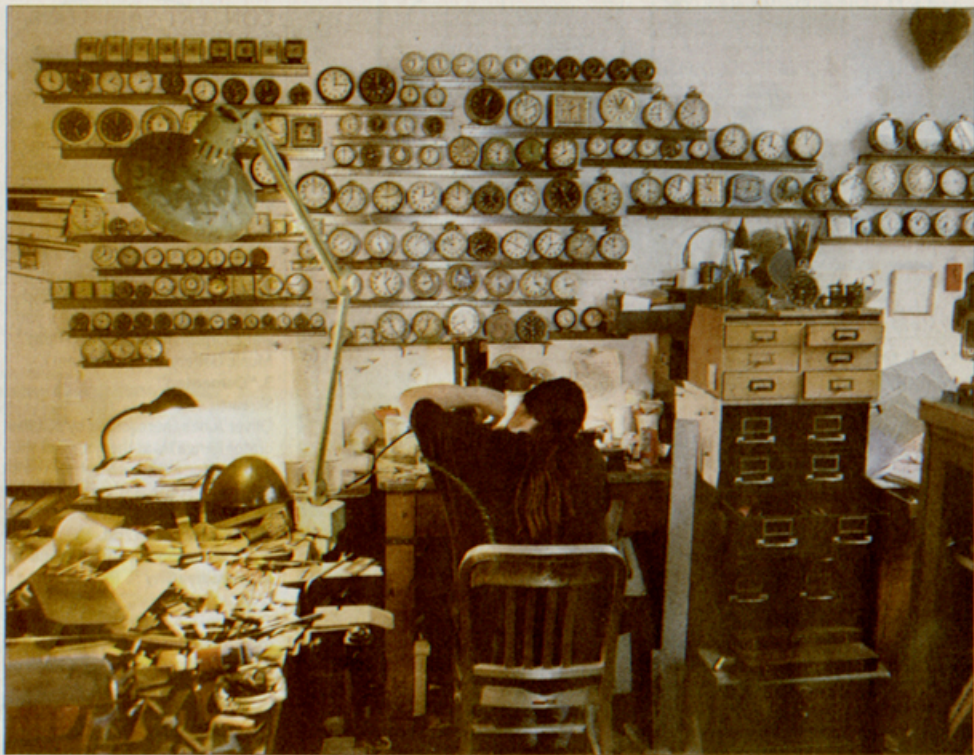


WHAT'S ON



NICK KOZAK PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Artist Ken Nicol's new show "Hundreds of Things" reflects his broad-ranging material curiosity. Among other things, he collects and makes art out of clocks, coffee cup lids and matches.

By the numbers

Ken Nicol's art brings order to the everyday chaos of a consumer-crazed world with rigorous systems

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ART CRITIC

The title of Ken Nicol's new show is "Hundreds of Things," and massive as it might sound, it's actually a very tight edit. At his Niagara St. studio — mind the arc-welder, the steel cutter, the shards of metal that tangle and snarl underfoot — you can see how modest a number it really is.

Hundreds of things? Try thousands. This is a place of gleeful, unabashed entropy, where disorder closes in on you like an enveloping fog: a storehouse of Nicol's broad-ranging material curiosity that could send a weaker mind spiralling in panic at its sheer volume.

Nicol's, though, is made of sterner stuff, and his artistic project in recent years has been the slow, steady ordering of his many, many, many things that continues to grow every day.

This month, that constant project is having a very public moment: "Hundreds of Things," at MKG127 on Ossington Ave., is one of three art spaces Nicol occupies in the city right now; the others being the Convenience Gallery on Lansdowne and the window of Type Books on Queen St. W.

"It's a Ken-apalooza," he says, both tongue-in-cheek and slightly embarrassed. Nicol is not one to seek the spotlight. At the same time, he is the artists' artist in more ways than

one: For years, Nicol's gift with materials, from metal-working to almost everything else has made him a go-to source of fabricating skill for dozens of artists around town.

He honed those skills as a jeweller maker, something he still does "when I have to," he says. Nicol's artistic priority lies less in making finely crafted objects than in a manic curiosity about materials, chance and the impulse to bring order from the swirling chaos of a consumer-crazed world.

Some things he finds, like the metal bristles of a street-cleaner brush, arrayed neatly in a jar. Others find him, like the thousands of tiny, self-immolating flies that plunge and perish in the heat of his desk lamp.

The bugs, tiny and harmless, would pile up daily under the light. Where most would see slightly repulsive annoyance, Nicol saw opportunity. "It's kind of like reverse collecting," says Nicol, who with his long, black ponytail, thick beard and plain black T-shirt, has a no-nonsense appearance that belies his quietly wry manner. "I sort of like the idea that they came to me."

He made tiny glass bottles in which he deposited exactly 100 of the tiny carcasses and then placed them on metal stands he made. He made perfect, exacting grids of them on paper and framed them. (The bugs appear in "Hundreds of Things" in three different forms; to

give away the third would be spoiling the surprise).

To the messy chaos of everyday life, Nicol applies rigorous systems: his constant, ongoing theme. He is forever cataloguing, counting, taking stock, divining order from entropy. It is its own goal: on one shelf, stacks and stacks of coffee cups, each one dated, represent a year of his daily caffeine habit, bought from the same place each day (Nicol grouches a little that the cups aren't identical, the shop having switched brands mid-year. "I just like people to let me know," he says).

Another wall is a field of old analog alarm clocks; nearby, a particular model — the Westclox Baby Ben, simple and ivory-coloured — sits in the dozens (Nicol's goal, of course, is an even hundred). Time is important to Nicol's work; it is the ultimate organizer, giving shape and form to the constant unraveling of life, from minutes to hours to days and weeks. Precise and methodical, Nicol's work can sometimes embody an obsessive struggle to account for every second.

"Counting to 100," from the MKG show, is a series of drawings on graph paper on which Nicol literally counts to 100, alternating colours on his four-colour Bic pen.

For a series of photographs, Nicol precisely arranged exactly 100 Pringles chips in a taut, uniform grid ("That's just me playing with my food," he shrugs).

For "100 Coffee Cups, 100 Ways," Nicol will spend hours in the gallery every day of the exhibition, arrang-



Ken Nicol's latest show is at MKG127 on Ossington Ave.

ing and rearranging Styrofoam cups into different sculptural forms.

There's an easy line to draw here, from Minimalists like Sol Lewitt, whose crisp, methodical drawings Nicol echoes with his rigid four-colour Bic pen line drawings in the window at Type, and Carl Andre, whose use of everyday material and repetitive, almost mechanical techniques signalled a shift in how art was made, and what it was, in the '60s and '70s.

Nicol's work is more sincere than mere cheeky subversion, though. He worries that he's lost somewhere between a critical-minded inquiry into a world teeming with material throwaways and simple obsessive-compulsive hoarding.

"I sometimes get this picture of that kind of collector — you know, the sweater vest, bad hygiene, and think, 'Am I in that world?'" he says.

Nicol is fuelled by material problem solving — the how and if and

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One of the worst things we can do as artists is try to make art

KEN NICOL,
ARTIST

"really?" — and it can be mind-bending in its implicit labour: he crafts remarkable, exacting-on-paper works by precisely positioning — then repositioning, and repositioning — sheafs of paper in a typewriter to create beguiling visual fields of dizzying, structural perfection.

While it's often hilarious in its labour-intensive absurdity — for a series of huge works on paper called "Beating a Dead Horse," Nicol wrote the iconic incremental symbol of four lines with a line through it (making five) as many times as it took for his pen to run out, and then kept going, scratching into the paper with the dead metal tip — but it's not ironic, nor a send-up, of anything. "The idea is to come right up to ridiculous and then pull back a little bit," he smiles.

His inquiries into the everyday, both in action and in materials, are sincere expressions of habit or impulse, and himself.

"One of the worst things we can do as artists is try to make art," he says. Instead, Nicol asks questions and works them out in a playful manner that can confound and astonish all at once.

"It's my game. I get to make the rules," he says, smiling shyly. Ken Nicol lives in the same world as you and I. He's just able to see it in a way all his own.