

Mary Daniel Hobson at the Bolinas Museum

A native San Franciscan and well-known Bay Area photographer and artist, Mary Daniel Hobson has been passionate about photography since she was only fourteen, when, as she states, “my camera taught me to pay attention” and “to see the world in all its fine detail.” At Vassar College, where she majored in art history, Hobson wrote a thesis on the photographic work of Lee Miller, lover and apprentice of Man Ray. Miller’s dedication to photography as a medium for self-expression and her association with surrealism offered a “role model” for Hobson. Hobson then enrolled in the masters program in the history of photography at the University of New Mexico, where her “fascination with Surrealism was confirmed.” Her MA thesis was a study of the photographic work of Dora Maar, model, mistress and muse of Picasso. Maar’s collages became a

source of Hobson’s own creativity. Hobson then began to apply mixed-media techniques and the methods of surrealism to her own photographic works. In 1996, she created her first series of layered photographic collages, *Mapping the Body*, which she worked on for seven years. From this initial series, she has expanded her integration of photography and mixed media to produce four other notable series of works, *Milagros*, *Bottle Dreams*, *Sanctuary* and *Evocations*. Works from all these series were on view in *Remnants* at the Bolinas Museum, and revealed Hobson’s masterful melding of photographic and surrealist dissociative techniques that produce affective emotional states from dreamlike juxtapositions of images and fragmented objects.

The series *Milagros* was inspired by the votive token offerings, small metal talismans, *milagros* (“miracles” in Spanish), that worshippers and pilgrims buy and offer to the effigies of saints in

churches and shires when pleading for their prayers to be answered. *Milagros* have many shapes and forms—hearts, legs, arms, hands, locks and keys, babies and animals—associated with the type of miracle requested. For her series, Hobson photographed people’s arms and hands and asked them to write down their requests for a miracle or positive change in their life. She then formed collages of these photographic images, statements and prayers using transparent photographic images and other materials, such as pieces of maps, handwritten letters, postcards and sheet music, sometimes threaded together with pins and thread, as, for example, *Kindness*, *Healing* and *Listen Long Enough*. These disembodied arms, although they look much like tattooed body parts, are in fact quite moving ritualistic religious objects, individual talismans for positive change and documented evidence of human desire for and belief in divine intervention.

Bottle Dreams is a wonderful series that takes photographs from Hobson’s past, printed as gelatin silver prints, and “embottles” them in clear bottles filled with mineral oil. They look like laboratory specimens on a shelf, clearly exhibiting Hobson’s interest in what she calls “the conflation of art and science.” Some images are indeed photographic records of favorite places—the Grand Canyon, Machu Picchu, Point Lobos and New Mexico. Others, like *Crabbing #1*, *#2* and *#3*, and *Trolling #1* and *#2*, reveal a remembered activity. The oil refracts and distorts these ethereal, curious and intriguing preserved specimens such that they blur into the viewer’s memories as well.

For the *Sanctuary* series Hobson bottled photographs of Marin County, where she lives, then rephotographed the bottles and their images against a black background. Certain scenes, like in *Sanctuary #1*, *#2* and *#3* with birds flying and waves rolling within the bottle produce the distilled and quiet emotional impact of actually standing on the shore looking out toward the Pacific Ocean. These are surreal, self-contained miniature worlds, photographic records of specimen seascapes.



Mary Daniel Hobson, (above) *001* from the series *Evocations*, 2007, archival pigment print, 8" x 8"; (right) *A Creative Fire Within*, from the series *Milagros*, 2006, photo, mixed-media collage, 36" x 18", at the Bolinas Museum.

The more recent *Evocations* are imaginary records of historic and fantasy geographies. *Evocation #007* includes an early French map of the coast of the American colonies and reproductions of renaissance paintings, photographs of nudes, antique charts and various found objects. Others like *Evocation #001* are photographed hanging by strings inside a bottle, which shows clearly the continuity of the development of her various series. The beauty and masterful technique in Hobson’s works confirm that she has learned well from her chosen role models and also that she has skillfully adopted surrealist principles to her own needs and artistic purposes.

—Frank Cebulski

Mary Daniel Hobson: *Remnants* closed in April at the Bolinas Museum, Bolinas.

Frank Cebulski is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

