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Jeffrey Vallance



Morticia Madonna, 2007. Mixed-media sculpture. 13 1/2 x 12 x 5 5/8 in. (33.7 x 30.5 x 9.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

NINE LIVES

Jeffrey Vallance is a story collector, recounting enchanting tales and adventures. Thirty years ago, for his project *Blinky the Friendly Hen* (1978), he bought a frozen hen at Ralph's supermarket, named it Blinky, and gave it a complete burial at a pet cemetery, which he documented in a book.¹ And then there are his travels to meet the king of Tonga, his correspondence with politicians, and his recent relics and reliquaries that enshrine objects of personal value. His unique view of the world, nurtured by a fascinating wealth of knowledge regarding the most obscure rituals and traditions, is astounding.

Vallance is hard to define in simple art-world terms. He's often described as an amateur anthropologist. He did study anthropology briefly in college, but unlike many anthropologists, he is not searching for the pure, unadulterated culture. He "likes to see how different cultures interact with each other, and seeks out cultural impurities—mostly contamination by Western culture."² For example, when he traveled through Polynesia, he looked at junk food packaging and tin cans that washed up on the beach. While most tourists would collect the shells and ignore the trash, Vallance zeroed in on the overlooked treasures of everyday life. He's also interested in ancient clashes of cultures. At the Vatican gift shop, for example, he found a tiki carving among the rosaries, which reminded him that when missionaries in Polynesia came upon a new island, one of the first things they would do was pile up all the tiki carvings and burn them. "So first the missionaries burned all the native tikis, and now they have natives carving them again, as Vatican souvenirs. So that's how I've studied anthropology."

A large portion of his work is research based, and Vallance has a special aptitude for finding the most obscure peoples, objects, or traditions to explore. "When I begin research on a new subject, I have no idea what medium the final form will take. I let each project determine the appropriate medium. I might paint; draw; make prints, photography, video, sculpture, objects, artifacts, performance art; use collections; curate; or write a text—each exhibition might be any of these or a mix of several. Sometimes the final version of a project will be a published text, and there will be no formal exhibition." He mixes up the formats and tries to keep things fresh by not sticking with any formula or medium for too long. "Sometimes my work will be a hybrid or a cross-pollination of two or more different mediums, and it can be difficult for the art world to define, because the art world and art history are organized in terms of categories, and many times my work falls outside of their definitions."

Since he was a child, he has been especially fascinated by island cultures. His parents decorated the house in which he grew up with plastic tikis, tapa cloth, and other South Pacific island decorations. As an adult he became curious about the real origins of these designs and set out on a series of voyages to Polynesia in search of the origins of the myth of tiki. After spending time in the South Pacific, he wanted to experience an island culture that was its polar opposite, so he went to Iceland. "In a sense, I'd gone full circle: My ancestors came to Southern California from northern Norway and decorated their home with Polynesian pop,

which aroused my curiosity and inspired me to travel to Polynesia, which in turn inspired me to return to my ancestral Nordic homeland.”

When Vallance and his wife moved into their home in the San Fernando Valley, they encountered a strange brown wall. Puzzled by the peculiar wall, Vallance suggested “going with a brown theme and putting all brown artifacts on the wall, so it looks intentional.” Vallance theorizes that “sometime during the 1970s the tenants decided to do some remodeling and covered one wall in the house with real wood paneling, creating a recessed shelf display area in the center. Then, later, someone else painted a lighter color over the real wood, to brighten up the room. Finally, a later resident tried to re-create the look of wood by covering it with a horrible brownish green faux-wood finish.” For this exhibition Vallance decided to turn the wall into an artwork and made a life-size replica of it complete with the objects he’s been collecting. So far he’s assembled more than a hundred brown objects, mostly from his travels—tikis from Polynesia, wood carvings from Switzerland and Lapland, Lutheran emblems, artifacts from Tasmania, and relics from *Blinky the Friendly Hen*. There are also thrift-store portraits of dogs and cats; mounted antlers from all over the world; miscellaneous artifacts from Venice, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, and Las Vegas; a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe; and a coconut (coco de mer) from the Seychelles shaped like human buttocks.

The Brown Wall (2009) is a perfect illustration of his penchant for collecting. As a child he collected relics from what he calls “personal tragicomic events,” an accident or disturbing psychological event, for example. He also collected objects that he “couldn’t believe humans would ever make.” Later in life he realized that these collections could be divided into specific categories: pop-culture symbols, anthropological artifacts, political campaign memorabilia, and hundreds of others. He had a large collection of Nixon memorabilia, which he’d started collecting in the 1960s at Nixon campaign headquarters and rallies, and eventually it became his *Richard Nixon Museum* (1991). He has a special admiration for political leaders, especially those who function as cultural symbols for their society, and those who fall from grace—Nixon and former Washington, D.C., mayor Marion Barry, for example. As an adult he has collected mainly objects that support his art theories, and amassed research archives on tikis; the king of Tonga; symbols from Switzerland, Iceland, Lapland, and Tasmania; and chickens, to name a few.

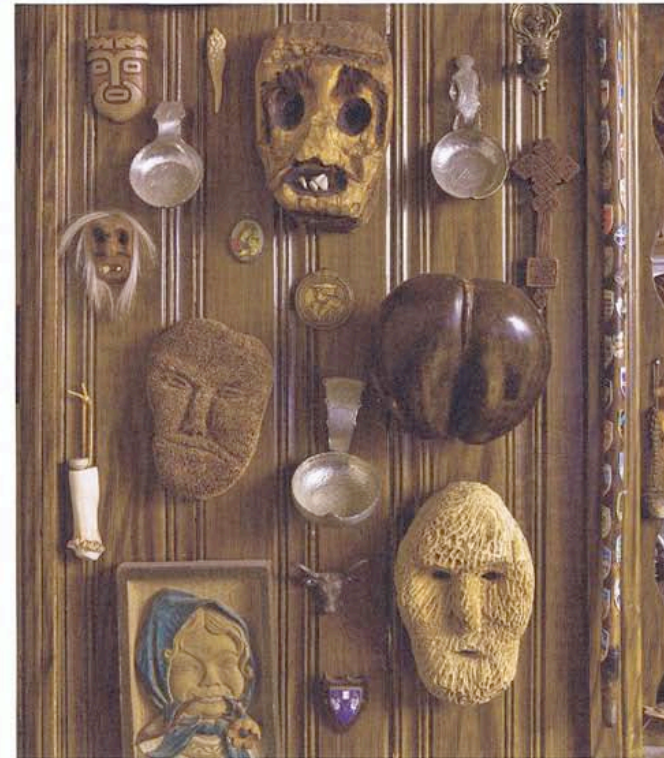
Vallance’s philosophical approach to edification always brings a smile to your face. *I try to set up layers of perception that are similar to real-world situations and hope that the viewer can participate in traveling through and between the layers. Often the first layer is humor. I think humor is a good doorway into the work—it makes the work more accessible. The second layer is usually irony, where somehow the viewer can see that the humor is connected to a real idea or concept in the world. Irony transitions into seriousness, the third layer, where the viewer can see that there are cultural issues involved in the piece. And the fourth layer is, hopefully, one of transcendence—even a spiritual aspect*

of the work, which circles back on itself and becomes humorous again, and the viewer is caught in some kind of paradox.

Vallance reminds us to explore our curiosities and regain our childlike wonder at and appreciation of the seemingly simple and meaningful treasures of everyday life.

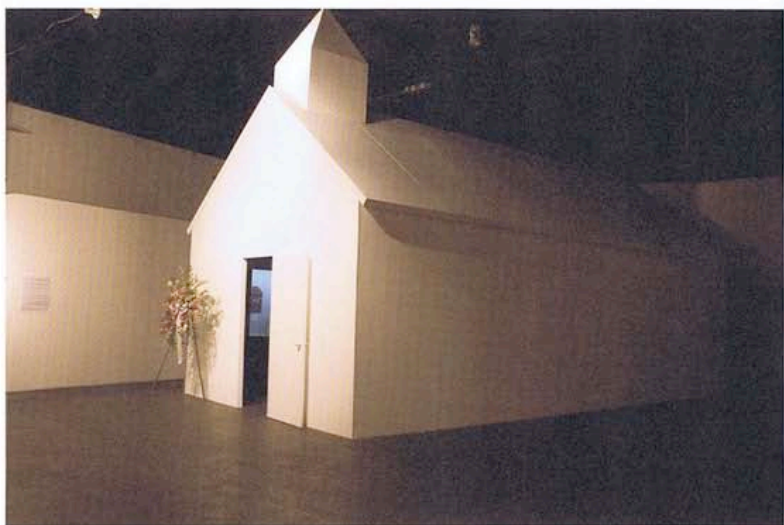
NOTES

1. The *Blinky the Friendly Hen* (1978) project was inspired by Evelyn Waugh’s book *The Loved One*, which grew out of Waugh’s essay “Death in Hollywood.” Blinky has since been exhumed and spawned a chapel full of relics.
2. All quotations from the artist are from conversations or e-mail correspondence with the author.

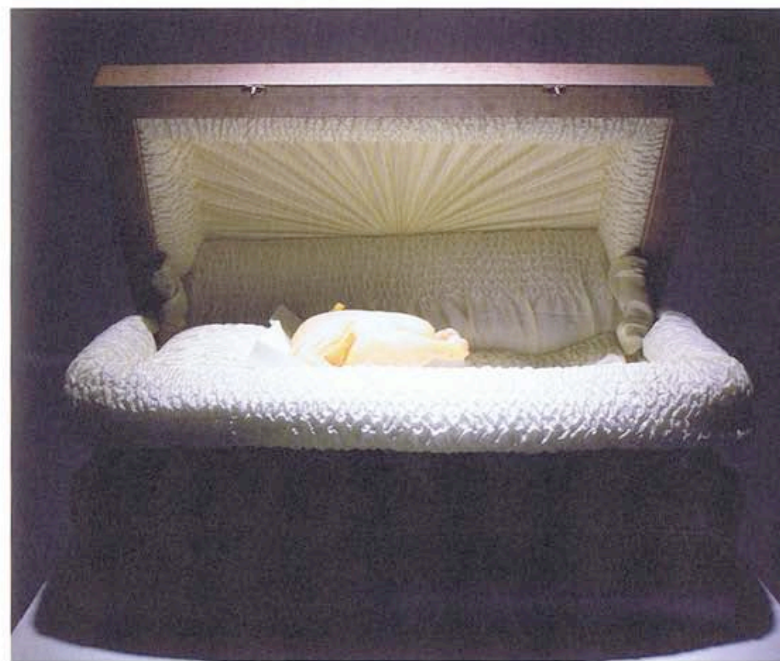


Detail of the Brown Wall, photographed in situ at the home of Jeffrey Vallance, 2008.





Blinky Chapel (exterior and interior), 2008. Installation views from *Blinky the Friendly Hen 50th Anniversary Exhibition*, Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 2008. Courtesy the artist.



Top: *Blinky's Coffin*, 1989. Mixed-media sculpture. 17 x 22 3/4 x 27 in. (43.2 x 57.8 x 68.6 cm). Installation view inside the *Blinky Chapel*, 2008, in *Blinky the Friendly Hen 50th Anniversary Exhibition*, Track 16 Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 2008. Collection of Barry Sloane.
 Bottom left: *Crematory Bone (L.A. Pet Cemetery)*, 2006. Mixed-media sculpture. 12 x 5 1/4 x 4 3/4 in. (30 x 12.7 x 10.1 cm). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.
 Bottom right: *Blinky Bone*, 2006. Mixed media. 23 x 13 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. (58.4 x 34.9 x 14 cm). Courtesy the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.



Top: Jeffrey Vallance Presents the Richard Nixon Museum, 1991. Installation view, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1991. Courtesy the artist.

Bottom left: Nixon Spirit House, 2007. Mixed media. 14 1/4 x 7 3/4 x 6 1/4 in. (36.2 x 19.7 x 15.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

Bottom right: Nixon Spirit House (detail), 2007. Mixed media. 14 1/4 x 7 3/4 x 6 1/4 in. (36.2 x 19.7 x 15.9 cm). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

Top: Relics & Reliquaries, 2007. Installation view, California State University Fullerton Grand Central Art Center, Santa Ana. Courtesy the artist.

Bottom: Vatican Tihi Relic, 2006. Mixed media. 5 3/4 x 10 x 5 3/4 in. (14.6 x 25.4 x 14.6 cm). Courtesy the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.



Above: *Jägermeister*. St. Hubert Belès, 2007. Mixed media. 16 3/4 x 8 7/8 x 7 in. (42.5 x 22.5 x 17.8 cm). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris.

Opposite: Jeffrey Vallance in his Bedroom Museum, ca. 1980.

