

The Kitchen Sink

By Kim Levin

Beth Haggart

Postmasters
80 Greene Street
Through February 4

This isn't Salvation Army scatter art: it's Beth Haggart's own personal possessions. The massive heap includes but is by no means limited to the following: a red wooden bed, a yellow ironing board, a green wicker hamper, a nondescript sofa, a dressmaker's dummy, old clothes, worn-out shoes, aging paperbacks and record albums, an antique trunk, tangles of electrical wire, battered suitcases, maps, snapshots, Vermont license plates, a cardboard box filled with artified slices of dried bread, and a dresser piled high with a jumble of things, including a bottle of Worcestershire sauce. The tangled desperation of so many doomed belongings makes me think of Géricault's *Raft of the "Medusa."* It reeks of mortal panic. In a winter marked by the Newt's ascendance and a holiday proliferation of uncollected garbage, Haggart's installation perfectly expresses our mood.

But the crucial element of this installation is the accompanying 13-hour videotape, which documents both the making of the piece and the residue of associations attached to each thing in its prior existence. As Haggart describes the material and emotional history of each and



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Beth Haggart: Installation (1995, detail)

every object and photo and piece of paper, and her reasons for throwing them away, a patchy autobiography is pieced together. "I'm always talking about things I took from people," she remarks while praising the attributes of a particularly ugly lamp. Is this video simply a portrait of the artist as an accumulator, warning us that we are what we own? Should we call

it a radical regurgitation by an inveterate early-'90s scavenger?

The concept of the installation can't exactly be called new and innovative, but this doesn't matter much any more. Haggart's piece joins an odd community that includes Anselm Kiefer's bonfire-stack of discarded canvases, the contents of Lucas Samaras's bedroom (shown in a New York gallery

30 years ago), Vito Acconci's belongings (transported by the artist from his apartment to an alternative space), and sundry other extreme gestures that take different positions toward possessions, preservation, and disposal. For Haggart, throwing away is really the taking of an inventory of minutiae. Scrupulously preserving on tape everything she has—almost!—got-

ten rid of, she discards the object but retains documentation. Only a suit jacket on wheels, stuffed with paperbacks, and a skirt sprouting kitchen utensils escape the inchoate fate of discarded things.

Urban scatter-work—provoked partly by social ills and the poverty-stricken improvisations of street people—has become a familiar genre in the past few years. Yet it hasn't been acknowledged adequately, due to a widespread critical allergy to messy art. Detritus may be harder to analyze than its psychological equivalent, abjection. The aesthetic of impoverished materialism is more than a distraught response to all those late-'80s critiques of consumption via artworks made of spotlessly new commodities. It's an ambivalent attempt within the culture of disposability—a culture in the process of throwing *itself* away—to answer a primal question bequeathed to artists: how does one differentiate between the priceless unique object and worthless junk? Like her previous monumental constructions of battered cardboard cartons and her small-scale electrical pieces (such as the rusty plugged-in sizzling iron titled *Noah's Ark* now at Exit Art, threatening to burn and electrocute viewers), Haggart's heap ups the ante. I see it as a sly comment on what has become of the mythically heroic creative process. Cast out, along with her possessions, is the old idea of genius. ■