



INTERVIEW WITH NANCY SHAVER BY STEEL STILLMAN

The following interview focuses on the lives of objects—in particular on objects noticed, collected, arranged and sold by the artist Nancy Shaver, proprietor of the shop Henry, in Hudson, N.Y. For Shaver, objects are not inert things. Instead, like characters in a play, they have backstories; onstage relationships—at Henry—with other objects; new roles in the homes of their eventual owners; and unknowable futures.

Collecting is the organizing verb in Shaver's life and work. It is evident in the accumulative grammar of her sculpture and in the exuberant arrangement of her store. For most serious artists, the line between one's art practice and one's day job is easy to mark. In Shaver's case, the line seems blurry until you realize that locating its shifting whereabouts is a productive philosophical matter.

In the images gathered here, and in the conversation below, objects play multiple roles. Aesthetics and ordinary, domestic utility can seem to swap places. Or be the same thing. Beauty shows up unexpectedly. In the end, objects – what they are; how they look; what they signify – are the story. Where art begins or ends is precisely the challenge.

I met Shaver in 1974 when I was one of four or five Middlebury College students who prevailed on her to teach a seminar on photography. We'd heard that she'd been studying with Walker Evans, while her then husband Haim Steinbach, who was also our teacher, was getting his MFA at Yale. Shaver was primarily a photographer then, but she was already a veteran flea market shopper, and a collector of unusual things.

SS: How did you meet Walker Evans? Did he encourage your interest in the ordinary?

NS: Evans was teaching at Yale and I audited his classes. I'd been taking pictures of junk on the ground and on the street, framing things very simply in the viewfinder, and Evans loved my pictures. I'd already begun to understand that if I was going to make art, I'd have to find my interest in what was in front of me. I wasn't interested in high drama or exaggeration. So getting to know Evans and his pictures—and reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—helped me on my way.

SS: In interviews, Evans repeatedly referred to literature, saying it had been a huge influence on his own work.

NS: In his classes, Evans rarely talked about students' work—all he talked about was literature, about Flaubert, or Baudelaire, or whomever. I decided I had to learn about these people, and read voraciously for the next four or five years.

SS: How often did you and Evans go junking together?

NS: We'd go out once a week. I would have preferred to go to flea markets but he liked more natural settings, like the beach, where he could find things worn by time. He had a huge pair of bolt cutters and he'd steal signs and I'd help. It was fun to find things and give them to him. We had the same kind of eye and became friends.

SS: And when you were on your own, what kind of things were you looking for?