

Portland

Instead of money, fairgoers can bid on items with their feelings at the Topsham Fair



Courtesy of Adriane Herman

A large antique doll house is one of the prizes at the Emotional Value Auction.

By **Nick Schroeder**, BDN Staff

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Each year, the Topsham Fair gathers an estimated 35,000 people, shelling out money on carnival games, indulgent foods and rural Maine knowhow. But this year, fairgoers are reckoning with something they've never been asked before: What do you do when something that has meaning to you doesn't fit in your life anymore?

It's a guiding question behind the Emotional Value Auction, located under a white tent between the goat's milk soap kiosk and a vendor selling "Don't Tread On Me" flags.





Courtesy of Adriane Herman

A man fills out a bidding form at the Emotional Value Auction.

Without opening their wallets, fairgoers rummage through a few dozen items, “bidding” on those they like by writing a few lines about why they want it, what it personally means to them. At the end of the week, the owners of the items review these testimonies and decide which bidder they’ll bestow their item to. No money changes hands.

The items are unique, kitschy and collectible — the sort you’d find at a good yard sale. There’s an enormous antique doll house with weathered miniature furniture; a pair of black leather boots donated by someone whose husband passed away; a large framed rendering of the 1984 Republican National Convention. One owner, aged 87, is auctioning off a conversation about getting older.

The Emotional Value Auction is the brainchild of Adriane Herman, a Portland-based artist whose work deals with the way people experience their everyday lives, and how they accumulate and release the things that comprise it. This week, Herman describes herself as an “experience broker” — a facilitator of the art of letting go, a sort of medium that transfers an item’s significance from its old keeper to a new one.

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Herman's theory is that material objects can lose their day-to-day utility, but still have complex emotional value. This can arise from simple nostalgia, trauma or grief, and in extreme cases, can lead to severe disorders such as hoarding. The Emotional Value Auction offers the service of transferring these items of significance to appreciative new owners, bringing closure that's not available by simply throwing them out or selling them on Ebay.

After one day at the fair, the Emotional Value Auction has elicited some vulnerable responses from the public.

The antique doll house found favor with a **Bowdoinham family who lost everything in a fire** last month.



Courtesy of Adriane Herman

Maine College of Art intern Renée Michaud balances a dish of clam cakes on her lap as she explains the rules for the Emotional Value Auction to a woman at the Topsham Fair.

To bid on the leather boots, a 66-year-old Lewiston man reminisced about a similar pair that he wore as a token of autonomy throughout high school in Auburn, purchased with money earned from after-school jobs he worked after his parents' divorce forced him out of the house.

Describing a difficult year where a parent “disowned” them for their sexuality, a 19-year-old student from Unity bid on a framed artistic rendering of a four-leaf clover they want to hang in their dorm room. “I am so excited but so scared to start college and create a life for myself in two weeks,” the bid said. “Having this sweet little good luck charm to display in my dorm would be a perfect insurance for my luck.”

Herman and her intern, 24-year-old Renee Michaud, are the only vendors at the fair who aren't walking away with cash. Herman says it's the chance operation of meeting people and hearing their stories that makes it worthwhile.

“I am really interested in how people pass things down,” Herman said. “These connections are outside a family structure, but they can be as profound as it is between flesh and blood.”





Courtesy of Adriane Herman

The Emotional Value Auction contains dozens of items available for bidding.

Michaud, a Maine College of Art student of performance art and public engagement, is studying with Herman for the summer. She says the Emotional Value Auction is an extension of other community efforts, and that the idea has some purchase in Portland's Hour Exchange, a community service time bank where members barter for small jobs.

"This work is about reciprocity and generosity," Michaud said, who is originally from Hampden. "It's a reward in and of itself."

Past exhibitions by Herman have featured Post-It notes that describe mundane tasks, a public collection of otherwise forgettable everyday events. The Emotional Value Auction project was awarded a Kindling Fund grant from arts incubator SPACE in 2018.

"It's satisfying to me," Herman said. "On the surface it's about art, but it's really about putting these kinds of ideas and authentic conversations into the broader public."

The Emotional Value Auction takes place at the Topsham Fair, 54 Main St. in Topsham, from noon to 9 p.m. through Sunday, Aug. 11.

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