

# when JAMES met BARRY



James Cockington & Barry Divola had read each others articles and books, knew each other to be collectors and had even talked on the phone, but they had never met. Creative Producer Susan Charlton invited James to bring his shoebox of miniature mementos and Barry his collection of cereal toys for a show and tell. Both collections are part of *The Exquisite House of Memory* exhibition

**Susan Charlton:** James, tell us about the childhood beginnings of your collection.

**James Cockington:** I shared a room with my brother when we were kids and we had single beds with bedheads. That bedhead was my only private space. So whatever I kept had to fit in a shoebox inside the bedhead. I had to hide things to keep them or else they would be thrown out.

**Susan:** Do you remember the first things you collected?

**James:** That's probably one of the first [#36 from the back of a cinema seat]. There was a bit of a cult at primary school, where you had to have one of these. It was like a ritual. This one is from the Glenelg Cinema in Adelaide, which has gone now. The memory associated with it is that it was the cinema where I first saw the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*. Everything here has a connection with an event. Is that the same for you Barry?

**Barry Divola:** I look at them and it takes me back to being about seven years old, hoping to get down to the breakfast table before my brother and my sister, so I can open the new packet of cereal and get one of these out before they get there. These toys were around from the early 60s to the mid 70s, but 1968-73 is considered the golden era! [Laughter] Actually none of these are from my childhood. I had parents where as soon as you got

to a certain age, out things went. I still don't know whether my Malvern Star Dragstar got thrown away or given away. I don't think I've ever forgiven my parents for it. Is this you in the photo with the pedal car?

**James:** I'd love to get my son the same one, but I refuse to pay \$300. I don't want to get involved in that world.

**Barry:** You mean the world of money and memories... This King Critter [cereal toy character] is obviously the most prized one, but he's actually missing the prong off his crown. If he had that prong on, he'd be worth well over a hundreds bucks. And if you found him in an original packet, he could be worth up to \$400. You could possibly find one on eBay if you had the money and you were lucky, but it's the search that's the most important thing.

**James:** I think my collection has a different formula. It's not collecting things for the collection; it's more signposts or milestones. Everyone could have something like this if they decided to.

**Barry:** What's the sugar about?

**James:** That's my sole souvenir from a trip around Europe. I think it was my honeymoon. And whenever we had coffee at a cafe, we'd keep one of these, because they actually have the name of the cafe on it. And apart from photos, that's the only surviving record.

PHOTOS: PENELOPE CLAY

→  
James Cockington (left) and  
Barry Divola (right) show & tell

That was the previous marriage, so I have the sugar cube, but I can hardly remember her.

**Barry:** [Laughter] What a very sweet thing to say.

**Susan:** Do you have any level of indecision about whether something is going to go into the shoebox.

**James:** It goes through an editing process. First of all I decide whether to keep it at all. And that's a random decision. So it might go in a drawer and stay there for 10 years and then the next time we move house I might think, 'Am I going to throw this out or keep it?' Then I might put it in the precious shoebox. At first I kept these things without knowing why. And then around about 1980 I started to 'curate' them and edit them and decide that they were worth keeping. And there was some sort of art rationale behind it as well. Barry, are there any stories you have about the adventure of actually going out and picking your Critters up?

**Barry:** I found a lot of these after I wrote an article about cereal toys for *Sunday Life*. I got about 120 emails, phonecalls and letters within roughly three weeks of my story. It was incredible. One girl I talked to was Greek. She lived in Australia as a child, but then her family moved to Cyprus. When things there started to look really bad politically they had to leave suddenly. Her parents said, 'You can only take two things with you'. And the two things she took were her favourite doll and her little container of cereal toys. When she raced out to the car her parents said, 'What have you got those toys for? You can just have the doll'. But she ended up choosing the cereal toys over the doll. And so, for her, that's an incredible memory, because the family ended up being in a refugee camp in Cyprus. It's weird talking about little bits of plastic and how it brings up different memories for people.

**James:** Your toys are beautiful pieces of sculpture. And their beauty is that they weren't intended as art, but 40 years later they are probably the best sculpture of the 60s. This is probably my equivalent [two badges with artist Keith Haring designs]. Haring did a lecture



tour of Australia in the mid 1980s. At the time he was virtually unknown. I went to see him, and afterwards he had this plastic bag of badges and just threw them in the audience. So everyone got a free Keith Haring. They're quite powerful because they're free.

**Susan:** Barry, did your sister go on to collect things?

**Barry:** No she became exactly like my mother. Just the other day my nephew, who's 16, was complaining to me because there was a clean-up and she'd tossed out all this stuff. And he was like, 'Mum, I need that'. It was exactly like me when I was that age.

**James:** Do you think there will come a time when people will not keep anything, except on computer disk, and live only within the moment with no desire to remember three years ago or keep memories of anything?

**Barry:** I think a lot of people do that now. I've got so much stuff. In many ways it represents a lot of who I am. But, if something drastic did happen I'd just have to cut it adrift, and then all I'd have is what's in my head.

**Susan:** Maybe it would be like *Fahrenheit 451*, and you'd be the keeper of the critters. [Laughter]

**Barry:** The repository of all plastic knowledge.

**Susan:** And people would be, sitting at your feet, saying: 'Tell us again, just describe what they were really like.'