

'Lifeloggers' exhibit captures beauty of everyday life



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LifeLoggers: Chronicling the Everyday at the Elmhurst Art Museum. (Courtesy of the Elmhurst Art Museum.)

Get a dose of daily life with Lifeloggers in Elmhurst

Currently on view at the Elmhurst Art Museum is an exhibition of artists who obsessively register the stuff of daily life, from the colors of parking lots to a person's location on the planet, all the items packed for a trip, the points of numbness on a diseased body and, of course, the weather.

The first word of the show's title, "Lifeloggers," has the curious, almost-familiar ring of a word so new it hasn't yet made it into the dictionary, though, of course, it has a Wikipedia entry. And, really, is there a more pervasive contemporary phenomenon than the need to endlessly record via a small high-tech gadget one's every bite, every step, every thought, every vista — and to immediately post that data to the ever-evolving network of social media outlets that keep everyone updated on everyone else's doings at all times?



At least that's what I expected "Lifeloggers: Chronicling the Everyday" to be all about, and it came as a great relief to discover that it was not. On the contrary, the 13 artists in the show appear to be steadily resisting these very urges.

Most of the artwork is made using low-tech, even outmoded, materials. Miniature oil paintings, pin and thread art, colored pencil drawings, classical music notation, hand-drawn comics and debossed prints are slow, dated methods. Using them takes time and skill, as when Clive Smith paints tense little self-portraits on 2-inch-square blocks of wood every day for a year, or John Pena draws a disarmingly thoughtful cartoon about a moment in his life, a daily practice he began five years ago. These are not scads of selfies posted with a quick tap of the finger to Instagram.

Indeed, narcissism, which seems to drive at least half of what gets tweeted, is remarkably absent here. This could be because the median age of artists in the exhibition is more than a generation removed from today's wired youth. Or it could be a sign of refusal and of artistry. Good art ultimately has to rise above and beyond the self of the artist, even if it is based in it. Stephen Cartwright tracks his exact longitude and latitude on the hour every hour for a decade and a half, enters a year of that information into a computer program and builds a machine whose sole purpose is to smoothly move its grass green and sky blue parts up and down accordingly, but the end result isn't remotely about Stephen Cartwright. Likewise, the machine that keeps a critically ill patient alive is not about that person. Both apparatuses eliminate the messiness and neediness of the real lives on which they are based, refining and focusing their functioning until a soothing pace has been achieved.

As artists slow down the world to record it, they also edit and translate it, adding emotional valence to raw observation. Nathalie Miebach is able to take meteorological figures from the weeks surrounding her father-in-law's death and turn those stats into a musical score that either finds meaning in the weather or makes meaning out of it — I'm still not sure which.

Finding and making meaning might seem like it would be a prime impulse here, but it actually isn't. What so many of the artists in "Lifeloggers" are up to might more accurately be described as processing. And what most of them seem to be dealing with are things, the immense amount of electronics, clothing, books, gifts, furniture, packaged food, paperwork, children's toys and junk mail that accumulate over a lifetime and in a week.

How to manage it all gracefully can seem like an impossible, never-ending task. Pinterest and apartmenttherapy.com are full of images and articles with all-too-helpful tips for organizing life and kitchen cupboards. Artists do it by inventing aesthetic systems. Richard Garrison plots the ticky-tacky colors of Target, Wal-Mart and Sears leaflets along meditative diagrams, creating circular circulars that are part modernist abstraction, part postmodernist deconstruction. Elise Engler, who appears to travel a lot, makes wee colored pencil drawings of every item in her luggage — one scroll for items taken, another for those taken back. The latter is inevitably longer than the former, and scale is hilariously mislaid: A bike and a necklace bought in China appear to be the same size. Mysteriously, Engler managed to acquire a substantial number of objects in Antarctica. Who knew there were shops there?

Artist Leona Christie takes cues from her brother Gavin, who is autistic and has an immense capacity for storing and organizing facts. He ritually hand writes and types blocky lists of MTV New Year specials watched, dates when shorts have been worn, travel details for driving 15 miles to Flint, Mich. She absorbs his intensity in a series of pristine, white-on-white prints that embed these inventories in the surface of heavy white paper, as if by sheer force.

The success of these systems can be measured in their ability to produce beauty and calm in the face of speedy commercial excess. Jennifer Dalton's "The Reappraisal," in which she catalogs and prices everything she owns and then displays the results, fails according to that criteria. This might be due to the sheer abundance of her belongings, which include a lot of her friends' and her own artwork, or the fact that none of it seems to be worth very much, at least according to the professional appraiser Dalton hired from Christie's auction house. This situation is depressing. But Dalton appears resolute in the face of her low market value. She loves every last cassette tape and framed photo, and has tagged them accordingly, like the lady at the garage sale who doesn't really want to sell her stuff anyway. She'd rather keep it, thank you very much. It's her life, after all.

"Lifeloggers: Chronicling the Everyday" runs through Aug. 17 at the Elmhurst Museum of Art, 150 Cottage Hill Avenue, Elmhurst. 630-834-0202 or elmhurstmuseum.org.

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