

Diary of a Plague Time



Max Reeves

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Being a Photographic Meditation under Quarantine of
'Marlowe's Museum of Interesting Things'
in our Home in Spitalfields, London,
during the Covid 19 Pandemic 2020

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“Seaward ho! Hang the treasure! It’s the glory of the
sea that has turned my head.”

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*

Marlowe and I moved into our flat in Spitalfields in the East End of London towards the end of 2008 when he was six, thereby ending a period of homelessness and anxiety. Our home is in a solid proletarian London County Council Block erected in 1949, with its own architectural quirks and built to last. We are situated in something of a borderland on the edge of the East End, with the City to the south, Hackney to the North, and Old Street to the West. Since its early days, our Block has reflected the richness and diversity of the various waves of life in the East End. With the exception of a couple of years when we joined together to fight (and win) plans by our Housing Association to demolish our homes to build yuppie flats and disperse us all, our flat has been our anchor. Our rock. Our castle.

At that time Marlowe was going to primary school. I being his primary carer, and in the process of redefining my photography practice. Being something of a collector I had amassed a trove of objects, pictures and kipple from my various travels and excursions, wanderings and encounters, with and without Marlowe. Now we had a home I set to mustering all these 'treasures' from their various depositories and consolidating them. And then to display them. As our shelving became by necessity evermore elaborate and expansive, it seemed evident that we were evolving into some sort of museum situation. This was always semi-intentional as I thought it a wonderful thing for a young child to have. To grow up surrounded with all sorts of curios and wonders, as well as random and banal things, each with its own story and identity, might provide something of a Wonderhouse for Marlowe's young and expansive imagination. We called it 'Marlowe's Museum of Interesting Things'.

What else? As we traveled to more places, plundered more markets, and found more stuff, the collection slowly and surely grew and evolved. And Marlowe himself, as he drew, painted, and created his way through his childhood adding to the tome. The shelving grew. The collection grew, and so did Marlowe. He grew into a creative, interesting, inquisitive and engaging human.

Soon he will be eighteen and my legal steersman ship will close. Sooner or later he will leave our home and our museum behind, taking it with him only in his consciousness. This is why I see the museum as a sort of Memento Mori, a requiem for a childhood, a mausoleum of memories of which I will be the sexton.

For a long time, I have been meaning to get around to some sort of documentation of our little collection. But why and for whom? And in what context? I think there are some genuinely interesting items worthy of recording for posterity, but also a lot of random shit with little or no perceived interest outside of our personal experience. Yet these divested things are as integral to the corpus as any of the more celebuntate pieces. An innocuous pine cone amidst several score kindred others which Marlowe chose to pick up on the bush floor in my hometown of Papakura, for instance, has equal currency in our collection than say, a preserved Joey from the bygone Haslar Hospital Museum. A masterful painting by NZ artist Matthew Couper lives in solidarity with my hopeless childhood attempts at coloring my cohort of plastic Airfix soldiery. Our museum is pretty egalitarian. I wanted Marlowe to be able to see potential and wonder in all things.

And then came the Plague. Well the Covid 19 pandemic. And a great anxiety descended upon us all. When we entered our quarantine and reached for our copies of Defoe and Camus and tried to make sense of it. When to venture outside meant risking lives; not just your own but also those of others compounded by untrustworthy guidance from government, and fears of shortages, and the collapse of the NHS. So with physical confinement came an opportunity for introspection. And like so many fellow photographers, my thoughts and my lens turned within, and a new project presented itself like a suddenly decoded message. But I also lost Marlowe. He went to Isolate with his Sister Django in her bigger and gardened flat in Hackney. A mile or two away in physicality but a mental ocean apart. For the first time I was left without him in our small Menagerie. He will return but for how long I don't know. I do know things will never be the same again.

On the first day of lockdown I took a rough pic with my crappy phone and posted it on Instagram, 'Diary of a Plague Time - Day One'. Intentionally melodramatic to gently test the uncertainty of those early days, and of course referencing Defoe. My intention was to take a new photo of some aspect of our Museum each day, to mark time through the quarantine. Within a day or two I decided to make it into a book. Like Defoe I strove to achieve verisimilitude, my iPhone barging in to a candid arrangement, authentically and 'spontaneously' capturing the subjects as they had evolved into composition casually, over the years, dust included. As something new arrived, it was placed wherever convenience decided. As something broke, or found another home, or simply vanished, it became removed.

The museum was in effect an evolution of chance and aesthetic, with expediency, the stepmother of arrangement. But the quality of the iPhone pics was not sufficient for print quality, so I had to retake each Instagram photo with the same taken on my 'proper' camera using a different aspect ratio. Also the photos for the book sometimes required compositional alterations to accommodate such things as light, angles, focus and so on, and so things moved. Thereby I created a parallel World, some sort of Simulacrum. Sometimes a dusting occurred. The Museum changed.

So the project galvanised me to consider the collection and our home in general, effecting a long overdue spring clean and a reordering. It was a chance to go through my deep storage, the ignored, lost or occult parts of the flat long forgotten. Some things I would discover and add to a composition while others would be taken away after the photo and put in storage or given away. Always trying to keep a sense of spontaneity in the project which, consequently, became also a documentation of change. Just as Marlowe has changed.

And so day after day I took a picture. Then recreated an approximation of it. It was my ritual. Wake up. Check reality. Have coffee. Take Instagram photo. Post it. Retake photo for book. Work it. Other stuff. Each photo a portal to another world, of another time as memories of the objects informed something of that day. Forgotten moments, or situations, or places, or exchanges and familiar ones too. Often I would spend some time researching the objects so as to make an accurate description for the accompanying text. Often too I would become lost in thought going on all manner of mental travel. Some sort of narrative unfolded, and this is what I present here.

As day became day became day, the chronicle woven more multiplex, and by and by an end needed to loom. Somewhere in the days of seventies I decided ninety was a good number to stop at. It seemed somehow resonant. Somehow significant. I did a cursory google...

"in numerology number 90 is the number of humanitarianism, compassion, and idealism. It is a number of philanthropy and tolerance. It may be understood as being a number 9 with infinite potential. The energy the number 90 represents includes the ideas of wholeness, inclusiveness, and comprehensiveness" (Wikipedia).

Whatever. That'll do. Also to be honest I was getting a little bored. The daily observance was becoming something of a chore and by now the bulk of our Collection had been orchestrated and recorded, and its arrangement refined. The Pandemic seemed, after roughly three months, to have run its main course. Or at least it seemed to have travelled somewhere new in the general consciousness. Like a mighty river that disperses into a delta, the main force gone but its tributaries flowing distant and myriad. It was time to move on. Like a childhood mutating.

The last image 'Diary of a Plague Time - Day Ninety' is represented by Marlowe's unfinished Epic Mappa Mundi, a project he began several years ago but never completed as its commencement coincided with his slow loss of interest in drawing. It was meant to be a narrative of his childhood's interests and travels while growing up, yet like this Museum remains a work in progress.

Max Reeves Summer 2020

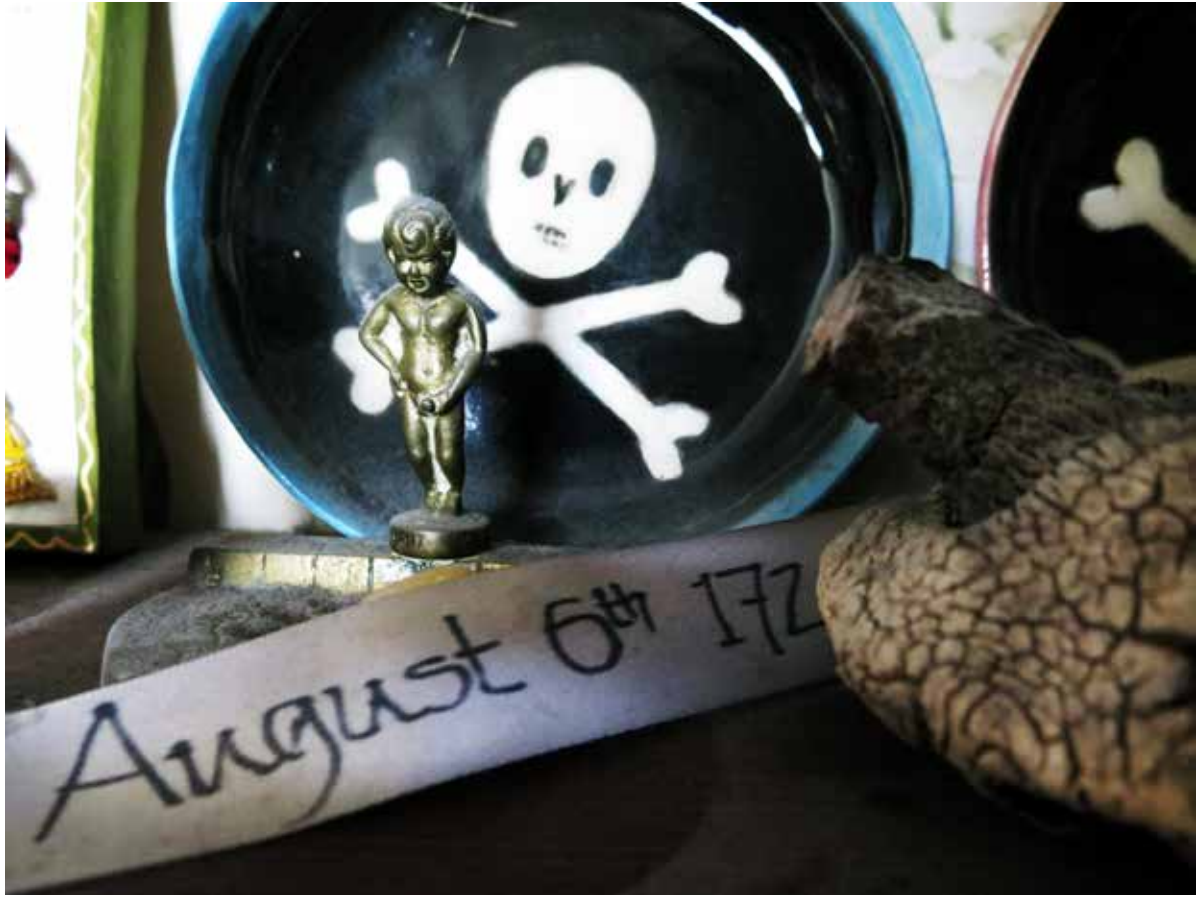
'My Son My Son You're all the World to Me'

For my Son Marlowe Mostar Chan-Reeves

BCF

Day One

A Manneken Pis (Little Pissing Man) of Brussels Ashtray, a Skull and Crossbones Plate by Julie Goldsmith, a Sea Plant of some sort I found on a beach in Oameru, Aoteoroa/NZ, and a Memorial Ribbon from the Crossbones Graveyard Gate in Southwark, London.



Day Two

Two Mexican Day of the Dead Dioramas featuring showering Skeletons and a birth scene. A gift from from my Daughter Django that she got at Mexico City's Macado de Artesanias la Ciudadela.



Day Three

A custom made doll-sized Burka I was given in Kabul as a special gift from my friend Mustapha, and an engraved Bullet Cartridge I got from an artisan metalworker in Sarajevo's Baščaršija (Old Bazaar).



Day Four

A Trump Chocolate Bar from New York (a gift from Django) with a phallus drawn on it, some Rubbers in the form of world food from an Asian shop in Auckland and a Sticker possibly of Saint Vincent of Saragossa with Ravens from the same shop and a metal Pukeko Candle Holder from Aoteoroa/NZ.

