

SHOPPING Camberwell market regular
Michelle de Kretser takes a last journey
among the ghosts of purchases past.

Odds and endings

THE last time I went to Camberwell flea market, I bought a Carltonware toast rack for \$10. But the day hadn't started out well. I'd arrived to find my secret unlimited-time parking spot converted to a permit zone. There was nothing to do but head for a two-hour bay in a parking lot.

It's necessary to move on, to make way for those who come after. But time limits are at odds with the nature of flea markets. They're places for loitering and the leisurely perusal of wonders. There are wintry mornings when I scuttle along the aisles, swept before the southerly like human debris. Mostly, however, I dawdle through the market, taking it at the adagio it deserves.

Everything that partakes of magic is provisional. Like fashion and performance, childhood and dreams, the flea market at Camberwell is marked by impermanence. It materialises on Sundays from early until half-past noon. For those few hours, the workday parking lot between Burke Road and Market Place is reborn as an archive, a graveyard, a wonderland of desires.

Earlybirds are already leaving, their smiles beatific, clutching their finds: an orange-tiled coffee-table, a crocheted bolero, a giant candlestick, a ziplock bag of dinosaurs. Taxonomies come undone at the market; kitsch and cool blur. It mixes porcelain eggcups and Darth Vader dolls, muddles trays of letterpress type and silver platform shoes. Fish tanks jostle satin bomber jackets here, telephones cosy up to the ruins of chandeliers.

There are times when these incongruous groupings suggest the dregs of dreams. At others, their look of objects startled into significance turns them into photos of the scene of a crime. They never fail to remind me of "the chance encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table" that famously defined surrealism. In flea markets, the fabulous and the bizarre impinge on reality to jolt us to attention.

The first thing I spot is *The Norfolk Island Cookbook*, which offers the added inducement of a list of local words. There's a recipe for tender pumpkin leaves (boil and serve with butter) and things to do with dead pigs. The opening phrase

in the glossary translates as, "That child is stuck in that pine" — the kind of situation that regularly develops in those parts, I guess, even if the culinary application isn't immediately clear.

Any given week, my grab-bag of plunder micro-models the glorious jumble on offer. Two novels, a tunic made from vintage curtain fabric, a string of spooky blue plastic pearls. A biscuit tin decorated with roses, a '60s wall tile painted with a stylised kangaroo. Three greeting cards recycled from old magazines. A packet of sandalwood incense, a zip-up cardigan, a hand-tinted postcard of the Bay of Naples. A hoodie. A Sunbeam electric frypan, five cakes of coconut soap. A pair of opera glasses made in the USSR from brass and ivory Bakelite. If nothing else, a \$2 bunch of dark red leucadendrons.

All kinds of people sell all kinds of stuff here. There are seasoned dealers in retro chic, people who are moving house, children who have cleared out the toy cupboard.

Today the woman who sells vintage buttons is here, and the man who peddles bundles of electrical cabling. Over at the plant stall, the tan kelpie keeps watch. His owner once sold me \$8 worth of seedlings that built hollyhock towers in my garden all summer.

This Law, the ubercool retro clothing store, has a clearance stall at the market. There's a guy who sells gemstones and one who fixes clocks. Tiny Asian students sell jeans in doll sizes. There's a masseur at work, and an Elvis impersonator. Sometimes the Salvos' brass band strikes up.

My favourite stall is run by two artists called Public Assembly. They scour the market for objects that spark their imagination, then transform what they've found into the contents of their stall. There are no price tags: purchases are by donation. What happens here encapsulates the spirit of the market. There's improvisation and trust, and the conjuring of marvels from other people's junk.

Today I buy a yellow brooch made from bits of a builder's rule: very Rosalie Gascoigne, as the maker points out. It lies beside a plastic artefact put together from the body of a lion and the head of an SS officer. That's one of the "conversation pieces" on display, creepily brilliant assemblages in



which cheap figurines are taken apart and startlingly reconfigured.

My parking limit in mind, I check my watch often. But time puckers and pleats here. All unaware, someone turns over a box of oddments and falls down the rabbit hole of memory. A lamp made from a baler shell illuminates a forgotten beach holiday. A share-house rises from the silt of years at the sight of three stoneware coffee mugs stamped with four-petaled orange flowers.

At Hubert Found . . . the '80s are bigger than *Dynasty*. It's a time capsule of batwing jumpers in electric blue and black, and fuchsia polka dot ensembles with Diana ruffles. Identical pussy-bow necklines, elasticised waists and knife-pleated skirts once hung in my mother's wardrobe. She's a 21st-century ghost in bright, uncrushable synthetics come to remind me flea markets are haunted places.

The future is on parade, too: just check out the crowd. This is where frugal hipsters come to shop. People-watching is reason enough to visit the market. Do you ever ask yourself if the dog collar is about to stage a comeback as the *dernier cri* in ironic neckwear? Here's where you'll find out.

This is where you monitor the rise and fall of hemlines, this is where trousers first narrow or flare. The halter-neck maxi sashayed into view here at least two seasons before it swarmed over the chain-store racks. Ditto the quilted faux Chanel bag.

Up and down the aisles strolls

Melbourne style at its inventive, irreverent best. An old school tie does service as a belt, a 'do is adorned with a mauve plastic clothes peg. Yesteryear's bland, floral button-through number is zhuzhed with a trilby, a lime-green swing coat and the stacked heel, butterscotch boots I swear were mine circa 1977.

Perhaps that's why so many of us keep coming back. In our godless, throwaway culture, flea markets lure us with a great redemptive promise. That what we have loved will yet be rescued from oblivion and landfill. That what has slipped from our unheeding fingers will somewhere be safely gathered in.

An array of trinkets reaches out to snag my attention. A black velvet cushion holds rhinestone sprays and enamel pins, gilt cats and filigree bouquets. But I've focused on a little wreath of dried green and white daisies encased in clear plastic. It has a funerary look: a roadside memorial in miniature. "You can have it for three," says the vendor, as I stand there in contemplation.

Many stallholders are willing to negotiate, especially as noon approaches. And as my toast-rack shows, cut-price treasures are here for the hunting. This morning I've had to pass on a \$12 Joseph shirt that wasn't my size and pounced on an original paperback of *The Burnt Ones* for \$2.50. I've found my best winter coats at the market, the dearest a steal at \$25.

Some people are immune to the second-hand aesthetic. To them, used

goods aren't objects enriched with history, but signifiers of poverty and a lamentable lack of hygiene.

Nevertheless, Balwyn Rotary Club has raised \$8 million for charity in the 33 years it's been running the market. And whether it's due to recession-induced thrift or a heightened interest in sustainable living, the pull of this place has never been stronger. Once you could book a stall a week in advance; now there's a wait of up to two months.

Not long ago it was feared that eBay would kill off flea markets. But cloud cameos are shifting shape here against a sky of Wedgwood blue. An emo teenager launches into "Caroline Says", and cinnamon doughnuts scent the air. Grown men are haggling over a shoebox of Ninja Turtles. Someone shouts, "Everything's half-price if we like you!" A girl in a ra-ra skirt is carrying off a turquoise vase that would make Adrian from *Collectors* drool. Could the bloodless click that wins you the online auction really supplant these embodied enchantments?

Like history, shopping happens twice: the first time as fashion, the second as trash. When an object is new, its message of status or wealth, sophistication or cool is broadcast to all. You might not want it, but you get what it's about — at least until the fashion changes.

Junk works differently. Its appeal, being individually slanted, is far less predictable. I see an artefact rich in symbolic associations; you see a manky brooch. If trash is to be perceived as treasure, it must correspond to a waiting niche in our uniquely storied selves. Then, from the junction of memory and wishes, desire flashes out to cast its lustre over what we see.

Another ghost lies in wait for me, swinging overhead: an emerald silk kimono embroidered with pagodas and dragons. The boho friend who first brought me here in the jewel-hued '70s used to wear its aquamarine double as a jacket.

Back in the day, the flea market went on late into the afternoon. That

ended with the advent of Sunday trading. Local retailers argued that the loss of parking space had an adverse affect on their businesses. Their lobbying brought about the present reduction in hours. For the same reason, the market doesn't operate on the two Sundays before Christmas. On a more significant scale than my private dilemma, the time available for experiencing the market has shrunk.

Like all the market's regulars, I grumbled about the change. "Those shops sell their stuff every day of the week. Can't they share for a couple of hours?" But we were missing the point, which was only superficially about parking and dollars. What was feared at heart was the spectre of subversion.

The market offers a carnivalesque parody of shopping. It mocks our lust for acquisition, even as it plays to it. These acres bear witness to the scope of our greed and the fickleness of our desires. Whatever else a flea market might be, it's certainly a memento mori. And who wants a death's head in view when you shop? Pack up the discarded playthings and the superseded chic, the presents you never liked and the impulse buys you regretted. Let retailing rage unhindered by the market's sly whisper: *This is where the stuff you're buying will end up.*

They're calling time on the tannoy as I make a last tour of the aisles. There's more on my mind than parking, I confess. By the time you read this, I'll be living in Sydney: a many-splendoured city, but they don't do flea markets with this panache.

The toast rack is for my sister, who collects Carltonware. When she heard I was leaving Melbourne, she said: "But I always think of you at Camberwell market." Today, along with these stalls, part of me is being dismantled.

I tell myself I'll be back, as a ghost or a tourist. But for now there's nothing to do but move on. It's time to make way for those who come after.

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