

Show Me Your Quarters

Z: How did your painted quarter collection begin?

J: I was in Portland working at a bakery, and I began to notice them in the cash register. I started wondering who paints these? That was 10 years ago. I want my collection to go to the top of this drawer.

(James scoops up a handful of quarters and then releases them.)

And I still wouldn't have enough to display them the way I'd want to display them.

Z: How would you display them?

J: I want to display them in the spirit of no, not in the spirit, just totally copying Felix Gonzalez Torres. They'd be in a fine art museum with white walls and wooden floors, piled in the corner and spilling down. Some would be buried. You wouldn't even know that they were painted but you would assume. But I wouldn't want people to actually take them like you were allowed to with Felix Gonzalez Torres' shiny candy.

Z: Cause it's money?

J: Not cause it's money, because...it's almost like it's not money. This is one of my collections where I don't only collect by myself. I tell people I collect painted quarters, and they bring them to me. I might not go to the Montclair Farmer's Market for a whole month, and then Carol, from Twin Girls Farm will see me and immediately say I have quarters for you. And I'm like, *Carol, this is three dollars!* I try and give her money for them. It is a challenge to make her accept it. But, it is interesting that she is finding these things, in fact, maybe looking at every quarter they get wondering if this one is good enough for James' collection. People see the same excitement and wonder in it. Everyone knows when they find a good one. The interesting thing about this collection is that you can't go to a store or anything and buy them. You know? You *have* to find them.

(James digs through his closet and emerges holding a jar.)

J: Oh, here is another collection. At first, it was just little bits of yarn from Emily's bits of toys and sweaters. One day I visited her at work, and there was like a garbage can full of scraps. I was like *Oh my god!*

Z: Did she work at a yarn store?

J: Yeah. I kind of wish it was all just Emily's because I think it would be fun for her to be able to look through this and go, "oh, this is that project, or this is that" cause she had used it all and touched it all, but instead it just looks cool smashed into a jar.

(James re-enters the closet and emerges with a large plastic bag.)

Z: What's in there?

J: My plastic dinosaurs. Emily made me put them away.

Z: How many do you have?

J: Probably one hundred.

Z: Why did you have to put them away?

J: They made things look "cluttered."

Z: If you were going to display the dinosaurs, how would you do it?

J: Maybe I would lay them out small to big, like stars or like a pyramid or triangle. When they were displayed in the house it was by kind like all the ones with a spiky back would be in one area and all the brontosaurus would be in another area.

Z: What makes a good plastic dinosaur?

J: I want it to be like a harder plastic, not rubbery soft and more than two paint colors. If it looks cheap out of the mold, if you can see the seam, that is bad. At the same time, I don't love new ones because they are *too* good. I would rather just have it be some dinosaur that has already been used.

Z: And the quarters?

J: I get excited when they are not just red because I have a lot of red ones. And I get excited when they are not just nail polish. There are a lot that are painted with nail polish...that is part of my theory on where they come from. People maybe go into whoever has nail polish, like Walgreens, and then they take a quarter out of their pocket to test it to see if it has a nice color and spreads well, or something. So for me, exciting quarters are definitely with paint and double sided.

Z: Where do you think the red paint comes from? Curbs?

J: I have no idea. But, red is popular. Sharpie, too. Red and blue. I don't know who does it. One day I wonder if I will take a whole bunch of quarters and spray paint them all, just for fun.

(James walks over to a wooden cupboard mounted on his bedroom wall.)

J: I call this my apartment building because everything makes just a little bit of sense to me in here. Like the giraffe and the giraffe eggs; this is Burt and Ernie's house and they have a picture of princess Di.

Z: So did the giraffe lay the eggs?

J: Right, giraffes are mammals...I guess it is not so over thought, but when I try and move things around it doesn't really happen. I clean this out. I actually take everything out and bring it outside and use my blower because it's so strong that all this gross black dust goes everywhere and then I put everything back in practically the same way.

Z: What is that?

J: That's a really gross collection that I feel embarrassed to talk about. Do you have any idea what it is?

Z: Lint?

J: Yeah.

Z: From under your bed?

J: No.

Z: Belly button lint?

J: Yes, belly button lint. It's disgusting. It is the grossest thing I collect. But, when I was a kid I collected my fingernails and my gum. So, I think that this is kind of mild.

Z: When did you start collecting belly button lint?

J: I don't really remember. Emily! (James calls to his partner in the other room) Do you think I did that in Portland?

E: Yeah. That is where it started. I told you I was going to make a pillow out of it.

J: But I was already doing it otherwise you never would have said that.

E: No. I said that you should collect it, I think.

J: You know, the belly button thing may have become more exciting after starting to take testosterone and then getting all this hair around my belly button...cause that is why you get belly button lint; your hair tickles your t-shirt and then it gathers. I don't know if you have hair around your belly button?

Z: Not really.

J: Yeah Emily has maybe one and it does not collect lint.

Z: How many years of belly button lint is in there then?

J: I guess 8 or 9.

Z: It just seems like there should be more then.

J: I'm not religious about it. I probably put only like 3-4 balls in there a month. But, I think for a while I was doing it everyday. Now I'll only do it if it is particularly large or colorful. There is often like a single curly hair in it, though, and I make an effort to hold onto the lint and pull that out...cause I don't want it to look like a thing full of pubes...which my friend Emmett collects.

J: There was a really good show at the Yerba Buena that a guy did about his mom's collections, but it was different cause it was collections of stuff that very much said, I am poor or I used to be very poor. The collections were like socks that might come in handy down the line or little tiny pieces of soap that are leftover from the last piece of soap. People probably collected that type of stuff here when they got freaked out about wartime.

Z: How did that make you feel about your collecting?

J: Just, that there wasn't any historical or cultural significance to my own collecting. It's more based on being an appreciator of things.

Z: You don't feel like that is cultural?

J: Maybe. I wouldn't entirely trust someone who didn't care about their belongings.

Z: And you get to organize.

J: mhmm

Z: Is organizing reassuring to you?

J: Like the joy I get out of? Yeah, it's usually cleaning and then organizing. Making everything fit.

Z: Is there anything else you want to add about your collections?

(James walks into the living room and returns holding a tattered wallet.)

J: This is my other collection that people give me a lot of. So you know when you get your registration for your car, you get a little sticker with the year on it? There is this little castoff sticker next to it. Anyway, people give me these, and I put them on my wallet. My wallet is so gross now that they don't even stick. They just fall off in my pocket. They look like they are melting. I think it's kind of neat. Basically, there is this thing in someone's house that they are not throwing away because they think that I will be kind of excited to get it. And I will be. So that is cool...although I started getting a whole bunch when I worked at the farmer's market in the DMV parking lot. It was cheating. It was almost like painting your own quarters.