

CITY PEOPLE



Gliding Along, And Gathering A City's Castoffs



Above, center and top right, Angela Boatwright



Above and far left, Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

POST-IT notes that read “Lunch at Balthazar or Felix” or “F Downtown to W. 4th St.” A capital A made of silver tape. A “Heaven Bank Note” for \$5,000 signed by someone named Yin Low. The battered audiocassette of Dr. John Gray’s “Secret of Passion.” A bruised photograph of a girl’s bare feet on a scooter next to a street lamp oozing a wet stain.

The old chestnut about one man’s trash being another man’s treasure takes on a new meaning in Bobby Puleo’s constantly expanding collection of urban flotsam and jetsam found in New York’s streets and gutters. These objects have nothing in common but also everything in common because they are part of Mr. Puleo’s accumulation of detritus, alternately a hodgepodge of strange and sometimes beautiful things and an archeological reflection of the city’s polyglot society. A selection of his finds has been brought together in the exhibition “These Eyes Have Eyes,” through this month, at Space 1026 Gallery in Philadelphia.

What propels the show into an especially intriguing realm is that Mr. Puleo found all the treasures riding his skateboard. The 19th-century flaneur was an idle man in

a top hat wandering the streets of Paris; Mr. Puleo is a modern version in sneakers, a slight but intense individual who combines an ability to perform complex skateboard tricks with a mission to rescue other people’s castoffs. This is a surprising activity from a man who says emphatically, “I never litter; I despise litter.”

Mr. Puleo, 29, has been a professional skateboarder for 10 years. Born in Passaic, N.J., he began skateboarding when he was 10 and started coming to New York at 16 on expeditions to its many street spots, like the legendary Brooklyn Banks below the off ramps on the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge.

In 1998 he moved to West 108th Street and began venturing into Harlem and the Bronx to reconnoiter even more unusual skateboarding locations. A childhood mania for collecting baseball cards and Star Wars figures that he “didn’t really like to play with; I was more into cataloging them” might have foreshadowed the future.

One day, a light blue sign with what he calls “interesting rivet holes” caught his eye and initiated a new path; soon after he began picking up metal and wood pieces that suggested inadvertent sculpture. That in turn led to collecting smaller and more easily transportable ephemera: photographs, written notes, fake money and the ubiquitous religious pamphlets ignored by the unsaved that blow around sidewalks citywide. As the collection grew repetitious and categories made themselves apparent, he put them into photo albums with the

Exclusive to the Bobby Puleo Collection: cracked CD cases, scraps of paper, dog-eared cards, battered tape cassettes and other ephemera.

ambition to do an exhibition or a book someday.

And he continues to collect. Mr. Puleo, who now lives in Bushwick, Brooklyn, roams the neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, Sunset Park, Washington Heights and Maspeth, Queens, where what most people consider trash is readily available for the plucking.

So cheap, transient and ethereal that nobody thinks to keep them, his finds are nevertheless an archaeological record that reflects society’s rituals and private obsessions, momentary thoughts and transactions that accidentally end up in the public sphere.

Neatly arrayed on the walls of the Philadelphia Gallery are grids of similar objects grouped into 18 different categories. There are pieces of paper with single letters or words (“Boxes”); backings of packages that formerly held key chains, fungus ointment and a “Beach Favors Flying Disc”; playing cards; and 63 parking lot window tags in a multitude of pastels.

Also on view are bedraggled United States flags in various materials and shapes, assorted numerals on paper, “For Sale” stickers, bits of wood, cloth and linoleum with differing patterns and a batch of almost unrecognizable plastic CD covers that look like antique glass or cracked, beautifully striated synthetic leaves.

Some of the most poignant objects are the least deci-

pherable. Clear plastic bags contain a broken button, what looks like parts of a toothpick, or just air. What does the blue card with the drawing of a hot dog and the words “Hot Dog” signify? Or the one that reads “Dead-6, 5-24-01”?

Religious pamphlets make up the biggest grouping, and the covers of many of them allude to Sept. 11. There are broken and abraded cassette tapes whose offerings run the gamut of hits from Merrill Lynch’s “Commodity Trade Hedge Account Development” and “Get in Shape, Girl!” to Ronnie Milsap, all in a cacophony of colors and conditions and languages, from Hebrew to Spanish to Chinese.

In yet another group are photographs whose torn-up parts have been recovered and painstakingly put back together. Scratched, abused, discarded, they tell of other lives and inexplicable actions. Why is the topless Asian woman smiling in front of a Christmas tree? Who is the man flexing his muscles who looks like Robert De Niro? What happened to the door of the black Volvo?

Mr. Puleo rarely uses the objects he finds, though there was the exception of the perfectly good Judas Priest tape that he kept and listened to instead of putting up on the wall. And he never calls any of the phone numbers on the myriad pieces of paper.