

ANT FARM

» LEE BACCHUS

About twenty-five years ago, shortly after I'd begun a career as a feature writer for the *Vancouver Sun*, a quasi-Kafkan character visited the newspaper office. Waiting in the reception area was a loquacious young salesman named Dave, and within the space of few words it was clear Dave was not long out of Junior Achievement or simply exuding his own fevered entrepreneurial imagination. With breathless enthusiasm he launched into his pitch for—ta-da!—Uncle Milton's Ant Farms. I should do a feature on them, Dave suggested, as he pulled one from his large briefcase.



With an ache of nostalgia I remembered these from the tiny, tacky display ads on the inside back cover of my childhood comic books, alongside ads for X-Ray glasses, Charles Atlas muscle builders, sea monkeys and buckets full of plastic toy soldiers. The ant farm was a window on a world where tunneling Harvester Ants (mail ordered by Uncle Milton) would create a society before your very eyes. As a kid

I was entranced by them, lusted after them, but my parents feared runaway infestation and I never did contact Uncle Milton.

But how I loved them!

It didn't take a genius to realize Dave, who saw himself as an evangelist for an ant farm revival, was the human equivalent of the hurried ants in his own plastic farms or perhaps a version of the darkly comic Explorer in Kafka's penal colony or the obsessive compulsive creature in *The Burrow*.

So what does this wandering preamble have to do with this gallery installation? In many ways some of the artifacts in Jerry Zaslove's complex and beautiful exhibit—*The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony*—reminded me of the ant farm I had desperately pined for as a kid. It was a tight social microcosm that would replace in fantasy the alienating suburban world I inhabited. And I would be in control. Of course, the ant farm was and is at best kitsch. Zaslove's assemblage transcends kitsch as did the many objects and emblems Kafka drew on to breathe life into his writing. Kafka's and Zaslove's materialism is founded on what I understand as the "transitional object." Those things that hover between one world and the next—between childhood and adulthood, between consciousness and dream, between memory and history, and between the self and the world.

These transitional objects—like the mattress that can serve as both marriage bed and death bed—can be both beautiful and terrifying. But above all we create and embrace these objects because they speak to us about our precarious condition as human beings in the grip of modernism and because they, perhaps only temporarily, loosen its hold.

Sometimes they can even promise a bridge to a new world.

Zaslove's engaging and compelling "natural history of a self" as I called it, leads the way, in and out of the transitional object—a sketch, a strata of mattresses, a doll, a book, a photograph, image ruins from Kafka's Prague and Zaslove's North America—toward the humbling understanding that Kafka's meaning somehow does not reside in any one dimensional and orderly interpretation but is suspended in an art that must be understood contextually, complexly and deeply through our own relationship with the phenomenal (sensate) world. Thus, the transitional object, where this "mindfulness toward reality" as Zaslove has termed it, is crystallized.

In other words, this indescribable (as it must be) collection of deceptively eclectic and beautiful

relics of the commonplace and not-so-commonplace comprises the kind of "splinter in the eye" that Theodore Adorno said works as a magnifying glass that allows us to "see" rather than merely look. This of course was Kafka's monumental task as well, and here Zaslove has accomplished what Kafka himself had done repeatedly in formulating his stories — assembling the splintered yet cherished remains of history, dream, and memory to construct a work of art (but more importantly an experience!) that is both an homage to Kafka and a way through the labyrinthine veins and arteries of creatures who to this day are subjected to the "apparatus" and who seek relief and liberation from their relentless burrowing in the colony.

*Karel I, 1912 Last Emperor
of Austria-Hungary 1912.
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Lida Baararova 1932; film actress. Langhans Portrait Gallery With Permission of Langhans Portrait Gallery