

The detritus of a lifetime

By Rick Polito

Tearing open a cardboard box, Harrell Fletcher grabs a one-eyed stuffed bear, a curiously flat musical elephant, a monofilament-whiskered bunny and an oddly anatomic pillow with arms he describes only as “an amorphous-shaped thing.”

“Some of these boxes haven’t been opened in 25 years,” Fletcher says, confessing “a mixture of affection and repulsion” for the artifacts of his youth, plucked out of the darkness of his parents’ attic for a kind of month-long monologue of stuff emerging in piles in the Headlands Center for the Arts’ Project Space studio.

Fletcher is sorting through his life one box at a time.

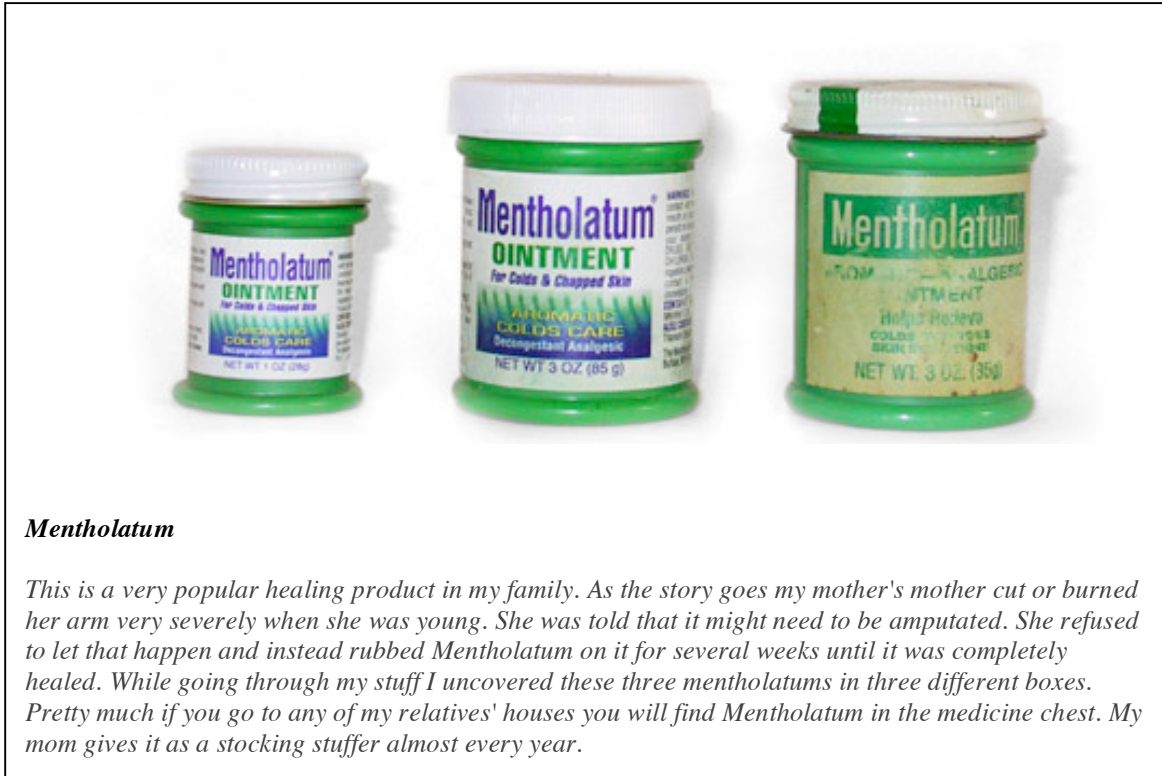
A multidisciplinary artist and vagabond pack rat, Fletcher has filled the center’s third-floor studio with the flotsam and detritus of a busy 33 years, all packed in boxes, a cardboard cornucopia of one man’s past lives. A toy accordion, a collection of early ‘80s MAD Magazines, a teddy bear rocking chair, a tin cup, a straw hat, two painted plastic plates - Fletcher’s life can be traced through the things he chose to save, the bits and pieces that packed his parents’ Santa Maria attic until he loaded a 14-foot U-Haul truck last month for his stint in the Project Space.

“I don’t know what I’m going to find,” Fletcher says. “Really.”

Through Sept. 23, Fletcher and his accumulation will be on display five days a week to anybody who climbs the stairs to the third floor. You can watch him sort. He’ll even give a piece of it. “I’m pretty much giving something to everybody who comes in,” he says.

The collection is near to maddening in its detail and breadth. In one corner a tangle of cheap Halloween masks testifies to the boy

Fletcher. Across the room, the grown man's tax receipts lie in neatly stacked piles. On a windowsill, three pieces of rough-finished wood stand nailed together, the purpose of the composition and the reason for its 25 years of preservation lost to time. A model train set is taped tightly in its carton. A sea serpent hand-painted on a floral bed sheet sprawls across the wooden floor.



Mentholatum

This is a very popular healing product in my family. As the story goes my mother's mother cut or burned her arm very severely when she was young. She was told that it might need to be amputated. She refused to let that happen and instead rubbed Mentholatum on it for several weeks until it was completely healed. While going through my stuff I uncovered these three mentholatums in three different boxes. Pretty much if you go to any of my relatives' houses you will find Mentholatum in the medicine chest. My mom gives it as a stocking stuffer almost every year.

For Fletcher, they are more than merely objects.

“Objects can be incredible facilitators for stories,” he says. “You can pick almost anything in there and there’s a story attached.”

The skateboard recalls the summer he and his high school friends took down the tree-house his grandfather made for him and used the wood to build a half-pipe skateboard ramp with no kit or plans.

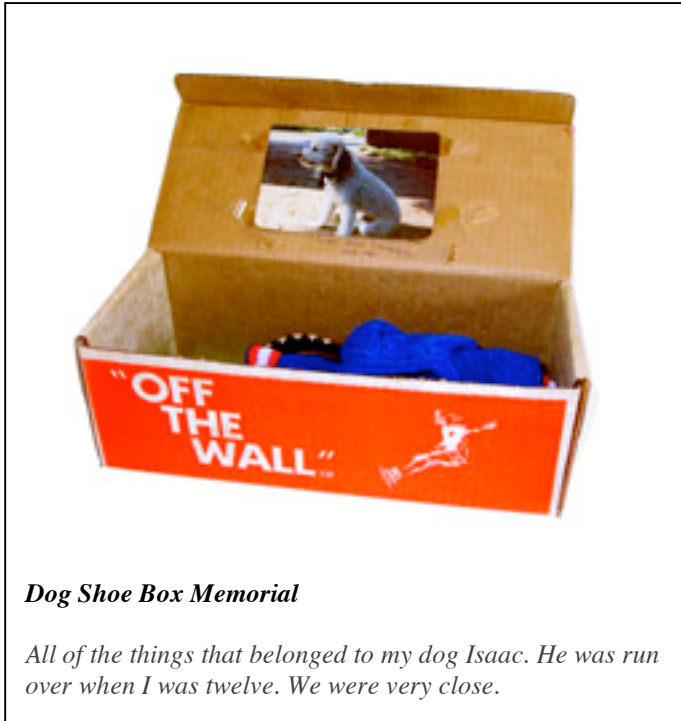
The football helmet was a gift for his first birthday, when his parents and their friends celebrated the first son in a family of daughters.

The collection of Spanish children’s books are a reminder of a Mexican girlfriend and his short-lived effort to learn her language.

The burn mark on the back of his hardback “Watership Down” is evidence of a boyhood pal’s experiment with firecracker fuses. “The firemen came and everything,” he recalls.

When Fletcher looks across the cavernous space, now filled with boxes and bulging paper bags, he sees not only treasures but the “tendrils of stories connected to each one.”

In a way, this is familiar ground for Fletcher, a graduate of the California College of Arts and Crafts. Many of his art shows have centered on everyday items set in the context of everyday lives. At the Here Gallery in Oakland, he trucked in the inventory of nearby yard sales and persuaded the would-be sellers to tell the stories of each item. At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, he coaxed visitors to let him copy the photos in their wallets and then blew the copies up to super poster size for the museum’s permanent collection.



Dog Shoe Box Memorial

All of the things that belonged to my dog Isaac. He was run over when I was twelve. We were very close.

But, he says, “it’s generally about other people and their stuff.”

This is the artist himself.

A man who has spent nearly all of his adult life living from dorm room to apartment, from project to project and grant to grant, camping out in art studios and working stints on organic farms, a man who has lived free of physical baggage, must now sort through his life, his past lives.

One box at a time.

“It’s about dealing with who I was,” he says.

And at the same time, this work is not nearly so narrowly focused. Any visitor to the third floor and Project Space can relate to what Fletcher is doing. We all have closets and boxes and trunks brimming

with items and objects long past their expiration dates. We hold onto the past in physical form for reasons we do not understand or even question. To walk through Fletcher’s piles of boxes, to see the 2-foot deep book of childhood drawings and the five dried lemons he saved from his parents’ backyard tree, is to recognize that we all pack memories in those dusty boxes at the back of every closet.

“Everybody has some experience with dealing with stuff,” he says. Or not dealing with it, he admits.

“There’s some sort of idea that you’ll want this stuff someday,” he says. And then, moments later, “It’s a complete mystery to me why I wanted to keep this.”

When Fletcher sums up his Project Space experience in a public artist’s talk Sept. 20, he will select 100 objects from his life. He will examine these objects as though they were artifacts from an archaeological site. He will write the story that each object carries.

He will sort through his life one box at a time.