

# G L O W A C K I

“History is memory,” I recall someone saying, and perhaps because the baby-boom generation is growing older, there is a great deal of interest in memory and how to maintain its vigor. Recent books and TV programs remind us that we are what we remember, and that people who lose all or parts of their memory also lose their identities and personalities in equal measure. If this is the case, may we not apply the same observations to a wider culture? George Santayana’s famous aphorism, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” suggests that the experiences of history are ongoing lessons in life. Those who are attentive students, who learn the lessons offered from the past, are able to avoid history’s mistakes. Perhaps this is too grand a concept for a modest art exhibition, so consider experiences closer to home, ones we have all experienced. No response dampens conversation or social intercourse faster than the phrase, “oh, I don’t remember.” The discussion, or at least a fragment of it, is terminated and communication is stunted.

Martha Glowacki is the artist in this exhibition who draws most sharply and pointedly upon memory as the locus of her cabinet. These references to memory are multilayered and embrace elements of a personal past, human history more broadly drawn, and even wider references to the universal natural cycles of life and death. Glowacki knows exactly where the idea of this cabinet was first implanted. It was more than forty years ago at the old Public Museum in Milwaukee. “I clearly remember walking into the room where all the skeletons were kept, with the old dark cabinets filled with skeletons and with vitrines on the top and whales hanging from the ceiling.”<sup>1</sup> She and a friend remembered the ordering of this room and their fascination with the contents of the cases as they

wandered through what were then open fields and woodlands of far suburban Milwaukee, collecting cow bones and bird skeletons. “Our aim was to try to reconstruct the bones into skeletons like the ones we’d seen at the museum.” The delightful childhood adventures of discovering and collecting were given direction by museum experiences that provided recognition and validity to Glowacki’s endeavors.

From her very earliest recollections she loved “making things,” and would often submit small models and dioramas in addition to papers written for class assignments. Later, the youthful dream of becoming a museum preparator, assembling skeletons and dioramas for a living, gave way to a greater interest in archaeology and anthropology, which combined discriminating cerebral and intellectual research with three-dimensional physical activities in the field. Glowacki did little fieldwork but was fascinated with “the way in which you cut down through strata,” and how time, that most evanescent concept, was given a physical structure as one “cut through layers of time” in an archaeological dig. Eventually the love of art was to claim her and the nascent diorama maker became a sculptor. Her early experiences as a student artist remained unfocused until she began the study of metalsmithing. “I was hungry to learn the process. I liked building things. I liked the ‘conservatism’ of it. You were in the class to learn a body of technique and were expected to make good designs as well.” Technique was not an end in itself but rather was the catalyst that served to direct her work.

Over the last twenty years, Glowacki has developed a method of working that, like the other artists in this exhibition, combines the pleasures of intellectual research with the equally pleasurable applications of precise mechanical craft:

a strong combination of mind and hand. Early on, she discovered the trove of riches offered by the open stacks of a great library (the University of Wisconsin's Memorial Library in this case), which she acknowledges as being one of the signal influences on her work.<sup>2</sup> The sources of her information came primarily from books of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, whose precise, richly engraved illustrations have been of singular influence on her sculpture both in the nature of the imagery and the dark and edgy manner of its rendering.

Using these sources, Glowacki has created a personal aesthetic that bridges the human and natural worlds. Earlier her research focused on the illustrated texts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century astronomers and mapmakers, who developed and applied human geometry and order to the wondrous chaos of world and sky. Later she turned to the ordering of nature of a more intimate sort, the manner in which gardening and the manipulation of growing plants was disciplined and regulated by human hands. The implicit statement in her sculpture is that while humanity may seek some grand design into which all nature will fit, plants, planets, and stars all deny the human desire for order.

*My Arcadia* is Martha Glowacki's title for her cabinet. The vision that the word "Arcadia" conjures up is that of a place of rural beauty and rustic simplicity. For Glowacki it is that and much else as well: a compendium of the ideas and sculptural forms of her mature work, which is an extended commentary on the cycles of life and death. In this installation she has adapted the traditional form of the museum specimen cases remembered from her youth, by constructing a glazed vitrine for her larger works, with a bank of glass covered drawers below for smaller assemblages. There are fifteen drawers in the case, fourteen on one

side, and one, all but hidden, on the other. Enclosed within the vitrine are three variations of small tree forms, covered with glass domes of the sort that might have graced a Victorian parlor table. To the left is a tree that has been pollarded. This is a form of decorative pruning in which trees are trimmed year after year to encourage vigorous growth while maintaining them at a predetermined size. The old branches form a gnarled knuckle at the point where they are trimmed, and it is from this point that a crown of tender new shoots bursts forth. In the center dome, a tree has been espaliered, pressed into another form of geometric conformity to follow the grid lines of a trellis, but in defiance of its human ordering, the new growth sprouts in all directions. The right dome contains a dead tree, with its base surrounded by bonelike bits of branches that suggest skeletal fragments of small wild creatures. But the theme of death is mitigated, for perched on this tree are bumble bees, those great workers and builders of the insect world, which seem to be resting for a moment before going on about their constructive lives. This theme of birth, fecundity, and death is repeated almost as a musical theme and variations in each of the drawers, where a subtheme touches on the way in which these elements have been rendered by artists and scientists of history. Three of the drawers contain copper plates, etched from images taken from Frederik Ruysch's monumental *Opera omnia*, and painted to resemble pages from this book, published in 1721–1727. Ruysch was a Dutch scientist, an anatomist who carefully preserved specimens ranging from armadillos to human babies, for anatomical study and reference. He had the goal of increasing and diffusing human knowledge, but he treated the objects he preserved with a deep God-centered respect. The jars containing small animals or birds, which Glowacki has

transliterated from Ruysch's original illustrations, were often decorated with sprightly sprays of dried grasses and flowers, references to the original habitats of these creatures.

Other drawers contain nineteenth-century photographs, some showing the rich bounty of a midwestern harvest, which have been paired with images of death and loss. The death photo of two young children, twins, seen in their coffins, carefully and lovingly garlanded with flowers has been matched with one of a farmer proudly showing his splendid crop of vegetables. Each drawer states and restates the theme of the cycle of life that goes on, no matter how great the ambition of humankind for domination and control.

Like a giant folio volume from the library, one may never see all of Glowacki's cabinet at once. Each drawer is a stanza, a chapter, but unlike a scientific text that attempts a full and complete explication of its contents, this one seeks a more poetic resonance, one less interested in providing precise information about the course of life than making it richer metaphorically. This has been accomplished by obscuring exact meanings and well-understood references through the use of powdered graphite, which has been applied to many of the objects, subtly obscuring and unifying details in the process. This black substance, dusted over a coating of varnish, is then gently buffed to a dense but reflective glow. Graphite reflects light as well as absorbing it, producing a texture as rich as the deeply engraved black lines of eighteenth-century illustrations. This unifies the appearance of objects of a disparate nature, while at the same time rendering their identity ambiguous, requiring a period of contemplation at the expense of instant recognition.

The one all-but-hidden drawer on the reverse of the cabinet contains what some may find disturbing, a long deceased and desiccated cat, now dressed in a coat of burnished black graphite. This was a cat of myth, however. It was a stray that decades ago wandered into the police station in the small town of Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin. Given a police department number instead of a name, “61” remained a pet for some years before it was struck by a car. But 61 didn’t die immediately. It had enough strength to crawl under the porch of a nearby home where it expired. For decades the children of the town knew that the porch of one of the houses on the quiet streets of the town held a secret. It was Prairie du Sac’s version of Tut’s tomb—the remains of a mythic cat, providing a tingle of polite horror as the kids hastened by that porch. Glowacki acquired the remains when the porch was reconstructed and has, in her own way, treated this dry corpse with the respect shown to the Egyptian cats of thousands of years earlier that were carefully preserved to serve as companions to their pharaonic masters in the afterworld. It is a story that few will know, but it is part of the skein of being that is contained within these drawers and that connects them, one to the other.

When Martha Glowacki is asked about what guided her in this complex work, she opens one of the drawers and responds by reading a few lines from a poem it contains.

Distance does not make you falter,  
now, arriving in magic, flying,  
and, finally, insane for the light,  
you are the butterfly and you are gone.

But there is an anodyne to this cosmic finality, and in response to it Glowacki opens another drawer and reads from a second poem, written more than a century later.

Once more my deeper life goes on with more strength,  
as if the banks through which it moves had widened out.<sup>3</sup>

In the present as in the past, the cabinet of curiosity is a device of instruction and wonder, as much for its creator as for those who visit it. This compendium is a statement and summation of the artist's high regard for art and for nature, as well as for the succor she has received from both.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations taken from the artist without other attributions are from an interview with the author in her studio in Sauk City, March 18, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Although Glowacki has used the library for decades, it is only recently that she felt that her research was serious enough to warrant use of the rare books in the library's restricted special collections. Thus most of the information and images she has used were found in the open stacks.

<sup>3</sup> The first quotation is from the poem "The Holy Longing" by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1814). The second is from the poem "Moving Ahead" by Rainer Maria Rilke; both are translated by Robert Bly in *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*, chosen and introduced by Robert Bly (San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1980), 70, 120.

## Illustrations

**Page 62**, Detail of Cabinet, *Drawer #15*, 2000, wood, glass, cat carcass, pigments, 5½ x 15 x 19 in.

**Page 63**, Detail of Cabinet, *Dome #2*, 2000, wood, bronze, glass, bones, pigment, 21 x 12½ x 9½ in.







CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES  
Four Artists, Four Visions

Martha Glowacki  
Mark Lorenzi  
Natasha Nicholson  
Mary Alice Wimmer

Exhibition organized by Natasha Nicholson

Essays by Joseph Goldyne and Thomas H. Garver

Elvehjem Museum of Art  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
2000