

don't really see the monster. In American cinema, there's a formula. The monster comes, it kills, there's a dumb person who runs to the monster, and one who lives to tell the tale. I wanted to make a film with real people and true meaning. There's a monster. These people are enemies. So what happens when you put them together and they have to work together to survive?"

Amber Vanterpool recounted the only on-set meltdown, which involved her brother, Darrell. "On day two, my brother thought he had deleted all the footage," she said. "He grabbed his head and fell on the floor crying. But I'd already backed it up. I told him to get off the floor."

—Mark Singer

ROAD TRIP CABINET OF WONDERS



Among the many items on display at Obscura Antiques & Oddities, on Avenue A between Twelfth and Thirteenth Streets, is a leathery, somnolent-looking human head. "It's an old medical preparation," Evan Michelson, who is one of the store's two co-owners, explained. "We used to have one that was tattooed under the ear with the address of its anatomical preparer—in midtown, I think, in the Thirties. Somewhere there's a basement full of heads like

that, waiting to be discovered. One can only hope."

Michelson has curly blond hair, glasses with elliptical frames, and the feisty, sardonic demeanor of a former Lower East Side performance artist of a certain age, which is what she is. Her business partner of nearly two decades is Mike Zohn, who, one recent afternoon, could be seen eating a slice of pizza from a paper plate while reclining in a century-old dentist's chair. ("It's surprisingly comfortable," he said.) Obscura sells an assortment of impossible-to-characterize merchandise: a stuffed snapping turtle the size of a small footstool; a compact kit, called a Sick Call Cabinet, for administering last rites; a bottle that once contained a heroin-based licorice-flavored cough remedy for infants; a pair of Shriners' fezzes; a complete set of Dr. Young's Improved Rectal Dilators, in graduated sizes; a nineteenth-century specimen jar containing the unarticulated skeleton of a fox; a black-and-white photograph of a man with slicked-down hair holding a bowling ball; a welding mask.

Michelson and Zohn—along with their buyer, Ryan Matthew—are the stars of the Science Channel program "Oddities." (The third season resumes in June.) Most episodes involve the hosts' interaction with people who are hoping to either acquire or unload a preserved stillborn pig, a wax model of the right arm of an electrocuted man, a lamp made from the spine of a cow, or something similar. "One of the best things about being on the air," Michelson said, "is that people

now call us and say, 'I have a mummified fox'; 'I have my grandmother's false teeth'; 'Something crawled under my house and died—do you want a picture of it?'" Fans have made pilgrimages from as far away as Malta, and have occasionally come straight from the airport, with suitcases. Michelson and Zohn view such people not only as customers but also as potential converts to the charms of the city and, especially, of the East Village—although the store also attracts "stormers," who, Michelson said, "come in and go, 'No, no, no, no,'" and storm out.

One afternoon, Obscura's clientele included Isaac Jones and Catherine Demailly, who are majoring in philosophy and linguistics, respectively, at the University of Central Arkansas, in Conway. They had decided, while watching "Oddities," that the store was the only place they were truly interested in visiting during their spring break, and they had driven straight through, a trip that took twenty-four hours. Obscura is not a large shop, but Jones found the displays overwhelming, in a good way. "It's hard to decide what's the coolest thing to look at," he said, thoughtfully, as he examined a set of early-twentieth-century stereoscopic color cards of severe dermatological problems, created by a Dr. Ringforth. Zohn, who was showing him around, told another visitor, "The 3-D is really quite good on those lithographs. They weren't meant for the general public. The syphilis and gonorrhea images are not for the faint of heart." Michelson added, "They're kind of like baseball cards—collect them all. And on the back is the diagnosis and how to treat it. Of course, it's 1910, so the treatments are kind of grim. But people love them."

In the end, Jones and Demailly dropped a bit less than four hundred dollars on a desk lamp made from deer feet; a decorative Victorian-era coffin plate; a set of handmade nineteenth-century microscope slides of intestinal and other parasites; a stereoscopic image of the brush-entangled corpse of an infant victim of the Johnstown Flood of 1889; and the jar of fox bones. Michelson suggested that they might enjoy reassembling the fox, jigsaw-puzzle style—a potential relationship strengthener and, very possibly, something interesting to talk about on the long drive back to Arkansas.

—David Owen



"I blame entropy."