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An Addiction for Collecting Objects: In Conversation with Ohida Khandakar

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by Purvi Rajpuria

I saw Ohida Khandakar's exhibit titled "Dream your Museum", at Serendipity Arts Festival 2023. The exhibit, comprising a film and a display of various objects– empty bottles of perfume, old letters, cigarette boxes, and bus tickets– centres around the artist's uncle, Khandakar Selim, and his almost compulsive passion for collecting and caring for objects. I was very moved by the exhibit and Selim's deep tenderness towards this world of non-living things, and his distant dream to build something like a museum with it. I wanted to interview Ohida about what drew her to this topic, and about her uncle's passion for collecting– something he calls an "addiction".



Ohida's exhibit titled "Dream your Museum" on display at the Berlin Biennale 2022. Image courtesy: Dotgain.info

Purvi: Tell me about your project 'Dream your Museum', and how you started working on it.

Ohida: It started during COVID, when I went back home to Kelepara– a village in West Bengal– where I grew up, and where my family still lives. I had just bought a new camera, and was taking an online film course in my free time, with the documentary filmmaker RV Ramani. I was really enjoying the story telling part of it.

At the same time, I remember, there was a huge argument going on in my family about objects. There were these objects that they wanted to throw away in the pond. This was interesting to me–I was wondering, what has happened? Why does my family want to throw these objects into the pond?

Purvi: And these objects belonged to your uncle? Khandakar Selim?

Ohida: Yes, these were items he had collected over decades. During the Covid lockdown, with nothing else to do, I started having long conversations with chacha (Khandakar Selim). One day, I suggested, "Why don't I try to digitally archive your collection?" Most of the family wanted to throw the objects away, but as an artist I felt deeply uncomfortable seeing these pieces being discarded.

I realized that even if I couldn't preserve the objects physically, I could document and archive them with my camera. When I brought this idea to chacha, he became very enthusiastic about it. I had my camera and was already surrounded by my family, so everyday I would shoot footage, copy it to my laptop, and then shoot some more. It all started very organically, with the sole intention of archiving these objects.

Purvi: Ok wait, can you take a step back, and tell me more about these objects?

Ohida: Since my childhood, we used to keep hearing about it being spoken about in the family . And the term they used was not "collection", in the village they would say, your uncle is bringing back "kude"—junk or rubbish— from the city. We used to hear that he was picking up stray objects from the road and bringing them home to the village.

When I was very young, people used to say, "Chacha collects trash, don't go near him." This was when I was in class 7 or 8. But later, when I became interested in pursuing art college, he was one of the few people who encouraged me. He would give me books, including art catalogues. I started to see him differently. To me, he was no longer someone who collected trash—he was someone who held treasures. I stopped focusing on what others said and realized how important he was to me.

I started to see my chacha as a character who wants to tell stories. I saw him as someone who is immersed in a different world, he has a different understanding of things, and a very different imagination. His attachment towards non-living things is crazy!

Purvi: And how long had he been collecting these objects for?

Ohida: *Chacha* has been collecting since the 1970s, when he started living alone in Kolkata. He used to work in the eye department at Implant House in Park Circus. His job was technical—he was a doctor's assistant. Every Sunday morning, he would come back to the village, spend the day with us, and then return to Kolkata early Monday morning. He was probably 23 or 24 years old at the time.

He would collect these objects, leave them at home in the village, and then return to Kolkata. With no one to care for the items in his absence, the collection gradually took over the space. First, the bed filled up, then the table, and eventually the entire house. There was no room left. He kept collecting and collecting, often without even realizing what he was accumulating. Yet, he would proudly say, "This is my collection, and I like to collect." That's how it all began.

And no one would want to take care of it, or keep it in the house. Chacha would come back every Sunday and take care of it. He packs each object in three different polythene bags. I have never seen that sort of interesting packing in my life– the way I have seen my uncle pack each object by hand. And it's not just I or 2 objects. It's 10,000 objects, 15,000 objects.

You can't count them. It's a large, large number of objects. He has 5000 to 7000 stamps and almost 8 stamp books, a gramophone, a lot of old cassettes, a few old phones, including an old stone phone. But that's only 50% of his collection. The other half could be anything that other people normally throw away. Like, he has never thrown a single bill from between 1973 to 2024, for anything he bought from Kolkata. He has collected each and every bill over such a long period of time. He has also never thrown out a single one of his nails. He has a container full of his nails! Can you imagine? Once I asked chacha, whose are these? What is it for? And he said to me, these are my nails and this is my museum collection.



Some objects from Selim's collection, along with a glimpse at how he stores them. Image courtesy: Khandakar Ohida.

And then he would share the story of each object. Who gave him what, on what date, and why they gave it to him. How he took something that someone was otherwise going to throw away. He has never thrown a single thing away; you know? When I heard these stories, I felt like he was the real artist, even though I was the one who had graduated from art school.

That's also when I started to see my chacha as a character who wants to tell stories. I saw him as someone who is immersed in a different world, he has a different understanding of things, and a very different imagination. His attachment towards non-living things is crazy! Obviously, he has a very bad understanding of living things.

Purvi: Why do you think he started collecting?

Ohida: When I asked him when he started collecting these objects, he told me that he had had this instinct in him since childhood, but there wasn't much stuff to collect in the village. Once he moved to the city, however, he saw how much stuff people throw away and started to collect those objects. Something like a showpiece, if it's broken, people in the city will throw it away. When *chacha* noticed people throwing things like that away, and felt like no one else was taking care of those objects, so he started collecting them.

It is also a psychological thing. Some people just have trouble throwing things away. In my house, for example, we still have my grandfather's farming implements from ages ago. It is genetic, I think.

One time I jokingly asked chacha if he drinks or smokes because he has all these empty alcohol bottles, and amazing ashtrays in his collection from France and other places like that. He immediately denied it and said, some people like to drink, and some people like to smoke– but those are not *my* addictions. My addiction is collecting.

Purvi: When you started shooting, what do you think your uncle was hoping to get out of it, or where did he see the film go?

Ohida: He started showing interest when I was simply documenting his objects. I was not really sure of where the project would go in the long run. At that time, no one else was taking care of these objects, and he didn't have the money to build a space to store and display his collection. It was not possible in a rural area. So he liked that I was documenting his collection.

In our day-to-day conversations he was a little disheartened that the cyclone (Amphan) had destroyed the mud house where he stored his collection. His wish was to protect his collection from the calamity. He was pleased to see that his collection would be stored digitally in my film in case he lost it to a natural calamity.



A still from Ohida's film 'Dream your Museum.'



The "Dream your Museum" installation displayed at SAF 23; Image courtesy: Khandakar Ohida



'Dream your Museum' film projection at SAF 23; Image courtesy: k Ohida

Purvi: In your film you show him wanting to build a museum with his collection. Could you talk about that a little more? What was his idea of the museum that he was trying to create? And how do you think it was different from the conventional colonial idea of the museum?

Ohida: Normally when we think of a museum, it often revolves around the objects it houses. I have seen this in my case as well– recently I displayed my work at a big museum. The first time I saw a museum was in April of 2011. I saw the Indian Museum in Kolkata, which is attached to my college, Government College of Art. I had gone with some cousins to get the application form for college. I was only 17 years old at that time.

Growing up in a rural area, I had never had the opportunity to visit a museum. For me, the idea of a museum was like a magical house—a *jaadu ghar*. When I went to the Indian Museum was the first time I saw the huge dinosaur skeleton or an elephant's tooth that is on display. To me, it wasn't about the history of these objects or where they came from but about the museum as an imaginative space. Imagination is what a museum evoked for me at the time.

Over time, after I went to art school, my understanding of museums evolved. Today, I think there are almost 55,000 museums in the world. Their significance often lies in the value of the objects they showcase—whether artistic, cultural, or monetary.

But if you look at my chacha's idea of a museum, it's entirely different. He collects personal items like his nails and hair and includes them in his museum. Beyond that, chacha also has some valuable objects in his collection, which he could have sold for significant amounts of money. But he never even considered doing that. For him, it's not about their monetary value. He wants people to come and see his objects, touch them, and engage with them. That interaction gives him joy. His approach isn't about creating a formal atmosphere or strictly protecting the objects but about fostering connection and sharing his collection with others.



Purvi: I know you have shown parts of his collection at the Berlin Biennale, and at Serendipity Arts Festival. But how do you have other plans of how you want people to engage with his collection?

Ohida: We want to break the distance between people and these objects. For me now, it is about creating a community space that can help people in rural areas to think differently. It is not about educating them, but about helping create a space for engagement and discourse. I have lots of ideas. One is to create an alternative museum where people can drink chai, borrow objects if they want to, and return them when they're done using them. I feel this kind of interaction could bring people joy and build a sense of shared ownership.

I'm also exploring the idea of a Virtual Reality museum that can be taken to schools, allowing students to experience the space in an immersive way. While we had initially planned to show the physical museum in a mud house, certain circumstances delayed the project. The entire concept is meant to be an imaginative space. I've already started working on it, but I'm waiting for additional funding to take it forward.

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I feel fortunate to have had the privilege of attending art college and gaining access to spaces, people, and mentors who have played a significant role in my growth. Now, as an artist, I feel it's time for me to give back to my society. While I continue to advance my personal career, I also want to contribute to my society by building an alternative museum.

One idea is to create spaces that empower people, especially rural women, by providing them access to opportunities that allow them to pursue their aspirations. A place where they can come together, share ideas, and have meaningful discussions. Perhaps a museum that is deeply integrated with the local culture—an alternative kind of museum. I have so many ideas... Let's see how they evolve!

Purvi: Thank you so much, Ohida. It was a pleasure talking to you. As you already know, I find your project very moving and thoughtful, and wish you all the best for everything else you wish to do with it.

Ohida: Thank you so much!

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Khandakar Ohida is a visual artist and film practitioner working in Hooghly and Kolkata, West Bengal. Her practice spans drawings, paintings, and installation art influenced by her surroundings, including personal memories, rural marginalized voices, post-colonial imagination, and non-linear narratives that interact with various societal layers. Ohida amplifies hidden stories, particularly those empowering women, by examining power dynamics shaped by class, gender, and belief systems. Her work often explores escape pathways, infused with magical realism elements.

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