

A couple and all their stuff

By David Hayes, Toronto Star, July 20, 2012



For several years, taxidermy has been a rising trend. In the late '90s in London, a swish young crowd revived the Victorian era's obsession with nature preserved in glass-fronted cabinets and mounted on walls. In 2009, The New York Times talked about the use of taxidermy in trendy magazine photo spreads and hip restaurants, as well as a subculture dubbed the "New Antiquarians" who, the Times reported, "incorporate dramatic antiques (like taxidermy) into the design of their carefully assembled homes."

But there's nothing faddish about Morgan Mavis' Contemporary Zoological Conservatory, operated out of the \$1,250-a-month west-end apartment she shares with her partner, Christopher Bennell. It's a modern-day, 1,000-square-foot cabinet of curiosities, an installation dedicated to preserving nature in the same loving and studious way that Victorians did, which is not to say Mavis and Bennell don't acknowledge irony.

When I visited recently, Mavis, a gregarious, plushly-built 32-year-old with shoulder-length pink hair, served me a gin-and-Ting cocktail in the conservatory. Here she is surrounded by a mounted bald eagle (collected by her father decades ago when it crashed into his windshield in Port Hardy, B.C.); 19-point antlers from a moose donated by friends; a 150-year-old, museum-quality cabinet containing 18 songbirds purchased at a Perth, Ont., flea market; a mammoth Cape Buffalo head (also donated); and a pre-1940 cinnamon bear that for years stood at the front door of the Wm. Lech and Sons Furriers Ltd. shop in Peterborough. She tells me about her passion.

"I was a collector ever since I was a kid," she says, and she's not kidding. She still has mini-collections of chalkware fruit, Colonel Sanders figurines — their 8-year-old Chinese crested hairless dog, who walks on his hind legs, is named "The Colonel" — and floaty pens. But at various times she collected novelty soaps and erasers, gems, cuckoo clocks, street signs and more.

What could be a psychiatric condition in others has become, for Mavis, a scholarly vocation. Her first degree was a bachelor in fine arts in sculpture installation from OCADU, but this summer she completed her master's degree in museum studies at the U of T. It ties directly into her interest in "the human interpretation of the natural," which involves acquiring, compiling and categorizing, as well as recording stories, about objects.

Storing them is a challenge. "Taxidermy is the most volatile form of collecting in the museum world," she says. "Moths are a constant threat and a fluctuating relative humidity causes the hides to get brittle and crack."

"We have to freeze everything that comes into the space before we put it out," adds Bennell. "We hope donations mainly come in the winter." In the coldest months, he explains, they seldom use the living room conservatory. To preserve their collection, they don't heat it at all, blocking off the doors with antique quilts.

A compact 28-year-old wearing tan trousers, a white t-shirt and suspenders, Bennell has slicked-back black hair, a receding hairline and a thin moustache. Resembling a younger, better-looking John Waters, he is a web developer and instructor in web design at OCADU. They are perfect foils for each other — Mavis more impulsive and arty, Bennell quieter and more practical. They finish each other's sentences and correct each other stories. "At least one of us can usually get the story straight," jokes Mavis.

I'm moved to ask about what, to my mind, is the most extraordinary piece in their collection (which is saying something): a floor mount of a pair of raccoons at the top of a birch limb cowering from an attacking coyote lunging at them with bared teeth.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" says Mavis and, of course, there's a story. A magician, Elvis the Magic Man, living in Brampton, was selling it. Mavis bartered to get a better price.

For now, they're renting although they think about one day owning a house where they could do permanent renovations that would help the conservatory. Bennell has paid off his student loan and has been saving money for a down payment. He's thought about buying an income property in Perth, where he has family, but he knows real estate is a gamble and, besides, Mavis is now burdened with debt from doing her MA.

They also love to travel. They've hitchhiked around Canada, lived for awhile in Halifax and frequently go on road trips to the U.S. This summer, they spent nearly three weeks in Newfoundland.

Although Bennell's family owned homes in Edmonton and Perth, from the time Mavis was 6 years old and her parents separated, she lived with her mother, who worked for the York Region District School Board, in rented properties in Unionville and Thornhill.

For Mavis and Bennell, "our unattainable dream is to buy two properties on Rusholme Rd. and live beside our best friends, with attached backyards, a big garden, a goat, chickens..."

But they're not stereotypical young people determined to buy a starter condo just to get into the market. "We'd never buy a condo," Mavis sniffs. "If we buy anything it has to make sense long-term. We're considering property ownership as an option but we're not committed to owing at any cost, no."