's work is predominantly figurative and, more than figurative, mimetic. The entire *Überschwang* series, for example, consists of patiently executed facsimiles of photographs of moss, lichen and decaying leaves. So they are in fact something like figurative paintings that ape abstraction through the intermediary of the photographic image. What interests me further is that virtually any artwork can finally and eventually be encapsulated, symbolized and "flattened" into a photograph. Which is perhaps the ultimate *raison* behind my *catalogue raisonné*."

I put it to Chmara that Mallarmé's famous pronouncement that everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book ("*Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre*"), might be updated to "Everything exists in order to end up as a photograph."

"Yes, perhaps that's a more contemporary way of putting it."

Finally I ask Chmara to give me rapid-fire responses to the names of a handful of artists whose work is reproduced here.

Andie Barus. "My father met Andie Barus in Geneva not long before her death in the late 1960s and acquired a batch of her negatives. She was Jewish and had to leave Germany around 1937 and came to Switzerland. But after the war she returned to Berlin because she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. She had a fantastic sense of the *unheimlich*."

Timothy Fowler. "What attracts me to Tim's work is that he has been able to develop endless variations on the book as an object. Being a rather distracted reader myself, I've always been acutely aware of all the disguises books can assume apart from simply providing reading material and Tim is mining an inexhaustible vein there."

Dumbo McFarlane. "I first met Dumbo at the Street Parade here in Zurich in 2005. He was lying in a bathtub full of foam smoking a foot-long reefer and around the perimeter of the tub he had placed a selection of his works for sale. I bought all of them and although I was later able to ascertain that he was in fact genuinely insane, I also discovered that he was not a real outsider artist but a self-fabricated one, which only served to raise him in my estimation."

Yves Molitor. "Yves Molitor was evidently a true monomaniac. Virtually his entire artistic output is posthumous and consists of imaginary life-size 33rpm record sleeves, of which he designed about six hundred."

Patrick Zeller. "I've always loved hyper-realistic drawing and I love the way Zeller seizes upon magnified details, often cropping and lighting the composition in a very cinematic fashion. His style has changed very little over the years and I currently have about sixty of his works."

Sensing that the allotted time has drawn to a close, I stop the recorder. Chmara looks out the picture window at the gathering storm. The first drops of rain stain the glass, a flash of lightning illuminates the Zürichsee and a roll of thunder rumbles on in the distance. As we sip the last of our *thé à la menthe*, Chmara seems utterly transfixed by the spectacle.

"I love storms", he says and gestures to Melanie or Milena or both.