

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTIMACY — ON LOOKING AT EVERYDAY THINGS

Meg Butler left a wonderful story as comment on the photos of the apartment in San Jose.

Both the pictures and your comments remind me of a small town in Texas that I visited. My first impression was of a dying town. It isn't on a main highway or interstate, it isn't touristy in any way — the one thing the town actively “advertises” is that it is the birthplace of a famous country singer. The stores on the main street are empty (but still bearing the old signs painted on the windows), the hospital building is abandoned (but carefully locked), the movie theater, now closed, still has the signs up from the last film it showed, the streets and sidewalks when I visited were dead quiet, empty of people and of life, except the occasional car. The few residents I met were older people who had spent their whole lives there and, for sentimental reasons or financial reasons or because they were just too tired to manage, had decided not to move, even when the town emptied out of their relatives

and all the young people and when their own generation began dying out. The town actually has a website with a calendar where town events can be listed, but as far back in time as you can search and as far forward as well, the only things listed are the standard American holidays.

There was a store on the main street (one of the two stores still open) that advertised itself as an antiques store. I can imagine where the store gets its merchandise, but I would love to know who the buying customers are. Nothing in the store was listed at more than fifty dollars. Old paperback mystery novels, plastic tea sets for having tea with dolls, American flag pins, used kitchen knives, bags of buttons, cookie jars in every shape and color imaginable, stuffed pigs Had I been alone in the store, I might have been "free" to laugh at certain items, sneer at others, or appreciate and examine the few objects that caught my fancy. But the store is owned and run by an elderly lady, a long-time resident of the town, and I felt embarrassed to be caught picking over the remnants of her hometown's life, in spite of the fact that presumably this was what I was supposed to do as a

customer in the store. Trying to evaluate and appreciate and understand a totally foreign object in front of someone who may know part or all of the object's history is very unnerving. Initially I felt an overwhelming obligation to buy something as a gesture that I appreciated her merchandise. But in the end I was unable to buy anything. The objects for sale were disturbingly intimate in that they were part of "everyday" experience – an "everyday" with which I was familiar from visiting grandparents and elderly neighbors – and I couldn't look at them, as I often look (though perhaps I shouldn't) at objects in museums, without feeling awkward and intrusive. It was an entirely different experience of "viewing" than any I have ever known.