

REMNANTS AND FETISHES  
OF PLEASANT PLUNDER

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UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS  
SNOW FINE ARTS GALLERY  
CONWAY, ARKANSAS 72032

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AN INSTALLATION BY GENE HATFIELD



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GENE HATFIELD

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JULY 27 — AUGUST 28, 1987  
SNOW FINE ARTS GALLERY  
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

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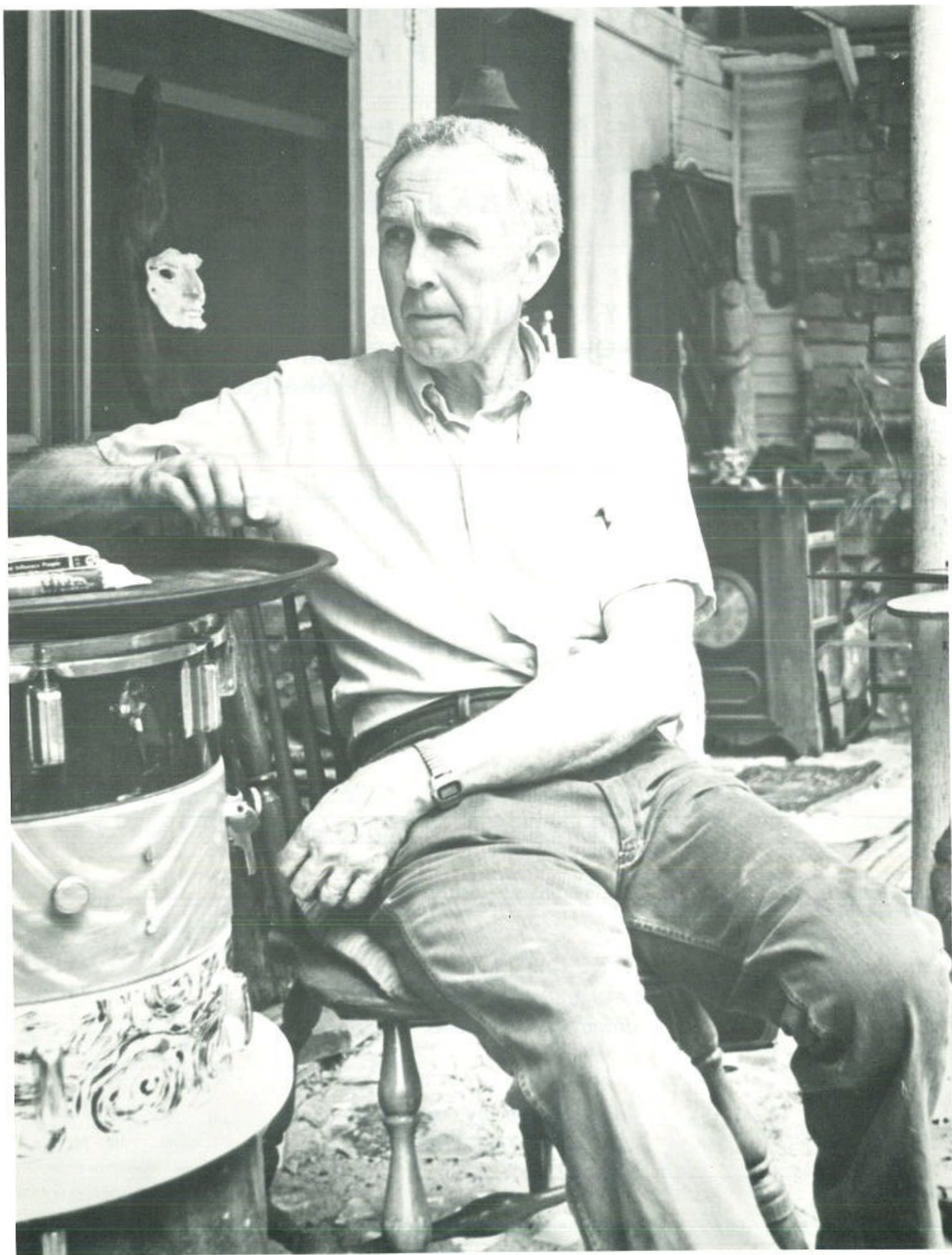
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Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

The conservative members of society, who generally view the artist with some uneasiness, will find in the work of Gene Hatfield a sure confirmation of art's unpredictability. He makes art to please himself. The content of his work is profound, but the sophistication of his insight is often lost on a less perceptive audience.

Hatfield composes with discarded remnants of our contemporary material culture. Mass-produced objects for practical use in an industrialized society are considered for their qualities of shape, texture, color, and a mysterious ambiance of past environments. Often the visual presence and impact of a work is enriched by layers of meaning, experienced by the viewer as the separate components are recognized and related to their original purpose and function.

Society today, perhaps more than at any other

time, finds itself entrapped by its own conventionality when conformity is the only retreat from controversy. Art frees us from conformity and lets us experience other possibilities. Ben Shahn has said we should not judge a work of art by its communicability, rather by its meaning and content. "Communicability requires too much of the public to ever be a successful measure of good art."

If Gene Hatfield's work does not always "communicate" to mainstream society, it certainly stands as a most powerful reality in opposition to conventionality and conformity, a reminder that nonconformity is not only a desirable thing, it is a factual thing—in this instance, art created by one whose courage to be different is surely sustained by that unique attribute known as the art spirit.



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes, Love Letters*

Gene Hatfield was born in 1925 and grew up in Conway, Arkansas. After being honorably discharged from the army in 1944, he attended the Arkansas State School for Teachers (now the University of Central Arkansas) where he majored in speech and drama and minored in art. In 1948 he received a Bachelor of Arts degree. In the same year he taught a class in the newly developed art department with Marie Schichtl. In order to continue to teach art at Conway, he attended the State College of Education at Greeley, Colorado (now the University of Northern Colorado) where he received a Master of Arts degree in education in 1950.

In 1955, Hatfield toured France, Italy, Scotland, Switzerland, England and Holland. He married Nicole Wable, a native of France, in 1957. They have three children, Hadrian, Marc and Mathilda. In 1926 he attended art school at Fontainebleau in southern France, studying painting under Henri Goetz. Hatfield taught at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway until he retired in 1985. Hatfield, who makes his home in Conway, has returned to Europe faithfully every year to make art at his summer home in France.



## REMNANTS AND FETISHES OF PLEASANT PLUNDER

Gene Hatfield transforms discards of a wasteful culture into objects rich with metaphorical allusion and formal inventiveness. He transforms the ordinary objects that surround us—a coil of rope, a shoe or a piece of wood—into objects only found within a Gene Hatfield universe. Considered separately, broken toys, worn out coffee pots, pieces of wood and mannequins with missing parts, no longer serve a useful purpose. They would certainly seem to have little to do with art. But in the hands of an adventurous artist they can assume a new importance quite divorced from their original purpose. For example, figures can occur by assembling chrome discards, socks become arms and bowling pins transform themselves into human bodies. In Gene Hatfield's world, art and life are so constantly intermingled that even the most inanimate objects take on a primitively animate character, as if he could endow anything he selects with a metamorphic vitality. *Carol Burnett as Crimson O'Tara in Atlanta* is a figurative work in which a green velvet dress becomes animated from the scarecrow construction. Another figure is magically transformed from chrome pieces and other materials into a *Dum Wayter*.

The human figure is the major form that runs consistently throughout Hatfield's installation. All of the remnants and relics—shoes, hats, umbrellas, clothing, chairs, mirrors and clocks—are associated with humans in one way or another. The human face is also a strong element in the many masks that hang on the south wall. Hatfield says these things are easy to see in found objects and they can be carried into more meaningful characters. Most of his masks were made at his summer home at Le Touquet, France, where he found pieces of driftwood on the beach. These pieces then were enhanced with a little carving or by the placement of other found objects for the eyes and mouth. One mask is haunting in the way the face is formed by the piece of wood with its horn-like forms protruding from the head. Hatfield has added bits and pieces of various materials to natural formed wood pieces, conjuring up personages and creatures, always imaginative and fanciful, sometimes menacing, more

often witty or ironic and funny. Whether these figures are demonic or satirical, Hatfield aims for drama. He says he wants his work to be remembered for this dramatic quality—not because they are beautiful.

The purpose of this installation is to assemble remnants and relics into meaningful relationships—to create a metaphor that has symbolic power. The objects chosen by Hatfield conceivably have some unconscious association for the artist, or if not the object, their configurations. The installation is dense with dream images, childhood memories, symbolic objects and personal statements, as if to allow much of the contents of his mind to be experienced by the viewer.



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*, Mask



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*, FLESH and the DEVIL





Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*, FLESH and the DEVIL



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*, Mask

Although his work is shown in the conventional context of an art gallery, Hatfield did not want to make his flow of thoughts aesthetically palatable. Instead, they were rendered with a directness, and with a variety of styles, materials and techniques indicative of a compulsion toward free expression. Hatfield's installation mirrors the energetic flux of the mind. A lifelike, somewhat chaotic atmosphere was more important than single art works. According to Hatfield, the aspect of spontaneity and free association found in his assembling of parts to form a whole "encourages fresh interpretation," and is linked to his appreciation of Surrealist art. His assortment of bowling pins, clocks, globes and mannequins, near the exit door, are put together to form abstract versions of figures much like the mysterious dress-dummy figures of Surrealist artist Giorgio de Chirico. The doll's head on the bowling pin and the draped

mannequin with flowers circling his head evokes an eerie feeling in the way the smiling expressions on their faces stare blankly into space.

Space in an installation is an important element. Hatfield wants the viewer to become aware of the space they are in. He has created a room in which the viewers actually become participants. For example, as the viewer enters the space he is invited to bang a drum, the card attached specifies that it is not important to bang the drum fast or slowly but to bang the drum. The side show—*Flesh and the Devil*—involves a frilly blue dress in which the viewer is instructed to lift in order to see the flesh which is a painting of a nude woman. Amidst the row of masks on the wall there is a mirror that is surrounded by an assortment of hats to be tried on by the viewer. The effect recalls the Surrealist device of the mirror as an entryway to a world of transformation, dream and metamorphosis. The installation is to be contemplated as well as to be experienced by the viewer.

Hatfield's philosophy of art and life are much the same—to make do with what you have. He maintains that much of his philosophy comes from his experiences and interests in the theater. Ever since he was a child, he was always fascinated with theatrical productions, starting with puppet shows in the first grade. After graduating from college, Hatfield joined students from the UCA drama department in traveling around Arkansas putting on Shakespearean productions. He said that he would help build sets and when they would strike the set after the performance he felt as if it were a waste of time since "you would create these wonderful things and they would eventually be destroyed. Hatfield is not interested in his sculptures lasting forever. He likes the element of change, and he encourages change since he is constantly adding bits and pieces to his sculptures over time. The fact that permanence of the work is not valued is not only symptomatic of a period in which swift obsolescence of both ideas and objects is taken for granted, but also a reflection of the artist's attitude toward materials that developed with early collages. This attitude includes the concept that the essence of the work is in the gesture of creation, and the introduction of a time factor which merges a static art form with a performance or event. Parallels of this consideration—the creation of an art to serve for

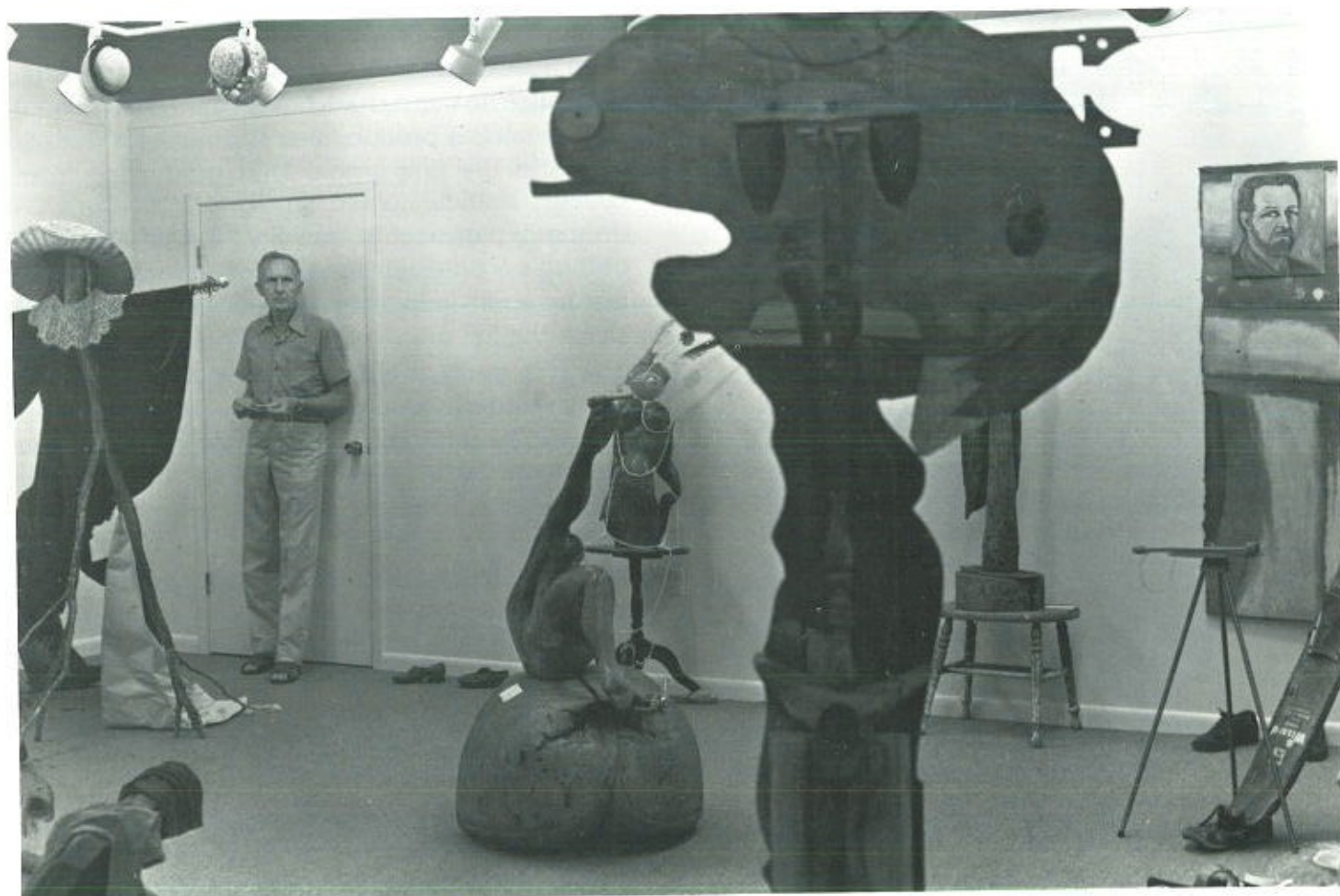


the moment—are found in primitive cultures where ritual objects are abandoned or destroyed after the rites, and also in theatrical constructions. The adoption of transitory media such as newspaper, plaster, cloth or string shows evidence of a continuing disregard for durability. The impermanence of materials allows for freer expression.

The relationship of his interest in the theater to his art work can be seen in all aspects of his creativity. Hatfield's house, for example is much like a stage set. The interior is full of art objects and his yard is filled with various sculptured characters, along with piles of found object props. In his backyard, one can find a variety of objects such as mops, rakes, piles of wood, shoes and boots of all kinds, buckets or toilet bowl floats and parts of toys and machines. All around the house are clumps of driftwood and mounds of rocks and stones. Hatfield has an inexhaustible supply of materials to assemble into artistic creations, from bicycle parts and lawnmowers to driftwood and coffee pots. "People throw perfectly good things away," maintains Hatfield, "I just can't

let perfectly good things go to waste."

The objects in the installation come from many different places. Some objects were found on the beach at Le Touquet, France, some from the streets of Washington, D.C. and Conway and others from his grandmother's store. He maintains that he does not search for a specific item, he finds them. Picasso once said, "I do not search, I find". He was referring to the aspect of discovery. This can be related to Gene Hatfield's method of discovery in relation to cast-off objects. Hatfield says, "I find my plunder at the most unexpected times and places, but I wouldn't find them if I weren't looking at discarded objects. Often, when looking for a specific item for a special unfinished piece, I find exactly what I want along with other goodies, or a good substitute, or an excellent part for another piece I'd forgotten I needed. It's as if some outside force leads me to the right place." Hatfield's use of commonplace images and found objects is similar to procedures used by Robert Rauschenberg who once said, "I feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes and mirrors or Coke bottles are ugly, because they



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes*



Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes, Widders of a Couple of Good Speckled Potato Sports*





Installation view: *Remnants and Fetishes, Waiting for Tom and Todd*

are surrounded by things like that all day long, and it must make them miserable." Gene Hatfield subscribes to this attitude that "there is no poor subject," as Rauschenberg states. Taking cast-off objects that have been discarded by society, hence valueless and contentless, Hatfield re-combines and reshapes their form and in the process shapes the content. His need for intense expressions stamps even the most abstract works with the human image.

The use of unconventional materials offers the artist several important rewards. Discarded or found objects often suggest the form and theme for a work of art, and by doing a little carving, or by adding other odds and ends, the artist can create an unusual and meaningful piece. In making sculpture from discards, the finished piece appears sooner and more directly from the heat of expression because the materials are already of a permanent nature and do not require casting, carving and firing. Also, because the parts are already more or less fully formed, they can easily be held or placed next to each other temporarily to achieve the visual idea of the completed composition before final bonding.

The use of unorthodox materials in the visual arts is generally accepted today, yet to fully understand Hatfield's oeuvre, it is important to trace the roots of this concept. From prehistoric times, man has collected and used found or discarded objects of his environment—hair, bones, feathers, shells and pebbles. Recent primitive tribes have added to these a variety of discards from the more sophisticated societies—cans, bottles, rope, string, plastics and other things. It is probable that early man's first attempts at figurative sculpture were the result of finding rocks, bones and pieces of wood in which heads and bodies of humans or animal forms were already suggested, so that it was necessary only to clarify the image with a small amount of carving. A similar approach is seen in two of Hatfield's found nature objects, in which the human torso is formed by a piece of wood (*The Pearls of Pauline*) and a bust with outstretched arms holding toy guns is formed and then clarified by another piece of wood.

Many artists in Europe and America from the sixteenth century to today have painted assembled still-lives. During the last century and the beginning of this one folk artists made constructions from flowers, hair, stamps and shells and

displayed them in frames for friends and relatives to enjoy. Among professionals, Pablo Picasso, in his cubist painting *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911), is credited with being the first to incorporate actual found objects in a picture. During the same year the Futurist Umberto Boccioni made a three-dimensional construction, *Fusion of a Head and Window*, of plaster and wood discards. After 1913, Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris often included scraps of newspaper, wallpaper, and other printed matter in their cubist works. Until his death, Picasso intermittently continued to make constructions and bronze castings from found objects, carrying out his wish to "debunk the idea of noble means," as he put it.

Those who championed the idea of breaking down the classical barriers, the Dadaists, used combine-paintings, ready-mades, collages and assemblages as their weapons against the pompous and sentimental in art and life. The Surrealists, noting the ironic symbolism inherent in the medium, juxtaposed strange and incongruous subjects to suggest new and often weird meanings. Francis Picabia, Giacomo Balla, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Man Ray and André Breton are some of the foremost practitioners of this approach.

About the same time, just before and during the 1920s, the German Kurt Schwitters explored the assemblage medium by creating collage constructions of waste materials, making outstanding contributions to art, anticipating even the most recent developments. With the advent of such practices as collage and construction, sculpture's course was radically redirected. Sculpture could be built, assembled, arranged or placed in any conceivable material. From 1920 to the 1940s, a small number of artists worked seriously in the medium. Among these were Joseph Cornell, Joan Miro', Max Ernst, Man Ray and a few other Dadaists and Surrealists who also continued working with discards. In the 1950s, junk sculpture enjoyed a resurgence in the work of the Neo-Dadaists. The Pop Artists added impetus to this revival during the 1960s. Within these movements the works of Louise Nevelson, Jean Dubuffet, Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Richard Stankiewicz, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Edward Kienholz, and the folk artist Simon Rodia are examples of the creative use of discards.

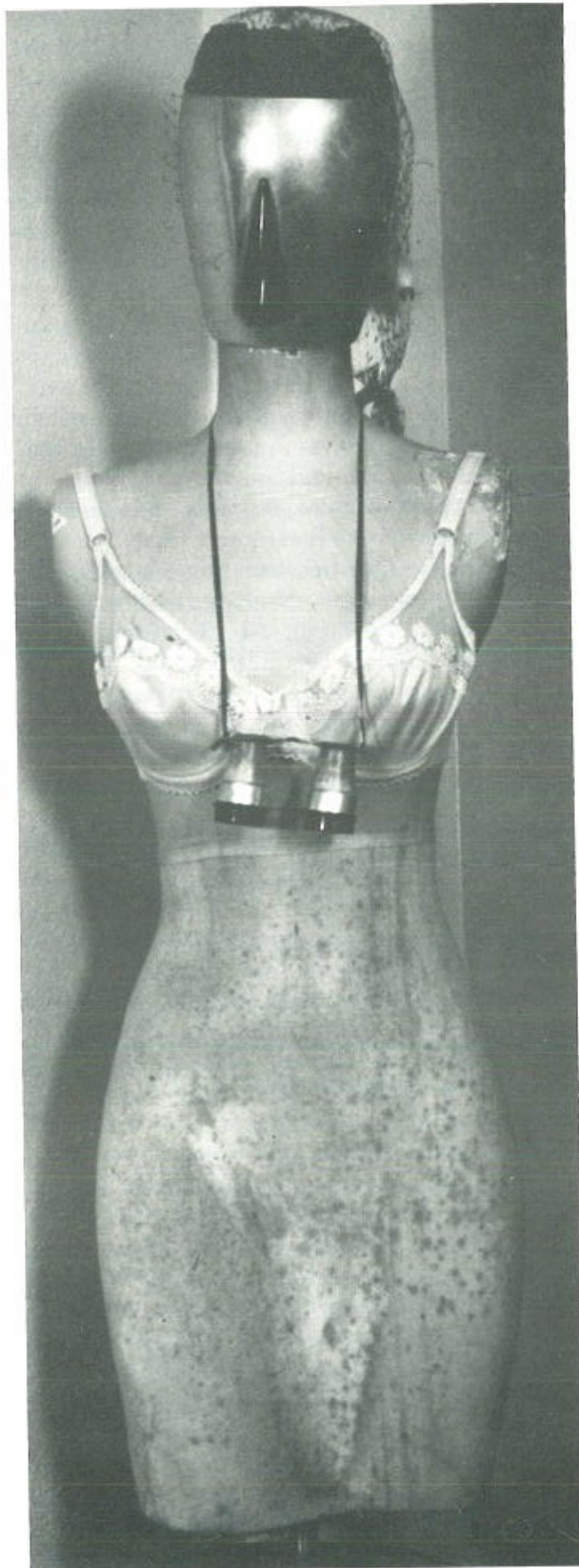


The influence of Dada objects, particularly those of Duchamp, is apparent in some of Hatfield's works such as *Slide* (1984), similar to Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914) in which the artists created by shifting the context of the objects from the utilitarian to the aesthetic. In the yard of one of Hatfield's houses is his sculpture *Slide*, a piece of a water slide he salvaged and mounted on a piece of concrete. The Ready-Made idea of manufactured objects being exhibited as aesthetically pleasing led the way to the "assisted" Ready-Made which bears the artist's added touches. Often this is the modification of ordinary manufactured objects. An example of this idea can be seen in Hatfield's sculpture titled *Venus di Chirico* (1987) in which a mannequin was assisted by the placement of a coffee pot, bra and binoculars.

Hatfield has no preconceived notions about his works. He maintains that he does not sketch out a work before actually executing it. "It is useless," he says, "I just examine the objects I have and then start picking out and putting together—I never know what it is going to look like until it is finished." Hatfield accepts the evocative content of the raw material of the images that have arisen from the process of assembling and emphasizes it, thus giving the work a subject. The titles of his works, often added after completion, can then confirm, contradict or enlarge their apparent meaning. The process is a visual one, of composing, balancing, heightening and activating various areas. Hatfield activates all parts of the room, making his installation a totally encompassing experience.

Hatfield is a writer and poet and, at this time, is writing a novel. The titles he gives his works in the installation often announce a poet's talent and are reinforced by his interest in the theater. *Nijinsky's Afternoon* (1985) is another example. It is a plaster bust of a male figure with actual horns on his head, inspired by the character in the ballet *The Afternoon of a Faun*.

He has also written some one-act plays in the absurd style and attitude similar to Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* (which Hatfield likes very much). The idea of the absurd is evident in Hatfield's work and Ionesco's philosophy of art is much like his own. Ionesco stated: "...a work of art is the expression of an uncommunicable reality that one tries to communicate—and which sometimes can be communicated. That is its paradox and its truth."



*Venus di Chirico*, 1987

The installation offers multiple centers of interest, propelling the visitor from one to the next by the density of the objects and images, by the often unfinished or process-like nature of the pieces and by the conflicting styles and characters of the works vying for attention.

Hatfield's art is influenced by everything and his world is one which constantly changes. Tinged with humor at times, Hatfield's assemblages are intricate conglomerations of remnants and relics. His creations are inconsistent and highly unpredictable because of the diversity of forms and materials. The only thing that remains constant is his recurrent approach to the human form and his inventive imagery.



*Nijinsky's Afternoon*, 1985