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Four Artists in Search of Found Objects

by Jeanne Schinto

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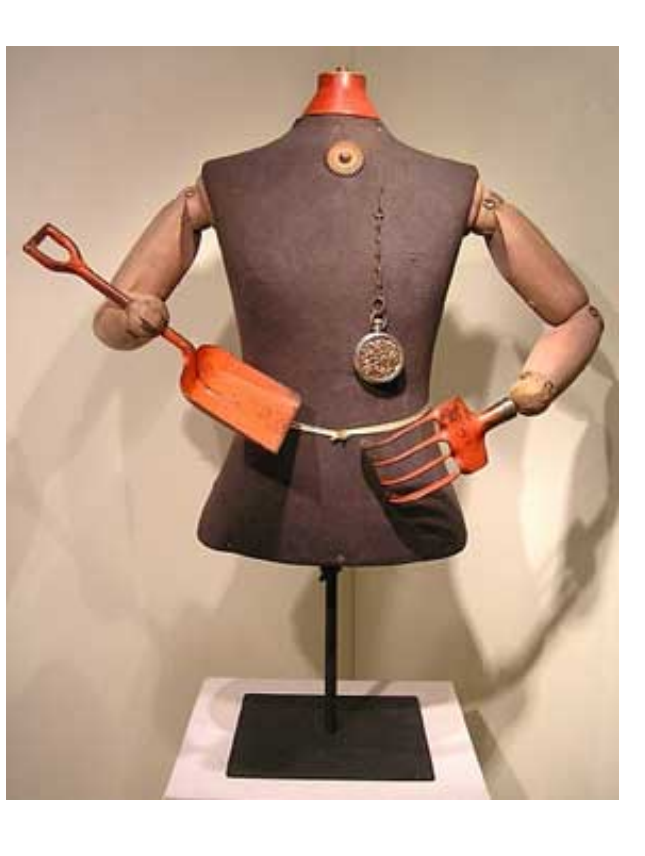
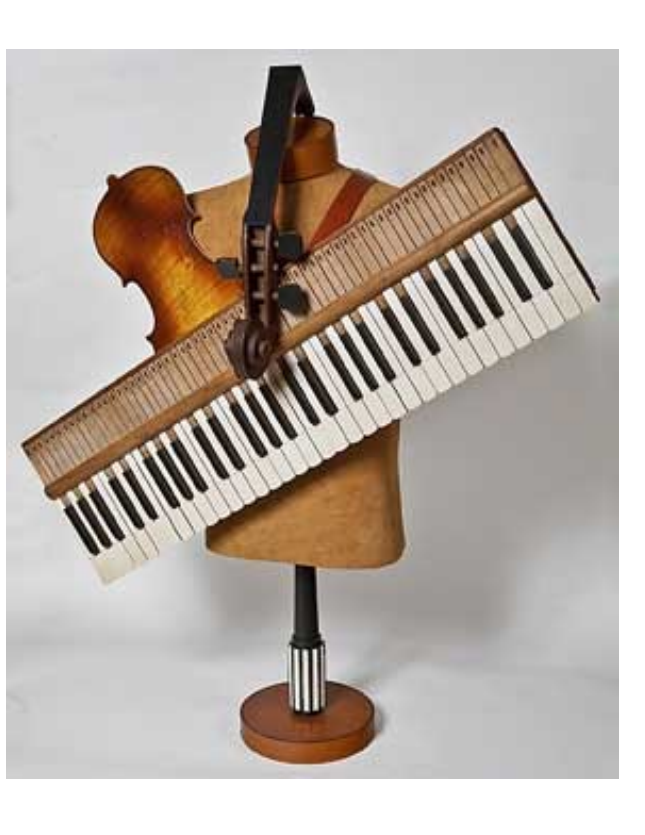
John Sideli in his studio in Wiscasset, Maine. Photo by Michael Fredericks.

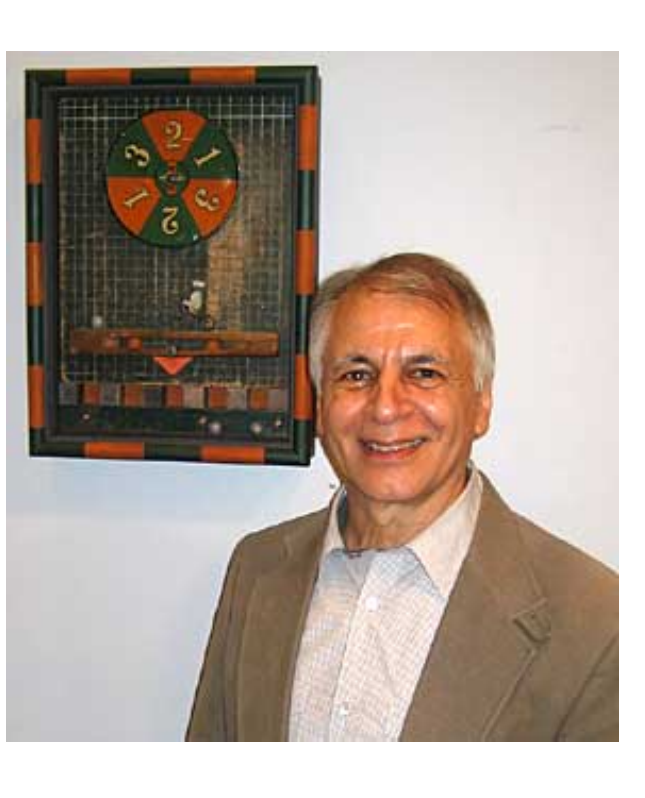
They're part of a long and continuing tradition of artists who create artworks using found objects. Followers in the footsteps of Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, and others, they are frequenters of flea markets, secondhand stores, junk shops, scrap yards, estate sales, old-tool exchanges, house-wrecking establishments, or even their local transfer station more often than antiques shows and fairs. While it's true that they aren't spending much money, they are among the most loyal and passionate of object seekers you're apt to meet.


John Sideli, ***Planter of Seeds***, 23" x 20" x 13", $6500.

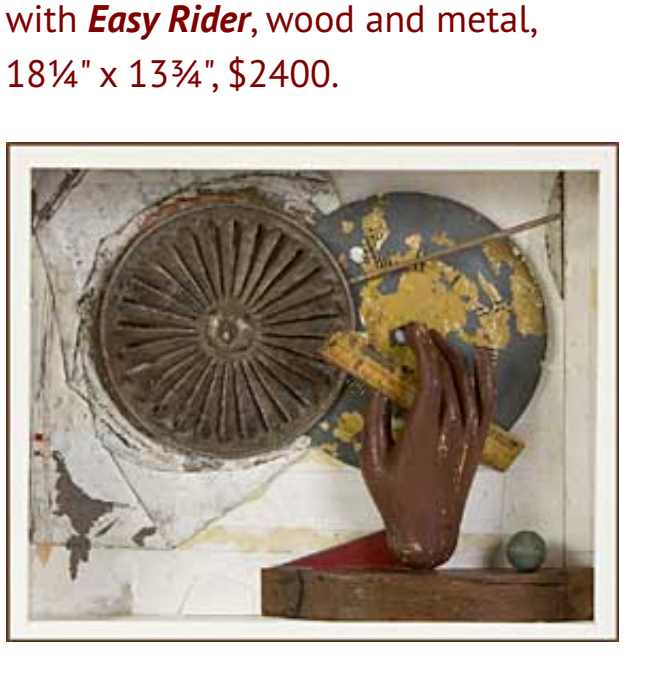
John Sideli of Wiscasset, Maine, is someone many readers have known for decades as a well-respected dealer in American painted furniture and folk art, specializing in original surfaces and, as he puts it, "clarity of form." Sideli is also working as an artist. A painter during the time he attended art school in the 1960's, he has been since the 1980's a maker of assemblages out of antique fragments of the very items he sells to collectors.


John Sideli, ***Trio***, 39" x 20" x 13¾", $6500.

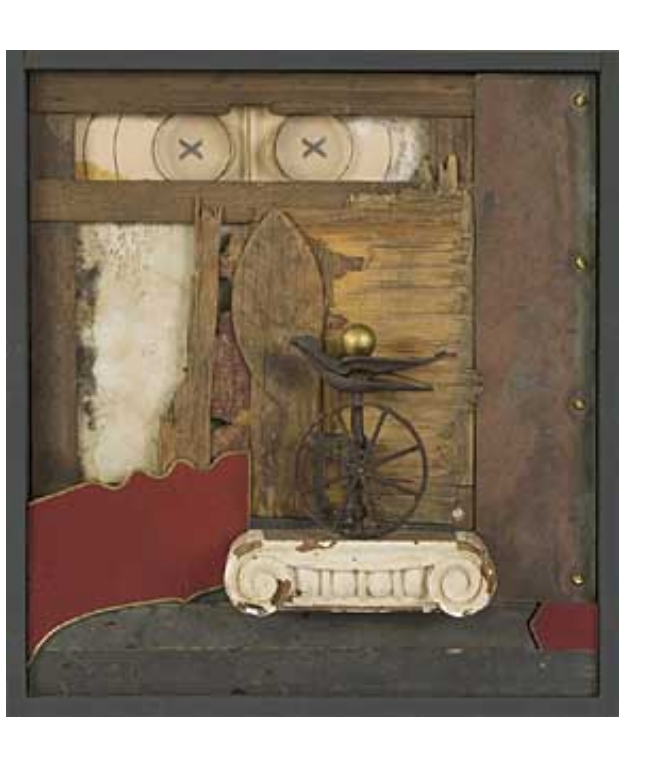
"A lot of the things I use aren't important in and of themselves," he said in a phone interview. "They don't hold a lot of value as merchandise. They come from here and there. Since I moved to Maine about five years ago, it's been a real boon, because there's a local flea market just down the road, five minutes from my house." He was referring to Montsweag Flea Market on Route One in Woolwich. It's been ongoing seasonally in spring and summer for about 35 years.


Rick Zonghi at NK Gallery, Boston, with ***Easy Rider***, wood and metal, 18¼" x 13¾", $2400.

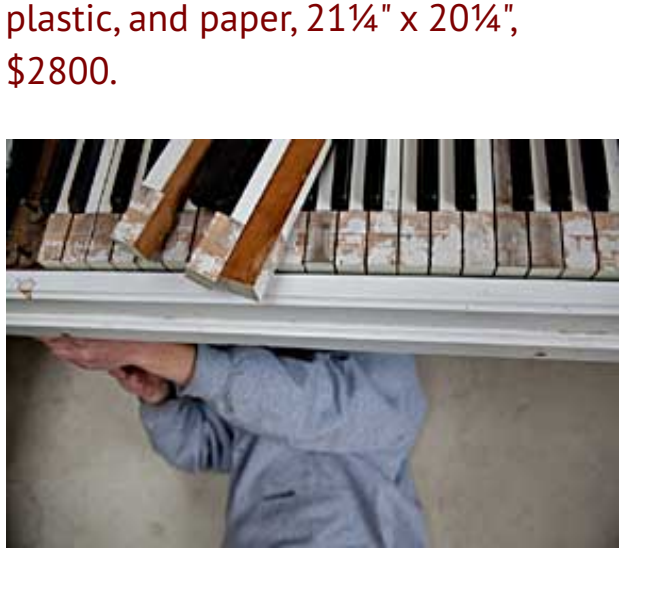
Extreme informality is the order of the day at Montsweag, and that's how Sideli likes it. "People drag stuff out of barns. It's the kind of thing that doesn't happen much anymore," he said. "When I lived in western Massachusetts and Connecticut, I didn't see that kind of thing. All the real estate there has changed hands twenty times. The houses all were cleaned out long ago. But in Maine still are guys who'll buy out a whole place, throw it all in the back of a truck, and drive in there. You never know what you'll find."


Rick Zonghi, ***Measuring Time***, wood, metal, and plastic, 16¾" x 19" x 4", $2800.

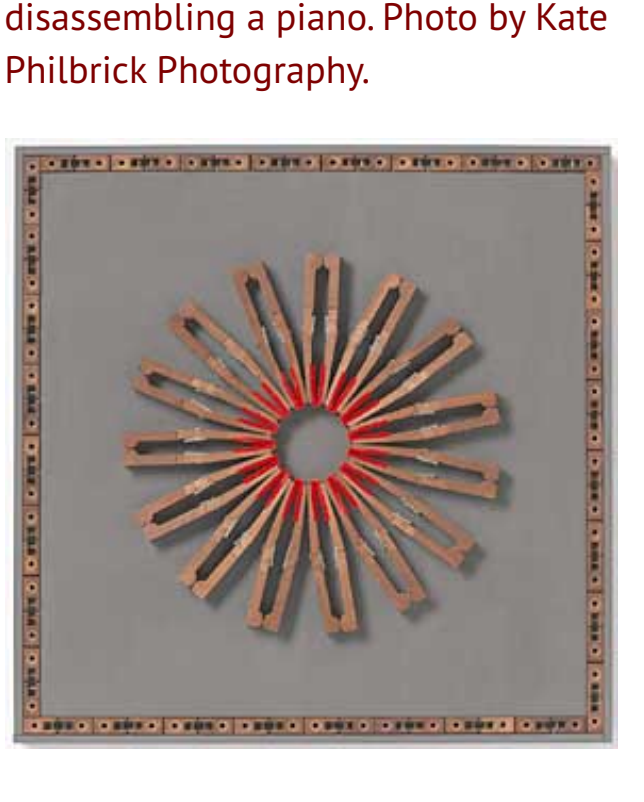
Sideli has a large studio and a gallery right in the same building where he rents an apartment. The setup would cost him "a fortune" anywhere else, he said. He keeps his studio fairly neat or not, depending on the current state of his projects. "When I get going, it gets pretty nasty, and then I clean it up," he said. "I usually have a dozen different pieces going at one time." Still, its underlying structure is highly organized. "I have plastic drawers on rollers, six high. I have a whole wall full of them. They're filled with seashells, buttons, corks, blocks, fabrics, brushes."


Rick Zonghi, ***Dos X***, wood, metal, plastic, and paper, 21¾" x 20¼", $2800.

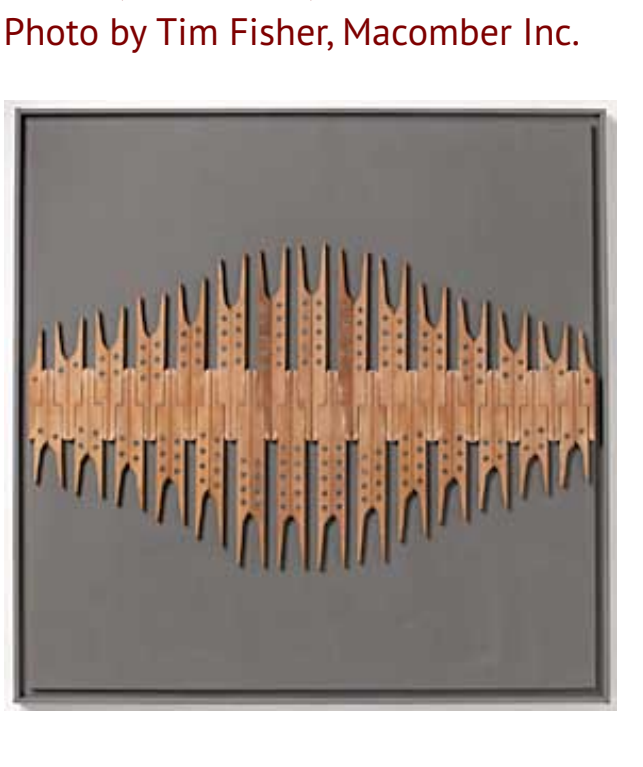
Sideli named Alexander Calder as one of his primary influences. Not long after dropping out of art school, Sideli and his then-wife, Jackie, had the opportunity to live for two and a half years as caretakers on the Calder property in Roxbury, Connecticut. A statement on Sideli's Web site (www.johnsidelifineart.com) called the experience "one of those great gifts of cosmic grace that come along and influence your life in ways you could never have imagined."


Louise Philbrick in the process of disassembling a piano. Photo by Kate Philbrick Photography.

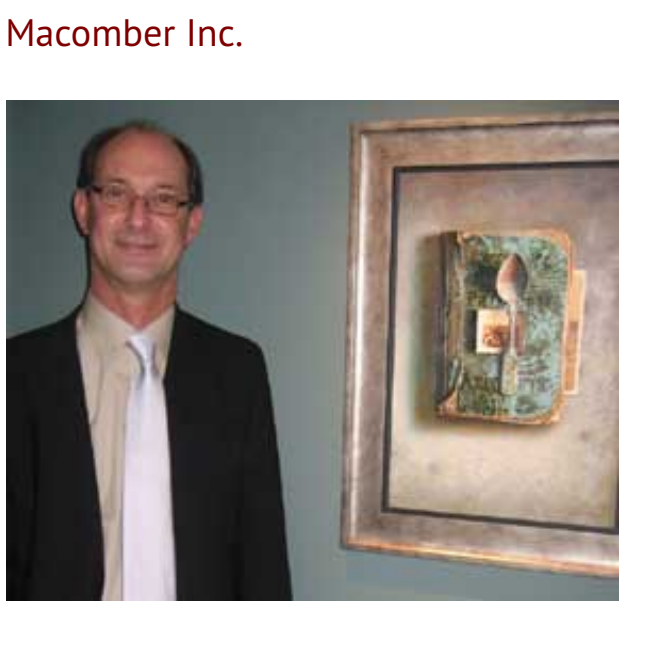
He said, "We lived in a small cottage next to the Calders' house, which was eighteenth century. That house was just filled with stuff—all the things he'd made, things that people had given him, people like Marc Chagall. I was supposed to go in the house once a week and check to make sure the pipes weren't freezing." That's when he was able to study what Calder had made from fragments of found objects.


Louise Philbrick, ***Cavatina***, mixed media (piano parts), 18" x 18", $1500. Photo by Tim Fisher, Macomber Inc.

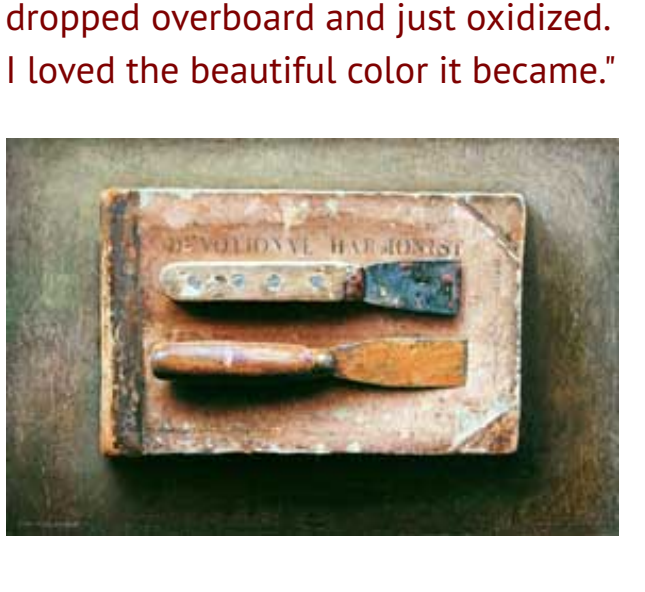
Sideli remembered vividly one object he was allowed to borrow and live with at his cottage for a while. "It was a metal hoop with strings across and little birds hanging off it that had been cut out of Medaglia d'Oro coffee cans. They were like origami birds but made of tin. We hung it near our infant daughter's crib. The first word she spoke was 'bird'—kind of wonderful."

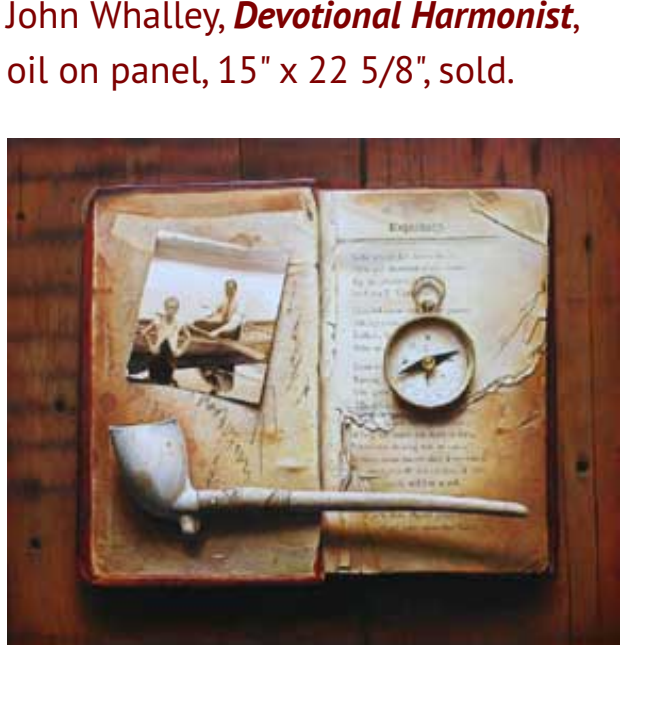

Louise Philbrick, ***Intonation***, mixed media (piano parts), 30½" x 30½", $3000. Photo by Tim Fisher, Macomber Inc.

Some people who sell to Sideli know he's an artist. Some don't. The same goes for his fellow shoppers, a few of whom have turned out to be artists too. As for his folk art clients, one in particular, Mrs. G. William Holland, paid him the compliment of a lifetime, he said. It was years ago, while he was showing her and her husband a booklet of images of his assemblages. "Mrs. Holland turned to me and said, 'You see it in everything, don't you.' It was just the best thing anybody has ever said to me. I felt seen, understood."


John Whalley at Vose Galleries, Boston, with ***Copper Spoon***, oil on panel, 22" x 15", $11,000. Said Whalley, "I dug the spoon up in an old boatyard at low tide in South Bristol [Maine]. It must have been dropped overboard and just oxidized. I loved the beautiful color it became."

For the last two years, Sideli has spent almost full time on his art, skipping most of the antiques shows he has done for years. That's because he has had some "very good luck" selling his artworks in his gallery and at other people's gallery exhibitions of his work. One buyer in particular emboldened him. He came in looking for an antique desk and instead bought seven Sideli pieces. (Not the desk too? "I didn't have any desks," Sideli said with a laugh.)


John Whalley, ***Devotional Harmonist***, oil on panel, 15" x 22 5/8", sold.


John Whalley, ***Repository***, oil on panel, 20" x 24", $16,000.

As Sideli recounted it, the collector was with another man, maybe his designer, who said, "Your works are going to be in very good company." A few days later, Sideli found out what he meant. "We were all so excited when we loaded his car, we forgot one piece. So I delivered it to his place on Prouts Neck." There Sideli saw his works already hanging next to works by Nevelson, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Andrew Wyeth. "That was the good company he was talking about. It was quite a thrill."

As Sideli accumulates material, he feels it's "waiting for its turn" to be used. One of his favorite ways to work is just to sit in his studio within view of everything and allow his imagination to roam-free associating-without any conditions or constraints on where it might take him. As he described it, his process truly is intuitive. "Sometimes I start out with the title and work back from that. Other times a title will come to me as I'm working. Often I don't really know where I'm going with something. I get to the end and say, 'Ah, so that's what this is about.'"

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I caught up with artist Rick Zonghi of Chelsea, Massachusetts, at the November 2011 opening of his month-long show of assemblages at NK Gallery in Boston. His experience as a graphic designer and book designer, combined with the raw material of found objects, resulted in the current series, he said. He may be found shopping at places like Todd's Farm (www.toddsfarm.com) on Route 1A (Main Street) in Rowley, Massachusetts, at the crack of Sunday morning's dawn. It opens at five a.m. weekly from April through November.

"I don't know dealers by name," Zonghi said. "I know them by the kinds of things they sell or where they're located on the field. Generally I don't say why I'm interested in an item or what I may do with it. Often I don't really know myself. I just like the surface, shape, or texture. Some dealers know I make sculptures with objects. One dealer expressed real interest in what I did with the things I bought from him—to the point of attending the NK Gallery show. But I don't want to encourage them to bring me things that they think I might like, because invariably I don't need those things, and I'd feel guilty if they saved me something that I didn't buy. I don't know what I need until I see it."

A visit to Zonghi's multistory house in Chelsea is like a trip to a private museum. He and his wife, Bobbie, have been folk art collectors for decades. Every room is beautifully arranged with objects, even Zonghi's studio on the house's top floor. Bobbie, who polished her eye while building a collection of cat-themed folk art, is her husband's shopping companion. They also scavenge together at a moment's notice.

As Zonghi recounted it, "Once when Bobbie and I were driving in central Philadelphia, she screamed out, 'Stop! Pull over!' I did, and she jumped out to retrieve a piece of crushed and rusted metal, which I later used in a piece called *Brass Ring*. It had just the right texture and surface to create the background I wanted. Another time, while walking along the Mystic River in Chelsea, I spotted some cloth on the incoming tide. I picked it out of the water and saw it was a cloth flower." It became the focal point of a piece he titled *Number 10*.

Serendipitous events are often an integral part of Zonghi's creative process, it seems. "One morning I spied a door being discarded in a Dumpster in front of a building being renovated on my street. It was just the right blue-gray color and rough texture that I needed to complete a piece called *X Box*. I asked the owners if I could have the door, and suddenly, since I'd shown interest, they felt the door must be valuable and took it back into their house. I figured it was lost to me, but much to my surprise, two weeks later I found the door propped up in my entranceway with a note saying, 'It's yours.'"

Another time, Zonghi asked a Todd's Farm dealer who sells clock parts if he had any dials. The next week he brought the artist a boxful. "They were all old, in great condition, virtually untouched. I asked if he had any that were distressed and damaged. He looked at me as if I were crazy. It took me two weeks to persuade him to bring me the ones he was going to trash. When he did, I found some wonderful ones, three of which I immediately incorporated into pieces then in construction."

I saw at least one of those pieces, *Measuring Time*, at his NK Gallery show, where I found it significant that his artist's statement began with the sentence, "I am a collector." He went on to say:

"I have been collecting things just about my entire life. The objects may be new or antique, broken, crushed, or run over, stripped of paint, covered with paint, partial—whatever strikes me. I study these found objects, and their texture, shape, content, and meaning extends beyond their original purpose, and my journey begins. Objects—discarded, broken, and forgotten—I put to a new use, and they live again. The placement of these elements yields a sense of intrigue. I don't always know where they are going to end up. I maneuver materials. The object itself sometimes dictates where I should place it. It's all about content and relationships with other pieces."

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Louise Philbrick of South Portland, Maine, is a sculptor and mixed-media artist (www.louisephilbrick.com) whose works are made of all manner of found objects, including, most famously, parts from old pianos. Those instruments often go for a song at estate auctions and the like. Since she takes the pianos apart herself, I asked Philbrick if she worked with her hands on things other than artworks. I wondered if, say, she worked on her bike or her toaster.

"Right," she said. "I like to see how things come apart and therefore learn how they came together. And I've had several commissions using bicycle parts. I've also used the insides of vintage toasters. Toaster elements are very beautiful."

Her studio, which measures just 250 square feet in a space attached to her house, is necessarily very organized. "A piano action breaks down to four thousand or five thousand parts. It's important to remember which piano it came from. I realized quickly that each piano is different—the wood, the metal, the felt, the history—all different. It took me all one summer to take the first piano apart, because I didn't know how it came apart. Now when I take one apart, it's almost like a science lab project. I catalog the parts and store them in drawers and cubbies and things all over my studio. That's also because I like to be surrounded by what I'm working with. I forget what I have if I put it away."

In virtually all the pianos Philbrick has dismantled she has found a bit of ephemera, which she loves. "Each piano has a nugget of some sort—a sticker, manufacturer's stamp, patent information, signature, stamp, something," she said. "Often it's adhered to some wood buried deep within the action assembly. By definition, ephemera wasn't intended to be long lasting, but there it is. So if there's an opportunity to use it, I do. Sometimes I use it in a way so that I'm the only one who knows it's there."

Besides the piano parts, Philbrick's sculptures make use of "anything that I come across that deserves to be honored, taken out of context. I don't usually do anything to it. If it's missing something or tied back together, it's all part of honoring its history in a new context."

Philbrick shops at flea markets and the like, looking for something that catches her eye. One special place where she loves to shop is the four-story Liberty Tool Company in Liberty, Maine. It's described on its owner's Web site (www.jonesport-wood.com) as "New England's largest secondhand tool store." It is also a place to buy hardware, antiques, trunks, used furniture, prints, postcards, books, magazines, records, glassware, pottery, toys, collectibles, and artifacts salvaged from estate lots throughout New England.

"Liberty Tool is always fun, both when I'm looking for something specific and also when I'm scratching my head over what I need," Philbrick said. "It's great to be able to spend a lot of time there. It's always an adventure." But since it's about 90 miles away from where she lives, it's also "a field trip."

Much closer to her house is a place called Off the Wall Antiques & the Unusual on Ocean House Road in Cape Elizabeth. "So I can hop in the car and be there in a few minutes. The guy who runs it [Carl E. Dittrich], a really good guy, super helpful, has all these little outpost buildings. He's very understated, always downplays what he has. I was working on a piece that was very spoon-centric. I told him I needed a selection and a variety of spoons. He said, 'Oh, I have a few.' When I got there, he had hundreds."

There's also a place in Portland, called Portland Architectural Salvage (www.portlandsalvage.com). "It's owned by a woman named Alice Dunn. It's huge, three floors, and it's another really fun place to walk around. You never know what you're going to find there."

Besides what Philbrick herself finds, she said, "People have lately been offering me all sorts of things, and I can't say no." She laughed. Besides those who offer things in person, Philbrick sometimes receives packages of objects in the mail. One came from a fellow artist. "He's a painter—a very curious man—and he had dismantled his garage door opener. He thought the parts were beautiful, but he wasn't going to use them and thought I'd be able to. People also leave things on my doorknob. They can't bring themselves to get rid of them—they want them to be used—so they send them to me."

People also commission her to make artworks out of objects of their own choosing. The spoon-centric piece was one. So was one involving wrenches. "Someone who inherited his grandfather's wrench set asked me to do a triptych based on those wrenches that would hang together in his home and eventually be broken up with each of the three parts given to each of his three sons. So I had these relics from this man, his picture, and his hammer, which he had made—clearly, he had made it. I also drew on several hours of conversation with the grandson about the grandfather, who was the kind of guy who didn't throw anything away, not even a broken band saw blade. I would have loved him, I'm sure. So I was able to put into that piece a little of my own affliction."

Is it an affliction or a gift for seeing the "it" in everything? I mean the "it" that Mrs. Holland alluded to when she said to John Sideli, "You see it in everything, don't you." Beauty? Form? Design? Meaning? Purpose? As Philbrick said, "It's the thing that makes people stop and pick something off the beach, off the ground. It's the same thing that makes people hold onto things. And when they figure out that there's a way of living with it—by having me make it into an artwork—instead of having it buried in a drawer or a box or basement, there seems to be appeal."

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Like Sideli, artist John Whalley (www.johnwhalley.com) of Damariscotta Mills, Maine, shops at Montsweag Flea Market, looking for materials to use in his work. Like Phil-brick, he likes to spend time at Liberty Tool. "In Maine there's just a mother lode of objects," said Whalley. He, however, differs from Sideli, Philbrick, and Zonghi in one major respect. He's a realist painter, not a maker of assemblages. He paints found objects in oil and egg tempera and draws them in graphite.

His artworks feature old books, clock dials, tools, painted tin boxes, labeled old apothecary jars, ancient forks, oxidized spoons, natural history objects, and vernacular photographs. In November and December 2011, Vose Galleries in Boston had an exhibition devoted to new works by Whalley, *Recollections*, a clever play on words. I met the artist there and spoke to him afterward by phone.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Whalley moved with his family upstate when he was a child. "That's when life started for me. Getting out in the country was just amazing. I loved it," he said. "When I was little and as a teenager too, I'd go out with a backpack of baby food jars and come back with them filled with all kinds of things I'd find—shells of crayfish, bird's eggs, you name it. My parents used to go to local Saturday morning auctions, where there would be wagon wheels, spinning wheels, that kind of thing being sold. That gave me an early love for antiques. Part of making anything back then was making it beautiful. People didn't make something unless it was functional and beautiful."

In college at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Whalley developed his talent under the guidance of Edna Lawrence (1898-1987), who taught traditional drawing, and Panos Ghikas, who taught egg tempera. One of his major influences along the way was Andrew Wyeth. "When I was a kid, I was in the book section of Macy's in White Plains [New York] when that huge book [*Andrew Wyeth*by Richard Meryman (1968)] had just come out," he recalled. "I remember opening it, seeing his work, and fireworks just went off. Of anybody he was the one who just touched something in me that made me want to be a painter."

Whalley said when he was younger he also liked the realism of 19th-century artists John F. Peto and William Harnett. "But as I got older, they seemed rather stuffy to me, dated. Their work is nice to look at. There are a few at the Farnsworth [Art Museum in Rockland, Maine]. But I want to do something different from that. I'm not trying to be photographic. Sometimes I just love the texture of the paint."

In 1987 Whalley was doing well, living and working with a gallery in Maine, when he took what he thought would be just a few years' career hiatus to work with street kids in Florida, El Salvador, and Brazil. It became 15 years. He returned in 2003 to Maine, where his studio is in a converted ice house. "When I had the studio built, I asked them to please incorporate as many shelves as possible, so I could see everything and be thinking of future pieces as I was working. So pretty much everything I have is visible."

In photos, it looks as though the things are on exhibit, almost as if a curator had organized them. "It does look like a little museum." He laughed. "Art collectors who come here get so enthralled with the shelves and everything on them they forget about the artwork."

Like a writer, Whalley is attuned to stories. "The objects that call out to me and that I take home have a story to them," he said. "Those stories are told in "the wear and tear, the patina, the color. I saw a book at a flea market recently. It had an old, worn, aqua-color cover, all scratched—a very beautiful texture—and the title was *A World of Wonders*." Published in 1838, it has one of those wonderful, period subtitles, *Or Diverse Developments, Showing the Thorough Triumph of Animal Magnetism in New England*. "So I'm going to find something that will go on that cover. And that will tell a little more of that story. It'll be a great piece."

Whalley has used antique books in more than a dozen other artworks, including *Devotional Harmonist*, *Edelweiss*, *Book of Samson*, *Art History*, and *American Moralist*. He has also used old hymnals. "I had a set of about twenty of them. They used to be produced in long horizontal formats. The titles really lend themselves to stories. I was in Antrim, New Hampshire, up in the attic of an old man's house. I found a stack of them and took them down to him, and he said they were twenty-five dollars each. I said, 'I'm only interested in them for visual art. I don't collect these things.' And he said, 'OK, five dollars each.'"

Whalley's oil on panel painting *Repository*is based in part on a vernacular photo of what Whalley takes to be a father and son, boating. "I have a large collection of photos that I got for something like a quarter each at a yard sale. I found that little photo in there," he said. "My father was an engineer. Some mornings when I was a kid he and I would go out very early fishing. [The painting] has to do with memories of that time in my life."

Whalley finds it odd and intriguing that the father is wearing a shirt and tie instead of less formal clothing. The other objects in the painting are an old clay pipe and a pocket compass. "I chose the pipe because my father smoked. The compass had to do with the different directions our lives went in. It doesn't really matter that people don't know that."

Because Whalley paints his objects rather than makes assemblages out of them, they're available for him to use again. In fact, he has used this photo more than once. "Otherwise, it's just a moment in time that would be lost forever."

A drawing by Whalley in graphite on paper, *Songs of Good Will*, features three items from the L.C. Bates Museum in Hinckley, Maine. It came about because artists were asked to draw something from the collection as part of Maine's long series of exhibitions featuring drawing as an art form. The objects he chose were a songbook, *Favorite Songs of Good Will*, an antique protractor, and an old group photograph of children at an orphanage and school in Hinckley called the Good Will-Hinckley Farm. Whalley said, "The songbook and the protractor are the kinds of things that the children in the photograph would have used. But it's more than just putting these things together. My hope was that many of the children grew up to become their own songs of good will."

Whalley's boyhood love of nature and natural things carries on. "One day I was walking and came upon a heron," he told me. "It was sick or injured, wasn't doing well. It flew away and then a few minutes later it flew back to me. Later near the same spot I saw the heron's body. I knew it was the same bird. A few weeks later, it was starting to get buried in leaves. I came back in the spring and it was just a skeleton that had been bleached out over the winter. The bones were all amazing sculptures, but the skull was most amazing of all. I brought it home and put it on an old, long ledger book along with an old pair of scissors."

The composition became his oil on panel painting *Affinity*, which takes advantage of the similarities between the skull and the scissors. Obvious once it's been done, the juxtaposition, however, is more than clever. Taken together, the objects make an eloquent statement about the closeness and inevitability of our relationship with nature.

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