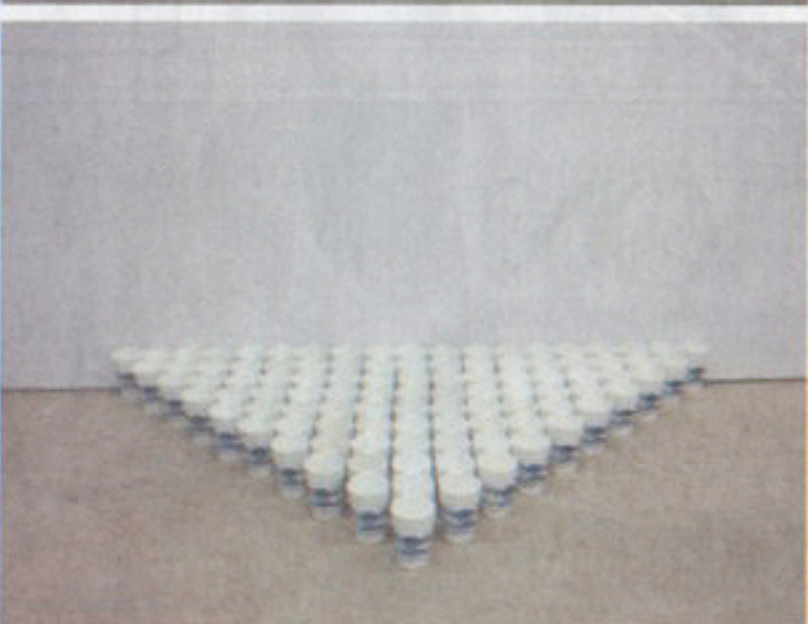
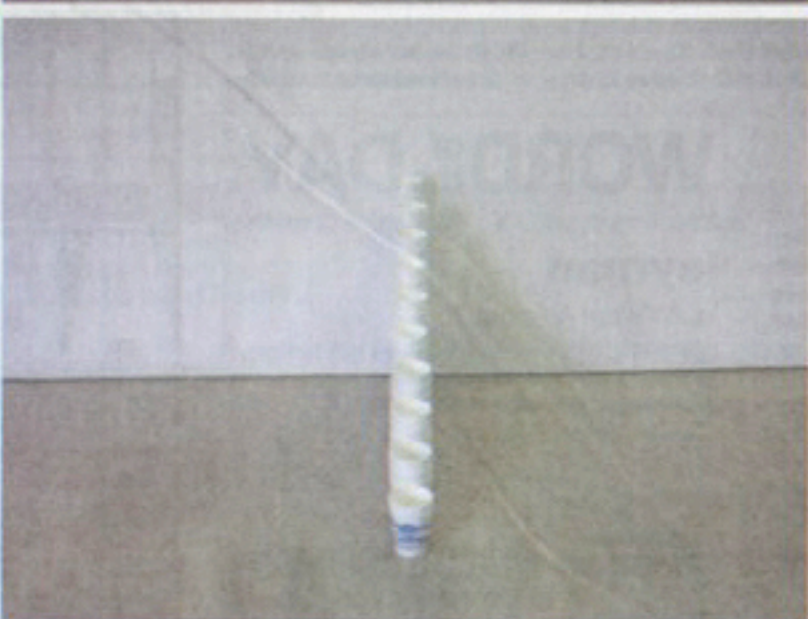
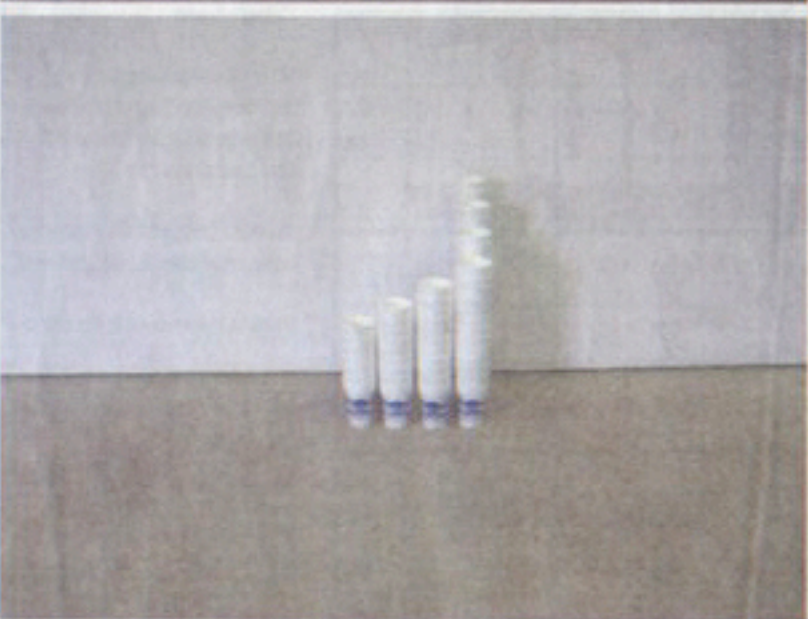
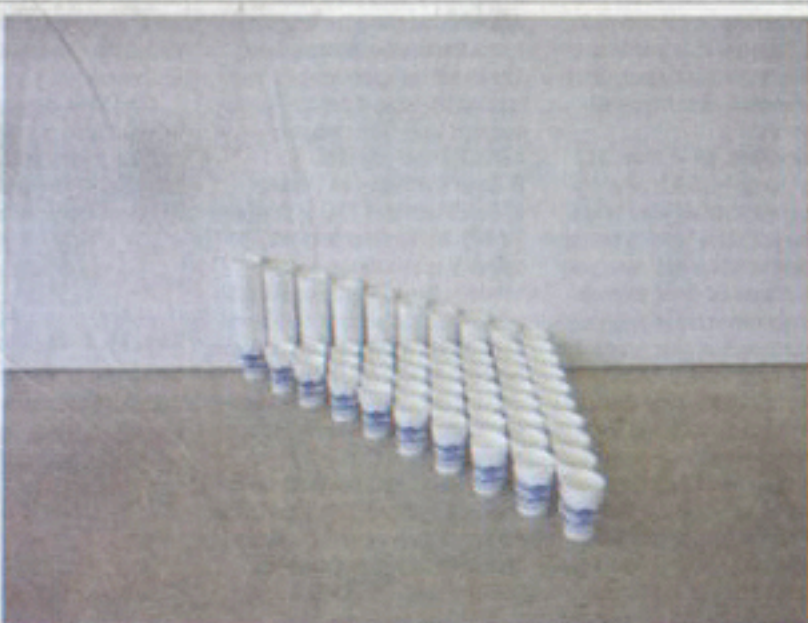
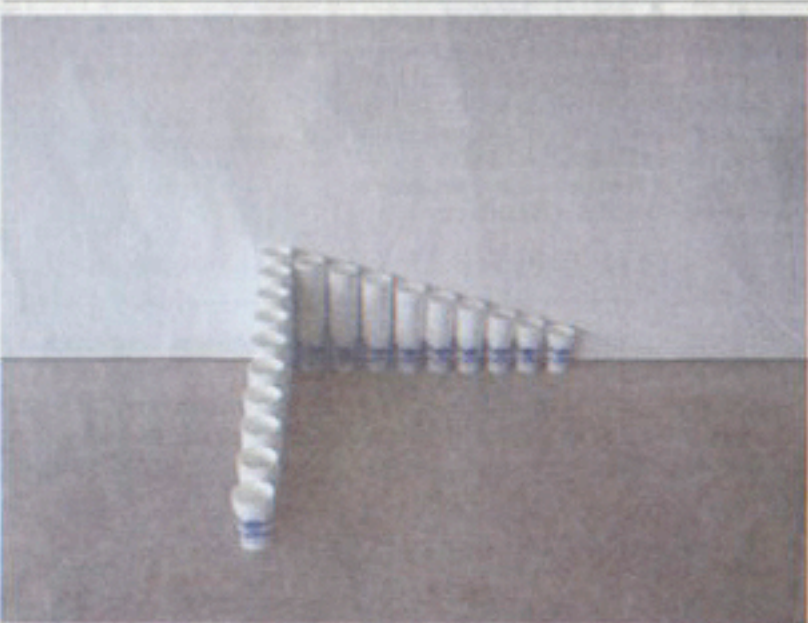


AVENUE

Questions & Artists

The cups add up



Ken Nicol is a master at divining order out of chaos — particularly chaos of the everyday-life variety. Whether he's carefully sorting swarms of houseflies or arranging potato chips into tidy grids, this Toronto artist distills mathematical purity out of lo-fi dross. With his latest show, themed on the number 100, now on in Toronto, Nicol talks to Leah Sandals about counting, craft and obsessive compulsion.

Q Your current show is themed on 100. Why?

A I don't know. I'm hoping to make a list of 100 reasons to do 100. I've been asking people for ideas. Someone said, "Well, 100 is really round, it's not like 37, all pointy and stuff." Ha! But 100 did come up with the Pringles I use, because it's 100 chips in every can. And the show is on for 100 hours. So 100 kept coming up. And it's a great tool, because it's a good goal for something. If I claim 100 as a genre of mine, then I can know when to stop collecting things like my white beard hairs. It gives me a nice little parameter.

Q Was math a big thing for you in school? There's so much in your art about symmetry, counting and sets.

A Generally I sucked at math in school. But I do a lot of drafting. I suppose it's geometry I'm more interested in. Phi, the Golden Section number — that's pretty neat. And as for grids, well, I mean, look at my heroes: Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre. Though I keep on buying Cy Twombly books, and I don't know why.

Q Because your works can be so small and precise, I find they prompt me to acknowledge my own poor attention to detail. Does it bother you that people don't always pay as close attention to objects as you do?

A It totally bugs me. I mean, you go to a Ken Nicol show — if you actually pay attention, you're going to be rewarded. A lot of this stuff is easy to absorb, because it's nice-looking and well done. But if you go a little bit further into it, there's more.

Q How is your sensitivity to detail influenced by your background as a jeweller?

A Well, jewellery is just metalwork on a finer scale. Though in the pieces in this show, it's mostly a support. Especially with the beard hairs and the bugs. It's more just a support for the cool part.

Q A certain degree of obsessive-compulsiveness comes across when viewing your art. How do you feel about that?

A Well, in one of my previous shows there was a piece called *Obsessive Compulsive Order*. It started because I had trouble with my studio door; I'd get halfway home and realize I wasn't sure if I'd locked it and I'd come back and check it. It got me frustrated and angry and it was never open, not once. I started writing it down in a book — date, time, door locked — so I wouldn't have to come back every night. And for *Obsessive Compulsive Order*, I ripped pages out of the book and displayed them. Now, I still have a book going; maybe that will end up being a little piece too. I mean, it's not intended as an art piece, but I know it could be simply by putting it in the context of an art piece. [Ultimately, however] that's not what it's for; it's so I'll remember that I locked my door. And it's working.

Q Your art has a lot of great systems integrated into it. Why are others drawn to that?

A I think people are tired of not getting conceptual art. I am! A while ago, I didn't really consider myself a conceptual artist, because my stuff makes sense. And you look at the earlier era of conceptual art — they kind of took the craftsmanship out, because it was detracting from the concept. I think we've come to the point now where the lack of craftsmanship is distracting. There's got to be a balance.

Q It often seems that your art has a kind of purity about it. Do you feel that way too?

A Well, I have this little box I made that ticks. It just ticks. This is my response to the multipurpose things we have now. You can't take a photo with this. You can't send a text message with this. It doesn't store your songs. It doesn't even tell the time. It just ticks. I find when I'm doing more than one thing at once, I'm doing at least one thing not as well as I could be.

■ Ken Nicol: Hundreds of Things, Volume One continues at MKG127 in Toronto until Nov. 12. For more information, visit mkg127.com.

National Post

Nicol aims to create 100 different arrangements of the same 100 coffee cups in the MKG127 gallery before his show ends.

KEN NICOL, EXCEPTS FROM ONE HUNDRED CUPS ONE HUNDRED WAYS, 2011 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MKG127