LOCHLANN JAIN

THINGS THAT ART

a graphic menagerie of enchanting curiosity

"Natural" Collections: The Whole, the Sum of the Parts

ELIZABETH BRADFIELD

The rustle of flashcards created for study; the tidy drawers of a now-old-fashioned library card catalog; small contextual notes mounted alongside paintings in museums; even postcards, those attenuated missives which stand in for miles and miles of travel and experiences ... all serve as simplified maps of understanding and records of contemplation. The physical size of these objects is part of their power, large concepts reduced to the size of the palm. All are in resonance with Lochlann Jain's cards in *Things That Art*, but none more, to my mind, than the specimen cards in an old-fashioned natural history museum, preserved in its full wondrous and disturbing Victorian aesthetic.

Take, for example, the Wagner Free Institute of Science in Philadelphia: three stories of specimens – birds, mammals, bivalves, minerals, fossils – stored in wood-framed glass cases. Dark oak-paneled walls, an open center of tall cabinets ringed by balconies with yet more specimens, everything gathered and yet separated. Cataloged.

You bend to the crustaceans cabineted at waist level, glass slightly canted to avoid glare (yet there still is glare). You stoop to the faded tests of crabs, the

yellowed labels marking species, collector, place, and date of collection. Some are written in slanted calligraphic script, some typed (imagine the satisfying metallic clack of keys, the tick-tick as paper is rolled up line by line). There are drawings, too, to help parse the more esoteric or tiny: a walking-stick bug's coxa and thorax, the strange architectural wonder that is the apparatus of an urchin's mouth. Parts isolated from the whole, offered for singular contemplation. And in cabinets with multiple examples of the same specimen? A testament to variation, to the dubious nature of a singular ideal form.

Peering closer, the biologist or naturalist might note, too, errors of classification on the labels. This gastropod is no longer in that genus. Now this bird is in another family altogether. There is authority in the hand that grouped these creatures originally, yet time has unveiled different relationships, has shaken certain assertions and revealed new, different, or hidden connections. And from those new understandings come also practical apprehensions of how grouping or splitting creatures influences legal decisions about hunting, management, and habitat.

Consider that in the late 1800s, C. Hart Merriam, the "father of mammalogy," divided brown and grizzly bears into 86 separate species where now science names just one – *Ursus horribilis*. How might you offer hunting permits for 86 species or "manage" them? What does "extinct" mean, both to us emotionally and also to the world's biodiversity, when the last of one the 86 species is lost? Is there less impact when it is not a species, after all, but an individual that is gone? Why? The names matter. The way we see things in relation to others matters.

Lochlann Jain's categories in *Things That Art* invite contemplation of just such histories: looking, collecting, and labeling. Jain's paper cabinets summon

us with sly humor and unconventional logic to question typical groupings and categorizations. Take, for example, "things that are shadows," which includes the scruffy beard growth of "5 o'clock," "time" as represented by a sundial, and "tumor" as an x-ray's blurred finding. The way these "things" leap between different emotional registers unsettles us, and the wit behind the part-phrase "of a former self" as one aspect of this category delights, allowing one to finish the saying and thus feel in on the joke. Together, these examples of "things that are shadows" disrupt a familiar word and invite the reader/viewer to ask ourselves what is "shadowy" to us. There is an energy, a shimmer. Deliberate gaps between word and image enliven both.

In Jain's work, both word and image vie for a hold on "truth" and we, the viewers, realize that our true interest is in the energy of the varied and discordant claims alongside one another rather than any settled determination. Jain doesn't explain why particular objects are selected for a given category or why the drawing "of a former self" is so tortured and Munch-like while the "crescent moon" is so serene. We are left to work that out ourselves, to determine where the emotional center of the grouping might be found. In this way, Jain's work becomes not illustration/caption, but art. Illustrations bestow simplified clarity. Captions present explanation. Art, however, offers gaps, which the reader/viewer must actively hurdle in order to find and create meaning. It's a thrilling leap.

When we visit a Victorian natural history museum now, it's both *what*'s shown and *how* it's shown that we wonder at. The mind and spirit behind the collection, too, shuffle under our awareness – uncomfortably so. We know this is wrong, this enthusiasm to collect unchecked, these animals removed from habitat and context. How does the beautiful, sterile presentation ignore the

people who walked the lands from which the specimens were taken? How does it ignore the mechanism of collectors getting *to* their point of collection? Class, race, and gender are at work here. (Who could afford to travel and collect and display? Who was trusted enough to be believed when they presented the first pineapple as an edible fruit?) Colonialism's legacies are clear, as is the dangerous whiff of exoticism. Jain's work evokes this world and this type of looking, as well as a challenge to it. Each card invites us to consider things as a "type," and also to consider how ridiculous "type" can be, how dangerous. What is a "typical" fruit, emotion, association, human, gender?

Art asks us to think about the nature of truth as well as how slanted and personal knowledge really is. To do this with humor, as Jain does, creates an open invitation to more readily grapple with difficult categories and truisms thrumming in the world beyond the book. Take "things some people jolly well eat but we tend not to," which includes a rather alarmed horse, a surreal knuckle sandwich, crow, and an unappetizing heap of lard. Behind the amusement of "crow" lurks the cultural question of who "we" might be. People *do* eat horse, marrow, lard, and crickets. They also eat crow. They eat dust. Jain has accomplished a subversive sleight of hand: by focusing on what is/isn't eaten, we ultimately come into awareness of cultural identity and the authority to judge what is appropriate or desirable.

Another example of Jain's sly countermelody is the card titled "things that were," which fully delights in illogic in its sparely drawn moments. Is a baseball through a broken window inevitable? No. Yet, to those who have witnessed or caused such an event it could feel that way. And what about the cocaine in the early formulas of Coca-Cola, the beverage that illustrates "hidden in plain

sight"? This example prompts us to recall other things once considered benign that we now must question: DDT thinning the shells of bird species, microplastics in the ocean, institutionalized racism. Again, it is the quirky and individualistic assemblage in each "things that…" which invites us to assess what we might add to the category. Rather than building our defensive walls and resisting an explanatory voice telling us "what is," Jain's work enlists us as coconspirators in creative questioning.

The formal elements of *Things That Art* also call to mind the simplified illustrations of cells in biology textbooks. The nucleus and vacuoles, the centrosome and mitochondrion, all those isolated parts working within the cytoplasm. Perhaps it's the tidy bubbles around each example, or perhaps it's because the body is so often evoked in Jain's drawings – the vulnerable, naked penis; the vulnerable, naked nostril inhaling whatever floats by, unable to close anything out. There's a tension between the many neat rounded squares encircling the "things that" which spotlights and isolates them – and perhaps protects them, too, as a cell wall does. These drawings are living things. They are cells going about their work and creating new energies, new processes – organisms in which complexity is enabled by multiplicity. One cell does a single, remarkable task. Together, many cells create infinite and glorious variety.

And, I must ask, is there an element of voyeurism in all of this looking? Of peeping in (as through a window or a microscope) on something ongoing not intended to be witnessed? Do Jain's drawings make us culpable, in some sense? Each page contains little portholes, windows onto the mind's inner associations, little ships of an idea afloat on the page's sea. Yes, it's like that. All the elements of each card like the portholes on a ship, people seen in their cabins

as if by someone out on the ocean itself, a disembodied watcher. Who is the one watching?

The one watching, of course, is the one whose pen is at work, drawing and shading what is both inside and outside of those windows, those cells. One of the powerful elements in *Things That Art* is the time evidenced in the overlapping marks of the pen in those shaded exteriors on so many of the cards, such as "things you may kiss," and "things that abstract."

In looking at Jain's work, I imagine the human bent to the page, repetitively scratching the surface, considering what is revealed in that unearthing. Time and the evidence of its passage moves "things that" from play to study. What happens over the course of all of that making? Someone is thinking. Some mysterious linkage emerged over the course of drawing to lead the artist from one cell/example to the next. Would the leap have been as strange or wonderful without the contemplative time it took to create the first example? Someone has pondered and drifted and examined and saved a record of that time – time and associative thought that is unique to the artist's own imaginative and experienced world and thus a gift to us as viewers.

In gathering and preparing specimens for a natural history museum, time is marked by the geographic range and local difficulties of collecting. It takes time to go out and net all those butterflies (think of those that escaped, those that were harmed beyond salvage in their capture; think of the "things that" which were discarded because of the physical parameters of the small card). It takes time to box the specimens and ship them home (think of the steady care it takes to draw a clean, delineating line around each example), and time to

mount and group the specimens in some pleasing and logical order (time to plot the final element of the category, to decide when to inject humor, when to prod a bit more pointedly). The speed of our digital worlds, the automated tasks that run behind our daily activities, whether it's typing an e-mail or snapping a photograph on our phone – technology erases the complexity these tasks necessarily embody and emerge from. The evidence of the hand in both Jain's writing and drawing remind us to consider another pace of contemplation.

Finally, in aggregation, there is power – both within the cards and between them. The largest biological organism in the world is an aspen grove. Each tree is not "a tree," but clonal, an expression of an interconnected whole. Or consider organisms like salps: small, barrel-shaped, gelatinous marine organisms that have both an individual life phase and a communal one in which they form long chains. Both phases are necessary. Both have different requirements and existences, yet both are "salp." But banded together as grove or chain, we notice them; not just the group, but also the variation between individuals and the amazing cohesion of the whole.

So, too, in Jain's work – to understand the power of what is being rendered, we must hold each drawing on a card and the card as a whole; we must hold each card and also the dance between all the cards themselves, as well as our experience as we turn the pages back and forth, drifting along, following threads of association and inspiration. We need the isolation of the individual, the complexity and strength of aggregation. We need certainty and uncertainty. We need serious play to open a door to a more dangerous consideration of the waters through which we sail.

Contributors

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