

In the summer of 1994, I was going to the local flea markets in Oakland pretty regularly, looking for assemblage inspiration, letting my eyes pick out interesting shapes. And of course, I was there to buy the thing I didn't know I wanted. At some point, I took a half-frame 35mm Olympus Pen camera along and began to look through that frame at these same things. In the viewfinder's flattened sense of space, I started seeing the objects against the ground as an arrangement of colors and textures, meaning and chaos.

Soon I was seeing it as a serious project combining two fun activities: shopping and photography. Because I wanted to make larger prints, I bought a 35mm Olympus OM-10 with a zoom lens in a downtown Oakland pawn shop. My wife, Lynn Beldner, already had one and had used it with good results for many years. It was light, fit into a fanny pack and wasn't too intimidating.

The two markets that I frequented were the Laney flea market in Laney College parking lot and the Coliseum flea market on the site of a defunct drive-in movie lot next to the 880 freeway. The massive Coliseum market was open 6 days a week with vendors selling everything from Mexican leather boots to furniture to fresh vegetables. Among the practical and new item vendors were tools guys and storage auction resellers passing on the miscellaneous possessions of anonymous people. By contrast, the weekend Laney Flea was better for me because it was closer to home, not too big to see everything and had a mixture of miscellany and antiques without all the tube socks and home goods.

Sometimes asking permission and sometimes not, I would click away at the stuff on the ground. I preferred not to talk to the owners and never took their pictures. If anyone made a fuss, I moved on. I wasn't interested in why they collected stuff to sell or their lifestyle of driving around picking at thrift stores or estate sales. I just wanted to frame and crop the stuff I saw through the viewfinder. I was making art and I didn't want to talk about it much.

Once I started to shop, I was done shooting. If I bought something, then I was carrying it and trying to take pictures. It would get too hot as the sun burned off the fog and the look of things would be different, I would get hungry, etc. There are lots of reasons, but mainly I just stopped seeing clearly after a few hours.

I was enjoying the freedom of making something without a lot of process. My sculpture and previous photography had me at the center of its production. This new venture into color photography meant that I would have to let others do that work. I sent the rolls off to a place in Connecticut and back would come a set of prints from which I would make selections for enlargements. At the local drug store, I would order full frame 20" x 30" prints and they would send them to me in a mailing tube. It was luxurious to just be in charge of the creative part.

Concurrently, I was collecting vernacular photographs or snapshots and enjoyed looking at them and imagining the lives lived and the conversations that occurred before and after the picture was taken. Finding objects in a similar state of repose, conversing with each other and trying their best to look desirable, was an invitation to document them. They were proclaiming their utility, not for the first time, or even the last.

In this rich country, thrift stores and the flea market are the places where our stuff goes to make a last stand. It is either sold, recycled or trashed. It is the place of the final verdict. Some of the things that show up there are so pitiful, so barely sellable that it is a wonder that anyone would spend the time to lug it around and put a price on it. The discounted dented cans of food come to mind as do the plungers.

This is America's stuff on the outs, the humble things interacting and conversing by chance proximity. The juxtapositions of unlike things, of new and old, of valuable and worthless, high and low culture make the framing an exercise in meaning-making – or just questioning relationships. If you find George Jetson next to Alf, what are they saying to each other? What about G.I. Joe and Herman Munster? The backdrop of asphalt, blue poly tarp or cast-off blanket gives the tableau an undercurrent of poignant neglect.

Finding the picture among the rubbish was the challenge, but this is not just an exercise in framing, though that is central to these images. It was thinking quickly about the relationships between things, being open to shooting a lot (when film was an expense) and knowing this landscape would be different the next week. But when the light was right (overcast or early morning), the saturated colors of the tarps would pop beneath the unloved things.

These are in the still life genre, obviously, but I also think of them as documentary photography and as snap shots, in the best sense of that term, as a portal to a different time and place, though perhaps obscured by the lack of context. They also are akin to aerial landscape in the flattening of the terrain and its inhabitants. And then, who is not portrayed by the stuff they own? Even though we don't see the owners, they are unwitting subjects as well. By looking at the whole of our commerce, wanted and unwanted, we make our culture the subject of a messy portrait.

I edited the vendors' displays, isolating less noticed adjacencies and underrated conversations. My choices have meaning for me related to my sculpture and other interests or sometimes, my sense of humor. Viewers will inevitably bring their own narratives, especially to the fertile ground of lost and found dolls and clothing. Shoes can also be stand-ins for people and convey their owners' personality strongly because it is not tempered by the rest of the ensemble. I tried not to rely on dolls much, ready as they are for anthropomorphizing, but sometimes they were irresistibly speaking in different tongues about their plight as cultural and/or personal refusés.

They, like all flea market stuff, are loved, put away, outgrown and passed down, finally donated, collected, bought, sold, given away again, on and on until now. Here they are, dirty and devoid of context, ready to be loved again.