

# LYRIC CRANIUM'S MISCELLANEOUS FICTIONS

## David Morrish's memento mori fuses truth and lies

MIRIELLE EAGAN

David Morrish is obsessed with the idea of death. He has collected macabre and curious objects for most of his life, so much so that in 2012, when the collection became too much for the home he shares with fellow artist and professor Marlene MacCallum, it was moved to an unassuming brick building on a suburban street in a small community near Corner Brook, and named The Lyric Cranium. Visits are by appointment or invitation.

Morrish works in what he calls “miscellaneous fictions.” He is interested in what happens when objects are displayed, and how their meaning alters in different contexts. He collected the post-mortem photographs, skulls and strange taxidermied animals as subject matter for his art, which ranges in medium from photograph, print, photogravure, sculpture to artistamps. Over time, straight portraiture shifted to documenting the placement of objects in unusual places, “thus adding a level of mysterious narrative to each situation.”

The real history of The Lyric Cranium is not what visitors are told. A text in the entrance describes it as the resurrected collection of Griff Hornan (1881-1959), a museologist who, in turn, salvaged many of the artifacts and oddities from one Homer Brunion (c.1875-1940). The current curator maintains and contributes to the lineage of holdings through a personal collection of art objects. The space is presented as a place of work, with a docent's office and mini-laboratory.

The Lyric Cranium is described as “an immersive still-life,” hinting at the genre's reminder of the inevitability of death. The space is bursting, with items on each available surface. Poorly-executed taxidermy bumps up against misshapen skulls, horns and antlers accompany a mouse dressed as a pope, and a dehydrated cat mummy Morrish found in Alberta in 1983 (ironically named “Fluffy” by students) is installed in an ornate framed shadowbox. A closer look reveals that the wallpaper, designed by the artist, consists of a manuscript from a Victorian Last Will and Testament, while another wall shows caskets sold through The American Casket Company's 1920s catalogues. If you're lucky, a generous attendant will show you the secret bookcase door. If you spend the time considering whether something is real, you will recognize the artworks within the accumulation (here's where I admit that I have visited twice and, twice, Morrish has pointed out that the pile of objects I was pondering was some garbage he'd swept aside).

To the back, the visitor enters a series of stark display spaces with harsh fluorescent lighting. Again, the number of objects is impressive: shrunken heads next to shotgun shells, thimbles next to teeth. Inspired by Claes Oldenburg's Mouse Museum, which Morrish saw at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013, the massive number of objects blur together to become a sculptural conversation of form. Whether normal, everyday objects or unique curios, each is made strange when placed in proximity.

The Lyric Cranium focuses its attention to the role of a collector, while wholeheartedly embracing the absurdity of accumulating a bunch of neat stuff. The striking difference in displays is Morrish's nod to the history of museums, from the wondrous, bizarre objects held in private collections as cabinets of curiosity to the eventual paring-down of exhibit design in public museums as scientific methods came to emphasize a language of objectivity. In this way, Lyric Cranium is one of a number of sites that playfully undermine museum presentation through mimicry. The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, for example, focuses on the various objects and narratives of the “Lower Jurassic” period. It is a place where superstitions and facts intermingle, nothing should be





*The Lyric Cranium. Photo: David Morrish*

believed, and where something always seems to be broken (on purpose, I have been told). The same can be found closer to home with the Museum of the Flat Earth, recently opened on Fogo Island by artist Kay Burns. The Museum combines genuine artifacts and fabricated imagery to renounce the overarching belief that the earth is round.

With the retirements of both David Morrish and Marlene MacCallum from Grenfell, The Lyric Cranium will be closed in early August and moved to Ontario. It is not certain what the next iteration will be, but there are indicators that the legacy will continue. “It’s horror vacui,” MacCallum tells me, referring to a fear of empty space. “He keeps collecting more.” ■

*Mireille Eagan is a curator based in St. John’s, NL.*