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## Natasha Nicholson: Anxious Objects

George W. Neubert

*Director Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*

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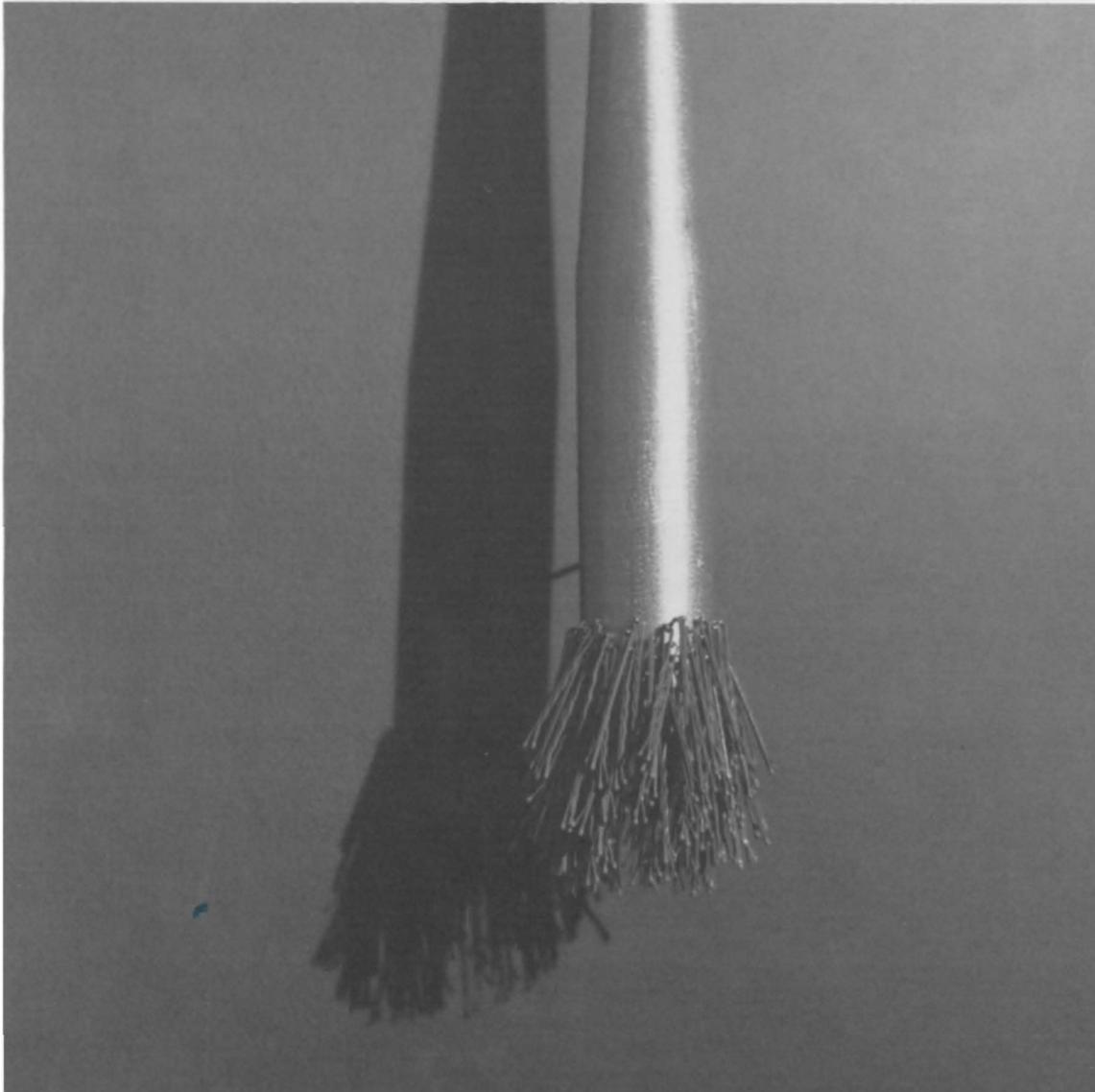
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RESOURCE/RESPONSE  
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



detail, Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with bobby pins, 27" x 3" x 3"

**NATASHA NICHOLSON**

Anxious Objects

Born and raised in St. Louis, Natasha Nicholson spent her first years in a crowded apartment in a housing project, moving as a teenager to an old house only slightly larger. Her three brothers slept in one room, the three girls in the other on the second floor. It was the children's floor, Nicholson's mother rarely venturing up, and the struggle for space and power among the siblings was unrelenting.

Within this crowded, chaotic environment Nicholson had to create her own way to reach for another reality. When she needed a moment away from the life that surrounded her, she would touch her "treasures," a group of little objects she had lovingly collected and arranged on a table next to her bed. While the space she had under her control was tiny—hardly an arm's length across—it centered her vision of beauty and order. Her objects were the talismans she needed to obliterate the ugliness beyond her reach. "For me," she has said, "the treasures were the objects that had the power to overcome my surroundings. They had the power to transform life." Only recently has Natasha Nicholson been able to acknowledge the connection between her childhood and her sculpture. She may have resisted making this connection earlier because the memories have been painful, but having recognized it's importance she has been quick to respond.

From the young girl's small table, always carefully arranged, with its snippets of ribbon, tiny, nacreous shells and bits of printed paper, one may see the genesis of the rooms and houses in this exhibition. Both three-room constructions seen here, (Cat. Nos. 16 and 17) give an impression of deep sobriety with their somber color, a dark grey blue. Within these spaces are chairs, (which the artist regards as the human or "figurative" component of her sculpture), wishbones, half-obscured photographs and human hair—the artist's own—scattered on the floor. The juxtaposition of these objects is discomfiting, yet from within these spaces comes a glow of light, a radiance that Nicholson defines simply as "hope" or "beauty." She has said, "I need to combine beauty or order with what I call the 'edge.' Some people have thought 'danger' might be a better word. This element is important to me because it's that sense of risk that makes the beauty all the more powerful."

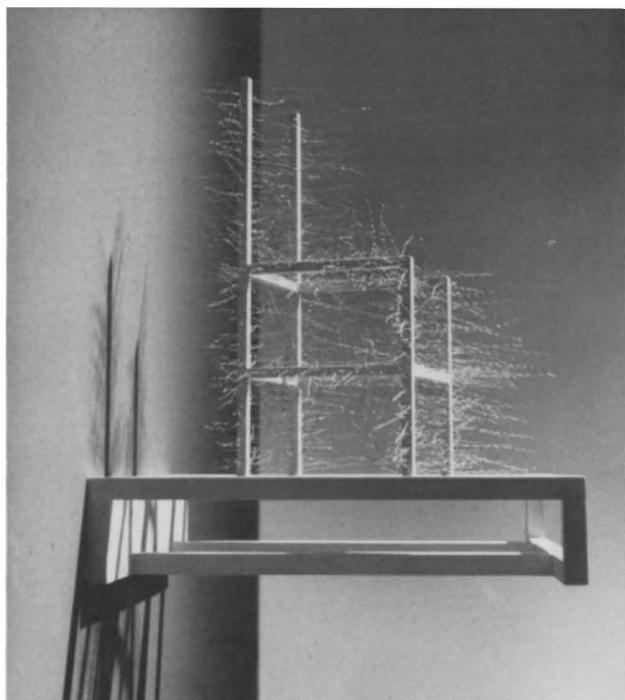
The edge of which Nicholson speaks is comprised of the tension between the objects she uses, the spaces in which

they are composed and her sense of light, directed in a transcendent, almost Baroque manner. Darkness gives way to light, reality gives way to beauty—the work of art is created as an act of faith. "There must always be an element of ambiguity, of questions about my sculpture, for how else can I suggest possibilities within my work, or even outside of it?"

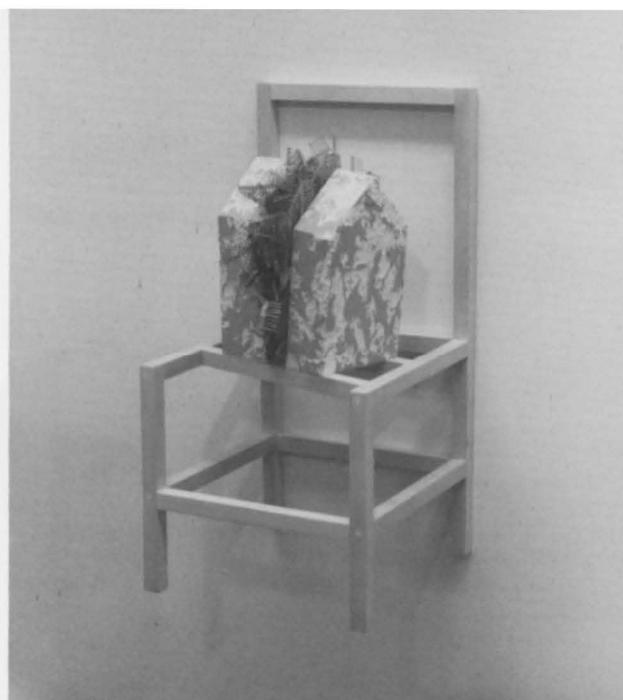
Given the strong frontality and episodic character of her sculpture, it is not surprising that Nicholson has been much more influenced by painters than sculptors. The painters she acknowledges include Dirc Bouts, the fifteenth-century Flemish primitive whose tiny "Madonna and Child," in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., riveted her attention. Nicholson felt an unrelenting tension between the picture and viewer that defies both the size of the work and its benign subject matter. Nicholson also acknowledges the paintings of the contemporary British artist, Francis Bacon, who often uses precise geometric forms, primarily cubes and rectangles to support the figurative, often unsettling content of his paintings. "Wired," (Cat. No. 9), and "A House Becoming Undivided," (Cat. No. 12), are examples of his influences on her work.

If the rooms, houses and chairs are metaphors from her past, the use of baseball bats as source material for much of this exhibition has been a more calculated choice. While working on the installation of a superb collection of African tribal art, Nicholson had the opportunity to handle these objects created as embodiments of power, fear or reverence. This experience led her to seek an object of secular ritual from her own culture which she might then infuse with a magic of her own making. The aluminum bat was not found without some experimentation with different sports objects and with wooden bats. The wooden bats, however, seemed to be too similar to African objects while the aluminum bat is an implement of contemporary technology. "I have changed the power of the object by altering its traditional appearance and use, just as an African tribal artist might alter a human or animal figure through calculated distortions or the addition of nails, fabric or bits of mirror."

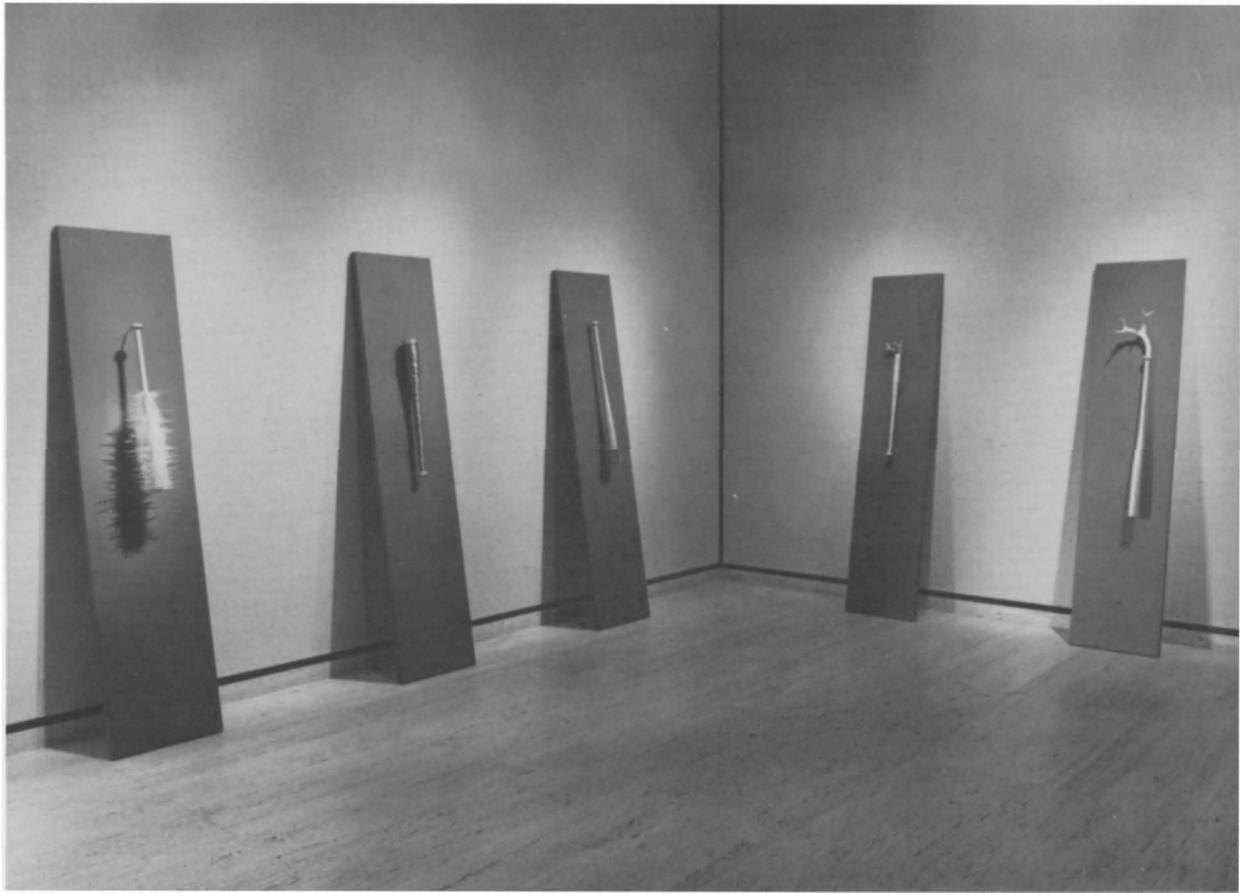
The creation of beauty in combination with danger, is a concept that is central to the development of Natasha Nicholson's sculpture. While she is awed and moved by natural beauty, it is the human power to create beauty that



Wired, 1986, assemblage, 21½" × 16½" × 16½"



A House Becoming Undivided, 1986, assemblage, 14½" × 7¼" × 7¼"



installation view of Power Figures

energizes her own creative output. The sculpture seen in this exhibition is imbued with her decisions to "... maintain a child's sense of fantasy, while combining it with an adult's sense of control and order."

*Thomas H. Garver  
Madison, Wisconsin*

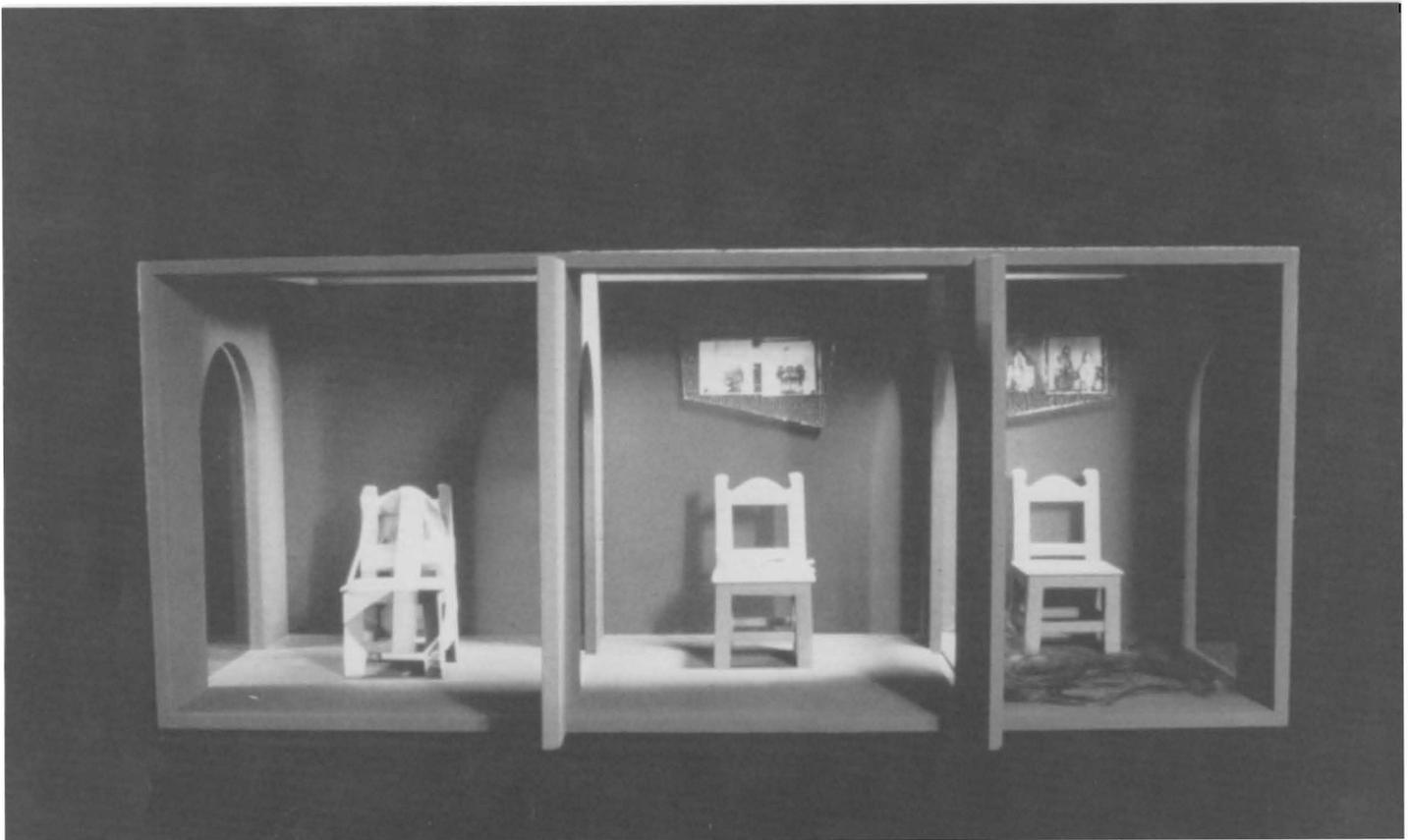
As partial fulfillment of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery's mission and focus on the visual arts of 20th Century America, the Resource/Response exhibition series presents and explores current issues and ideas being pursued by contemporary American artists. It is within this context that we present the recent sculpture of Natasha Nicholson. Spanning a five year period of 1983 through 1987, the nineteen art works selected for the exhibition survey the artist's recent and recurring narrative imagery. Intuitively selected and meticulously crafted, Nicholson juxtaposes disparate 'found' objects and materials, metaphorically transforming common imagery, (house, rooms, chair, boat, and baseball bats), into personal fetishes and "anxious objects" of our time. Within this assembled context, these constructions seem to function as contemporary archeological and ritualistic artifacts evoking a mysterious and private meaning.

We are particularly pleased that Thomas Garver, noted for his sensitive vision of contemporary art, has contributed to this exhibition with an insightful introductory essay which brings a personal understanding of Natasha Nicholson's oeuvre. I am also indebted to the artist for her cooperation and total involvement with all aspects of the organization of the exhibition.

*George W. Neubert  
Director  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*

#### Exhibition Checklist

1. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with pink antlers, 42" x 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"
2. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with glass rods, 26" x 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"
3. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with trees, 50<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 3" x 3"
4. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with copper screws, 25" x 3" x 3"
5. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with horses, 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 3"
6. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with bobby pins, 27" x 3" x 3"
7. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with green wire, 26" x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"
8. Power Figure, 1987, aluminum bat with boat and titanium, 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 26" x 3"
9. Wired, 1986, assemblage, 21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"
10. Now Voyager, 1986, assemblage, 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 3<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"
11. Piazza, 1987, assemblage, 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"
12. A House Becoming Undivided, 1986, assemblage, 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"
13. The Voyeur, 1986, assemblage, 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"  
(collection: Jerry Dahlke, Madison, Wisconsin)
14. Lightning Rod, 1986, assemblage, 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"
15. Hudson River Landscape, 1986, assemblage, 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 4" x 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
(collection: Rene Paul Barilleaux, Madison, Wisconsin)
16. Untitled, 1983-5, assemblage, 16" x 48" x 20"
17. Untitled, 1983, assemblage, 38<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 16" x 16"
18. Untitled, 1984, assemblage, 54<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 14<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 13<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"
19. Untitled, 1984, assemblage, 52" x 11<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"



Untitled, 1983, assemblage, 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  16"  $\times$  16"

### NATASHA NICHOLSON Artist Biography

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Natasha Nicholson studied at the Ringling School of Art at Sarasota, Florida, and the San Francisco Art Institute in California. Her first one-person exhibition was held at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, in 1974. Other solo shows were given at the Smith-Anderson Gallery, Palo Alto, California, 1975; Civic Arts Gallery, Walnut Creek California, 1975; William Sawyer Gallery, San Francisco, California, 1977; TJB Gallery, Newport Beach, California, 1978; Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 1979; Asher-Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 1979, 1981 and 1983; Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 1983; Foster Gallery, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1983; and Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin, 1986.

Nicholson has participated in numerous group shows including exhibitions at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, 1975 and 1980; Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, California, 1975 and 1977; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, 1976 and 1978; Floating Museum, Bologna Art Fair, Bologna, Italy, 1977; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, 1978; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, 1979 and 1981; Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco, California, 1980; Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin, 1982 and 1984; Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1983; Laguna Beach Museum of Art, Laguna Beach, California, 1984; Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois, 1984; and the Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1985.

***Anxious Objects, a selection of nineteen sculptures by Natasha Nicholson, was curated by George W. Neubert and exhibited at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery. Resource/Response is part of Sheldon's ongoing Resource Exhibition Series. Resource/Response explores current issues and ideas addressed by contemporary artists. The Resource Series is made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.***



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