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## Some People Can't Just Throw Stuff Out

WHEN Mac Premo moved to a smaller Brooklyn art studio in March, he didn't have room for the yellowed baseball cards, old telephones, floppy disks and other ephemera he had been collecting for decades.

He could throw it all out, he realized, or maybe put it in storage. But there was one other possibility: he could use it to create a magnum opus, the biggest and strangest art project of his career. He went with the opus. "I emptied my chambers," he said on Monday, looking at the work. "This is it."

He was standing in a friend's garage-like studio in Gowanus, inside the huge rusty metal Dumpster that he bought in May — "the largest thing I have ever owned" — and that has become a kind of Dumpster of curiosities, filled with personal and obscure mementos. There are his daughter's baby shoes, a tin of canned beef with a label in Arabic, the frame of a bicycle he rode across Europe and the Wiffle ball from a grueling game he played in Roswell, N.M. (He won, 1-0.)

There are 457 items in all, many of them displayed in frames arrayed along custom-built shelves that line the walls of the 22-foot-long Dumpster, which visitors can enter through a swinging door at one end. The installation will be on display at Water Street under the Manhattan Bridge as part of the Dumbo Arts Festival, beginning Friday. "This is a portrait of a life," Mr. Premo, 38, said.



Mac Premo, a collage artist, inside his Dumpster of personal mementos like licker stubs, old license plates and baby shoes, which will be on display this weekend at the Dumbo Arts Festival in Brooklyn. "This is a portrait of a life," Mr. Premo said.

The project is unabashedly about stuff, but it is also a meditation on bigger themes. The old license plates, ratty sneakers and yearbook photos are totems of memory, friendship and loss.

A torn dollar bill stands in for his old cat, Bacon, who once ripped apart Mr. Premo's mother's money and inspired allergies and devotion in equal measure. The SweetTarts wrapper is a reminder of a three-year prank war in which his roommate pinned the candies to one of Mr. Premo's neckties, among other places. The black floppy disk holds a play he wrote in college.

While discussing his collection he stopped at a clear plastic doll whose internal organs had shifted over the years: a liver at the knee, a brain behind the nose. He bought it with his wife, before they had children, for a quarter at a yard sale when they realized they both had similar toys growing up. The doll itself was not important, he explained, but it was powerful as "a mnemonic device" that recalled those simpler times.

"I'm using it to hold a memory," he said. He quotes a friend, the artist Mark Wagner: "Things help me think."

Mr. Premo, a collage artist who has shown work at MoMA PS1 in Queens, has collected things since childhood: first baseball cards, then pictures of cars, then skateboards. He always had the idea that this growing magpie's nest would one day become part of his art.

He found the Dumpster with the help of his friend David Belt, a real estate developer who created swimming pools out of Dumpsters parked near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn two years ago. He spent the summer working on it, and in it, in Mr. Belt's studio, giving it a hardwood floor and wooden walls and arranging his objects, which he also cataloged, or "eulogized," one by one on a blog that he continues to update. He has also created a mobile Web site for the Dumbo exhibit that will guide visitors through the collection. "The Dumpster Project" has its share of kitsch — the head of a Ken doll sits at one end, a set of Chairman Mao wristwatches at the other — but it also carries strong currents of real feeling. Mr. Premo says his wife's old pajama pants, which he has on display, are important because "she slept a thousand nights in those." (For the record, his wife, Adrianna Dufay, teases Mr. Premo for his sentimental streak and wanted to toss out the pajama pants.)

Each item in the Dumpster represents a chapter of Mr. Premo's life. His childhood is

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embodied by keys to the Maryland house where he grew up and a 1986 ID card from a laser-tag arena, among other things.

Ancestors are represented by the Red Sox hat of his father's uncle, who had a mighty handshake and a cluttered garage.

There are the college years, as conveyed by a dirty bandage from a drunken mishap involving a shopping cart. And the New York era, denoted by tickets to the never

-played Yankees game of Sept. 11, 2001, and a cellphone he smashed to bits the next day.

In a way the Dumpster could be seen as a temple to obsessive-compulsive disorder; Mr. Premo himself says his art explores "the fine line between hoarding and collecting." And although his work is rooted in the contemporary world, the themes, he says, are ancient. "A lot of art is about the fear of dying," he said.

He acknowledged that some might find the work narcissistic, but said he thinks it will have wider resonance. He is not alone, he said, in focusing on a question central to the project: "If I let go of my stuff, how do I define myself?"

As Mr. Premo prepares to let go of his belongings, he does not quite know what oblivion will look like. He has no plans or place for the Dumpster beyond the Dumbo show, though he hopes it will find a buyer who will give it a permanent home, he said.

And he does not plan to stop collecting; he has already begun gathering new objects.

"There wasn't a Zen purging," he said. "As opposed to being quiet, I'm yelling, 'Look at all this stuff!'"

By **SAM DOLNICK**

## Art and More Around the Bridge

*Dumbo Arts Festival 2011*

**WHEN AND WHERE** *Through Sunday. Visit Web site for specific locations and times.*

**MORE INFORMATION** (718) 488-8588, [dumboartsfestival.com](http://dumboartsfestival.com)