

Damien Hirst's stuffed animals among artists' obsessions on show at Barbican

Gallery stages exhibition dedicated to personal collections of postwar and contemporary artists including Peter Blake and Andy Warhol



Medical artifacts collected by Hirst. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

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Anyone even a little embarrassed by their private collection of ceramic frogs can take heart from an exhibition opening on Thursday - there are more novelty cookie jars, vibrantly coloured tea towels and animal-based cream jugs than may ever have been gathered in a major British art gallery.

The Barbican is staging an exhibition dedicated to the personal collections of postwar and contemporary artists including Damien Hirst, Peter Blake, Howard Hodgkin and Andy Warhol.

And the gallery means personal collections. There are cabinets of curiosity-like rooms of Japanese prints, stuffed animals, Mexican LP covers, fossils from hundreds of millions of years ago, Soviet space dog memorabilia and more.



The Magnificent Obsessions exhibition runs until 25 May. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

Pae White, a Los Angeles-based multimedia artist, was at the gallery with a selection of the boldly coloured homeware textiles designed by Vera Neumann that she has collected most of her adult life.

“This is maybe one-fiftieth of what’s in the boxes we sent over,” she says standing in a room surrounded by tea towels, napkins, bed linen and scarves all signed ‘Vera’. “It’s mind-boggling. For me this is like a design library or a graphics archive. It is sort of a tool - that’s how I rationalised buying them. It was ‘I’ll use this for inspiration’, even though maybe I didn’t.”

White remembers sleeping on Vera linen when she was a child and it intrigued her. “This kind of distribution of pattern exposed dumb kids like me to contemporary art without even realising it.”

Her collecting can be linked to her art, she says. “I realised this person [Vera] looked at the world and its potential to be a textile, an artwork ... that relentlessness, that ad infinitum possibility has definitely informed my work.”

The exhibition was the idea of Barbican curator Lydia Yee. “I’ve been visiting artist’s studios for many years and I’ve always noticed what they’ve kept, whether on a wall or on a shelf,” she says. “I’ve always been curious about the relationship between artist’s collections to their art work.”

The exhibition shines fascinating light on to the inspirations and influences of the artists represented. It will come as no surprise, for example, that Hirst is a keen collector of stuffed animals, skulls and medical models, including a wax model showing how to remove polyps from a patient’s nasal passage.

It may be more surprising that Blake is a collector of elephants; that the documentary photographer Martin Parr collects cigarette cases, badges and clocks featuring the many dogs the Soviet Union sent to space during the cold war; or that the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto has a collection that encompasses everything from Neolithic tools to 20th-century medical instruments.

Yee says there is a long tradition of artists using their collections to inform their art,

whether that is inspiration, research or reference.



An exotic array of puppets make an appearance. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

For many of the artists in the show, collecting has hovered perilously close to obsession, and White admits it can be quite draining. “When I started going on eBay and people were winning and I wasn’t winning, I got very upset ... I took it very personally!”

She managed to curb her Vera textile buying about seven years ago but “thanks to this show I’ve started buying again”, she says ruefully.

Magnificent Obsessions: the Artist as Collector is at the Barbican Art Gallery from 12 February-25 May