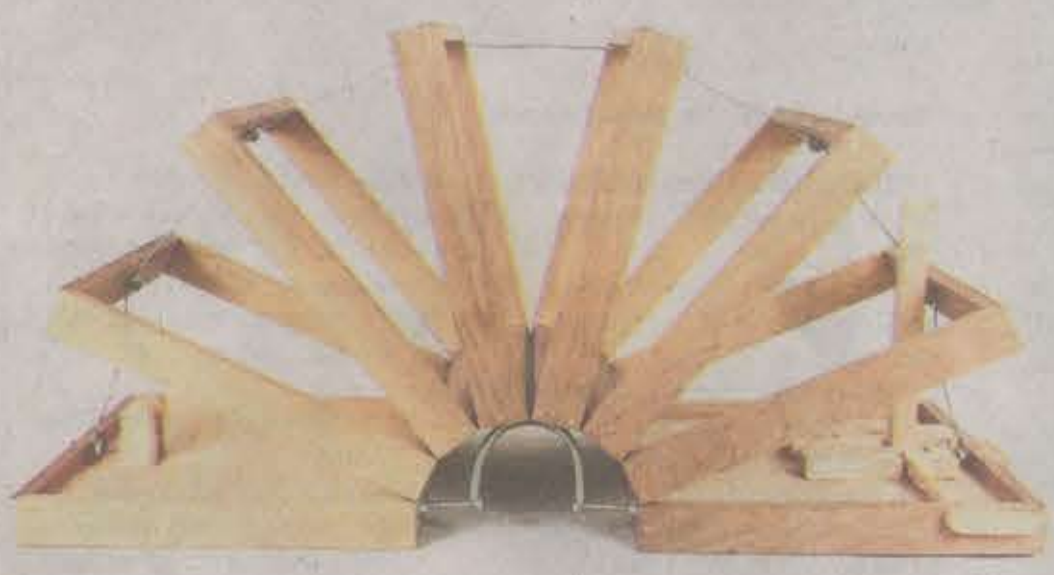
Peter Bugg

Kelly O'Briant's "Cabinets for Important Things" is among works on view in her installation "one day, late in the afternoon" at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft through May 10.

Raw or refined, artists continue a curious tradition

By Molly Glentzer



Gallery Jatad

Patrick Renner's "Unfolding Box," made of walnut and poplar, is among works on view in "Cabinet of Curiosities" at Gallery Jatad through April 25.

Aristocrats, merchants and scientists first built cabinets of curiosities during the European Renaissance to display natural wonders brought home by explorers who traveled the world.

A pair of Houston exhibitions suggest how the urge to amass and show stuff off has evolved in the 21st century, and how different our approaches can be — from obsessively orderly to colorfully junky.

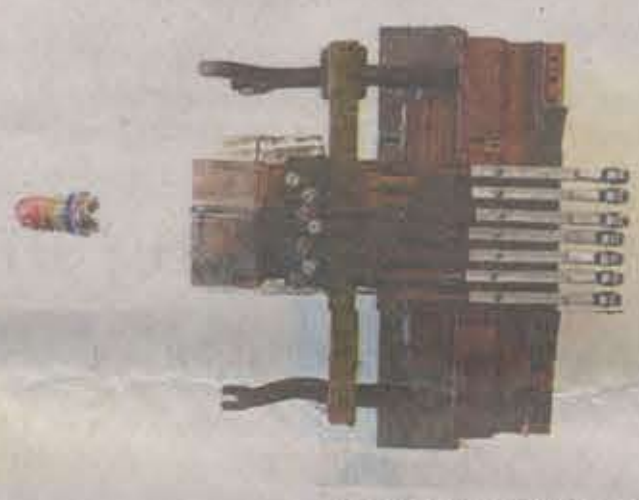
Patrick Renner didn't have to go much farther than the streets of the Shepherd Park Plaza neighborhood, where he lives, to gather some of the odds and ends that fill shelves in his solo show "Cabinet of Curiosities" at Gallery Jatad. The artist best known for his monumental outdoor work "Funnel Tunnel" has applied his inventive mind to sculpting an array of objects from found materials. He always keeps his eyes peeled for others' cast-offs, looking to create new value for them.

The exhibition opens a window into Renner's personal history. Pages from journals he's kept since he was in junior high school are among the works inside a glass cabinet that also contains a petrified Halloween pumpkin and other objects that have inspired him. The show looks less like an exhibition than the studio of an eccentric inventor.

As facile with woodworking as he is with mechanics, Renner can make a thing look crude or refined. His "Unfolding Box," a 1-foot cube that fans open in pieces, falls in the latter category.

Renner's fans may recognize some of his older pieces, including a trio of "Telephone Pole Pianos" he created in 2008 for a solo show at Lawndale Art Center. They originally rotated around telephone poles that fell during Hurricane Ike, creating sounds as they struck nails and wood splinters.

Other works now have a new context, displayed alongside antique African objects from the gallery's collection. A thumb piano Renner made in 2006 with wood, steel, a bean can, a tire inner tube and skateboard grip tape looks sympatico with a magnificent 1920s



Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

One of Patrick Renner's "Telephone Pole Pianos," from a set of three.

ceremonial carved thumb piano from the Camaroon grasslands. (Renner's version was once activated by a string that stretched across a room.)

Much of his work is more layered than meets the eye, and it's often collaborative: He enlisted friends to create boards with the word "bored" bored into them. Montessori school students drew the markings on his plaster "Ghost."

One of the drawers in a tall vertical cabinet came from the late Lee Littlefield's studio, where Renner was an assistant. The cabinet's frame looks carved, but it's repurposed, too; the indentations happened when one of Renner's partners in the artists' collaborative {exurb} used the wood as a platform during work with a computer-navigated cutting system.

Renner created "Strata" by turning an old window into a frame with a door and filling it with sandy soil, pebbles and many layers of old socks. The newest piece in the show, "The Frankenstein Method," is a deconstruction of a vintage metal-top table Renner found beside a road.

Over at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, ceramic artist Kelly O'Briant's pristine installation "one day, late in the afternoon" reads like the aesthetic opposite of Renner's show: serene, spare and strictly organized.

She's re-created an array of household goods including kitchen utensils, box graters, scizzors and cooking pans in unglazed white clay to emphasize their forms. Composed in evocative still lifes, the objects create a mysterious atmosphere: Walking into the space, you might feel like you've entered an abandoned house whose roof has given way to several feet of snow.

There are surprises that both disorient and delight: The composition "Two Dozen Each" looks like it was cut from a backyard fence and deck, with a spigot, a garden hose and a hand sprayer; but a paint bucket under the spigot is full of eggshells. The 25 box graters of "Recurring Dream" hang in a grid that's graphically pleasing but also slightly ominous: If you've ever cut your finger on one of those things, you might see it as a nightmare of sharpness.

A trio of small curio cabinets draws the eye to one wall, perhaps because they're also the most colorful pieces in the installation. Their insides are painted in sunny golden-yellow, pale blue and brick. Each cabinet contains several dozen small white clay curios, or maybe the ghosts of curios.

What fun might ensue if Renner visited this place?

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MIXED MEDIA

'Patrick Renner: Cabinet of Curiosities'

When: Artist talk and book signing 2 p.m. Saturday. Gallery hours: Noon-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, through April 25.

Where: Gallery Jatad, 1517 Blodgett

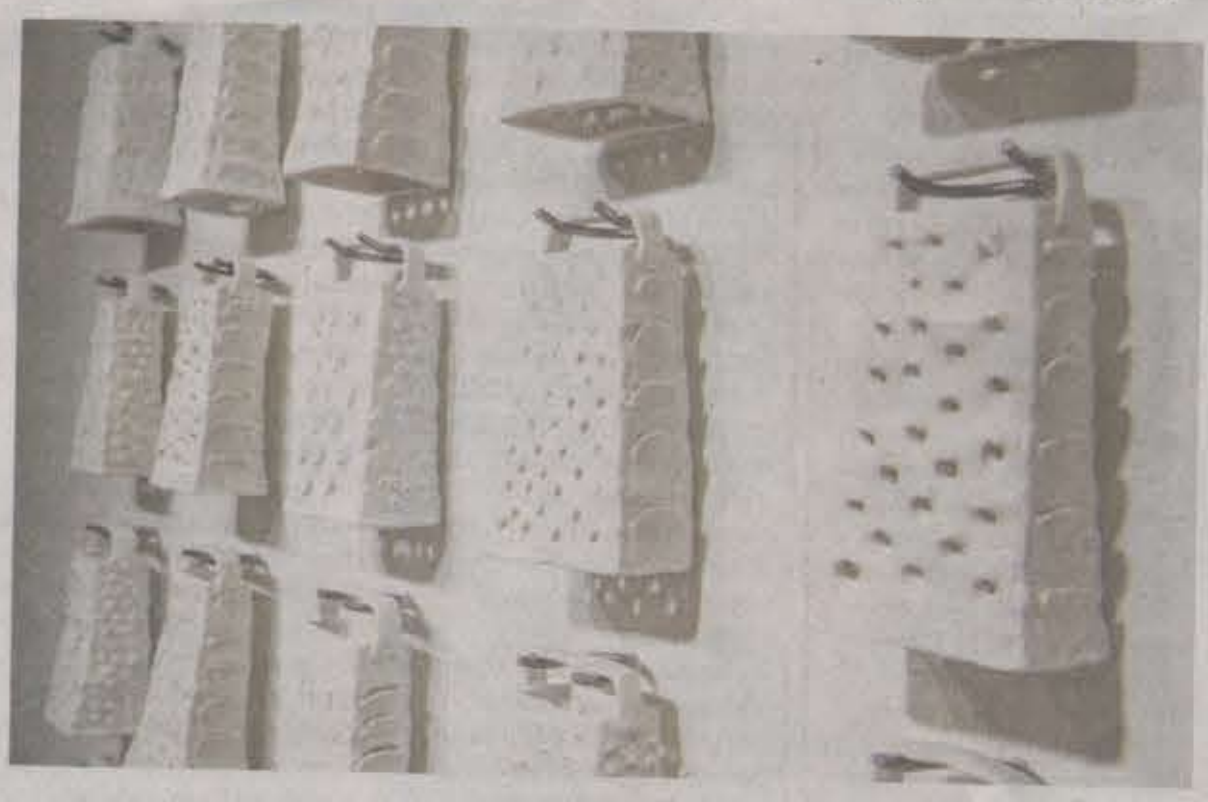
Admission: Free; 832-657-4328, galleryjatad.com

'Kelly O'Briant: one day, late in the afternoon'

When: Noon-5 p.m. Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through May 10

Where: Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

Admission: Free; 713-529-4848, crafthouston.org



Peter Bugg

A detail of Kelly O'Briant's "Recurring Dream," one of the ceramic works on view in her installation.