



# **MYSTERIOUS POSSESSIONS**

*work by Patricia Hernes  
curated by Jennifer Murray*

**LOYOLA**  
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

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Ralph Arnold Gallery



# ON THE ARTIST, AND THIS EXHIBITION

by Frank Vodvarka

Patricia Hernes has, for most of her life, been an artist and teacher in Chicago. A graduate of the School of the Art Institute, she later taught at Mundelein College and Loyola University Chicago. Throughout her career, she has displayed a constantly evolving view of artistic subject matter. It has been a slow evolution, marked by a reluctance to yield to current fancy in her artistic approach, and evincing a steady growth toward her own, idiosyncratic resolution of object-meaning and its representation. If there is an influence in her work, it is perhaps a fascination with nature, and particularly with the 19th century plates depicting details of flora and fauna that still characterize many museum collections. This has led to her understanding of the magic inherent in bio-form objects and their relationships, an understanding well-served by her ability to persuasively represent them in her drawings.

Hernes understands objects in much the same way that a Victorian Naturalist and

(left) *Seed Talisman*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches

Native American Shaman might, if the two were somehow combined. In the former iteration she draws on the centuries-old concept of a “collection of curiosities,” or in the more interesting version of the idea, the cabinet of wonder – a *wunderkammer*. In the Renaissance and later, “cabinet” referred to a room: thus a room filled with “wonders.” These tended to be objects of the natural world like minerals, bones, plants, and the odd creature, but also the many antiquities, archeological artifacts, and relics that the newly awakened classical sensibility of the times relished. Such a room became the world in miniature in all its varied, and yes, curious dimensions, and ownership of that space implied a cultural empowerment. During the 18th and 19th Centuries, such spaces could grow quite elaborate, forerunners of the more specialized museums that came later. The vast collections of Sir John Soane – which, by 1833 had spread through three townhouses in London – are a splendid example of this earlier tendency. His has been described as “a collector’s passion, delighting in the juxtaposition and aggregation of meaning,”

which suggests the unifying theme of such an inventory of seemingly disconnected objects. Put differently, these objects – while inherently interesting – gained their real power from their co-existence and narrative capacity.

So powerful is this aspect of collected objects that Charles Dickens used these “fantastic things” to cast light on the characters in his book, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, written in 1840. Here Dickens correctly identifies one of the key attributes of such a collection, the furthering of the owner’s self-identity. Later in the Victorian age, the term “cabinet” came increasingly to mean something like today’s more limited definition of a cabinet as an enclosure. A splendid example of a more directed collection can be seen in Sigmund Freud’s study in Vienna, where over 2,300 pieces – including Roman glassware and Sumerian seals – existed to satisfy both his fascination with the human psyche and his own addiction to collecting. It is worth noting that Soane was similarly enthralled by the spiritual, as he also owned over 350 artifacts from Native American cultures. These were primarily amulets and fetish figures that suggested an interesting connection between natural object and religious function – an explicit reference to the magic capacity of things.

In one of Hernes’ earlier drawings – *Bug Box*, 2012 – she makes what seems a direct reference to the idea of the wunderkammer



*Bug Box*, 2012 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 16 x 12 inches

by placing various natural objects, including insects, larvae, and bits of flora, more or less within a box shape. Here the box acts as a structural element, granting an organization and sense of purpose that the objects might otherwise not make explicit. She continued that theme in another work of the same period – *Invasive Species* – which also relies on such an element, in this case a stick shape. Here the fauna and such are covered with areas of root-like cilia that demonstrate Hernes’ capacity for making expressive



*Invasive Species #4*, 2014 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches



marks. In both instances, she is implicitly using the structural element to make certain the audience understands that there is a reason for all these objects occupying the same space, and a relationship that will need to be discovered by the viewer.

In her most recent works – all completed in 2015 – she is less concerned about maintaining an obvious structure, and more about the actual relationship between things. She is confident that the nature of the objects and their juxtaposition is sufficiently clear that structural references cease to be necessary. This can clearly be seen in her *Divination Rod*, where the “stick” has morphed into a “diviner’s rod,” which still organizes the material, but also implies a magical function. This is a direction that continues throughout the remainder of her work. Thus two others of her drawings – *Ginkgo Spirit Bundle* and *Meat Rattle* – are free from outside reference, instead recombining into mysterious “shamanistic” tools of uncertain intention. They reference – through their titles and otherwise – strange, sometimes sexual, often fantastic forms whose unclear purposes compel us to rethink the very nature of our milieu. In this sense, her *Plague Stick* is perhaps the most overt – and startling – of the drawings in terms of mortality, suggesting that all is not benign in this world that she has so persuasively drawn.

This raises the second consideration in regard to these drawings. Hernes is an



*Meat Rattle*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches

#### PREVIOUS PAGE

(top) *Divination Rod*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 10 x 13 inches

(bottom left) *Aquatic Power Object*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches

(bottom right) *Ginkgo Spirit Bundle*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches



*Plague Stick*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor  
and dissolved magazine ink | 10 x 13 inches



extraordinarily skilled artist, whose drawings demonstrate dexterity and vitality. And it is perhaps worth remembering that these are not – in the end – collections of objects in the wunderkammer tradition, but drawings of collections of objects. As René Magritte famously noted in regard to his painting of a pipe, “This is not a pipe.” Nor are any of the objects in Hernes’ drawings precisely what they appear to be. They are translations of reality, and the distinction will become readily apparent by examining the case of objects in the gallery that partially served as inspiration for her drawings. Similarly, unlike the binding element in the wunderkammer collection – the curiosity of the collector – here there is a larger thematic element that speaks to artistic concerns. The actual room – referentially or otherwise – need not be present; the method of delineation, choice of color and line weight, composition, and so forth have obviated its need. Thus the latter consideration – artistic presentation – has, I think, asserted itself in such a way as to become the dominant issue. Hernes herself refers to drawing as the most immediate way to clarify, record, or express an idea, indicating an interest in objects as she sees them in their symbolic and artistic relationships. Were they not fetishes before, they are now, because that possibility has

been significantly heightened through the drawing process. If there is a dialog between the represented elements of the drawings, it is in large measure a visual one.

The real success of these drawings – especially strong in their collective presence – lies in their persuasive presentation of a magical world that has been limned by the artist herself. They may reference the real, but ultimately they take us on a journey through the artist’s own mind; we may have been able to glean something of the collector in Hernes, but she ultimately takes us on an artistic passage.

*Turtle Rattle*, 2015 | colored pencils, graphite, watercolor and dissolved magazine ink | 13 x 10 inches

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## **RALPH ARNOLD GALLERY**

Ralph Arnold Fine Arts Annex  
1131 W. Sheridan Road  
Chicago, IL 60660

Established by Loyola University Chicago in 2010, the Ralph Arnold Gallery is located on Loyola's beautiful Lake Shore Campus. An educational exhibition space, the Ralph Arnold Gallery is a venue for cultural enrichment which sustains an active roster of professional and community-oriented exhibitions, providing opportunities for artists, curators, students, and the public to engage in and be inspired by varied art and design practices. The vital role visual arts play in society, and in Loyola's liberal arts curriculum are central to the design and focus of our dynamic exhibitions, lectures, and events.

Our exhibition program demonstrates the diverse talents of visual artists, Loyola faculty, and students from local, regional, national, and international fields. In addition, selected lectures by artists or curators are offered at the gallery, and all events are free and open to the public.

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