

Beth Haggart at Postmasters

Beth Haggart's relentless recycling of this and that into quirky, vivid works of art has never been more engaging than in the act of avant-gardish housekeeping that produced this autobiographical junk heap of an installation. Noted for work that transforms all manner of collected refuse into art objects of



Beth Haggart: *Untitled*, 1995, mixed mediums, dimensions variable; at Postmasters.

playfully formal bearing, she's contributed several striking and ingeniously constructed cardboard box sculptures to group exhibitions at Exit Art and P.S. 1 in the recent past. For this exhibition she dumped a giant heap of her stuff in the middle of the gallery. After the show ended, I was told, the truly useless stuff went in the dumpster and the rest to the Salvation Army (or maybe to salvaging art collectors).

This impressive collection of clutter was accompanied by a 13-hour video, made during her activity in the gallery, in which Haggart describes the emotional significance and mundane happenstance of each object she puts on the pile. The camera is focused on her midriff and her dark sweater forms the backdrop as she handles and verbally annotates each memento. Haggart's matter-of-fact narration is an endearingly candid, sometimes comic, monologue that touches on her failed marriage, her relations with family and friends, her taste in clothes and, of course, her packrat version of the making of art.

All the bric-a-brac that inevitably collects around a life seems to symbolically absorb and reflect traces of the passing of time. There's a photograph of Haggart (at age 26) and her husband during their marriage ("... destined to fail, we didn't look very happy"); an expensive record turntable ("I've given all my records away, what do I need it for?"); a photo of a second Jewish marriage ceremony held to please her ailing mother ("really stupid, because he was Catholic. She said she'd never speak to me again"); baby shoes ("kind of sad I never had a baby, but every life has missing parts"). Even some stuff she still

likes—a wooden fruit box, a bulky sweater, a portable TV given to her by a now-dead friend—out it goes. Through the magic of videotape she can toss her diaristic junk and have it, too.

Haggart's approach to making art brings to mind the Fluxus movement and suggests affinities with artists like Ilya Kabakov, David Ireland or David Hammons. It's tempting to interpret her work as a witty broadside on capitalist acquisition. However, the work oddly evoked a sense of community—who among us doesn't have closets and boxes full of stuff? In addition, the artist's approach to conceptual gesture suggested something closer to the evanescence of meditation. The piece also seemed to aim at self-knowledge: clearing physical space is an opportunity for psychic purgation as well. More importantly, Haggart's work affirms the enduring power of personal narration often found at the center of today's art production.

—Calvin Reid

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