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## Fridge magnets tell your story

Marina Pisano, San Antonio Express-News

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Think refrigerator and you think of mayonnaise, leftover meat loaf and the nickname of a very large NFL lineman.

Think refrigerator door and, if you are like many people, you think of a few small magnets holding up way too many snapshots.

The cultural anthropologist Thomas Maschio sees much more. In research that took him into scores of suburban American kitchens throughout the country, he used the same scholarly observation techniques and analysis he used in field studies in the forests of Papua, New Guinea, to explore the visual forest on the fridge door.

Maschio, who wrote about his study in the May issue of Anthropology News, says that great big rectangular object sitting in the kitchen may seem mundane,

but it has important symbolic uses in our culture. It holds not just Ben & Jerry's and Diet Coke but center stage in a ritual performance that continually creates and re-creates domesticity and a feeling of home.

"In ritual, you often see when you enter a ritual field what anthropologists call an alerting quality," Maschio explains from his office at Cultural Dynamics in Westport, Conn. "You're alerted that something is going on. Something that tells you you're entering a special space where special meanings are expressed and special activities are taking place, which mean a lot to people. That's what the refrigerator was saying to me."

Cultural Dynamics, where Maschio is vice president, does consulting work for various companies, in this case appliance makers who want to know how consumers are using their products.

Maschio finds that they are using the surface of the refrigerator door very nicely, thank you, often as a kind of command central and bulletin board.

The school photos, backyard snapshots, soccer practice schedules, to-do lists, children's artwork, vacation postcards, birth announcements, offbeat cartoons and bits of wisdom clipped from various publications all express who we are as a people, how we live our lives and what we value.

While men take part in this ritual, it's more often women who position items on the door. And what is up there is usually in flux, changing as events and milestones occur and life moves along.

"New memories are created or memorialized, a child has a new accomplishment," Maschio said. "Old pictures are filed away, new ones put up. The ritual of creating domestic life is ongoing, and women are constantly creating the feel and character of the home and involving themselves in the praise and nurturance of children."

He finds a hierarchy in the seemingly casual display, with pictures showing favorite

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people and moments or a family member's latest achievement or activity placed at eye level. Other items are pushed down or off to the side, ultimately to go into an album or photo box.

"Right at eye level are the pictures that merit a special 'Kodak moment,'" Maschio said. "A grandparent with a child, a girl or a boy holding a trophy." More peripheral space is for aunts, uncles and cousins.

If a friend walks into the kitchen and sees his picture displayed anywhere on the door, he may happily declare, "Hey, I made the refrigerator," Maschio says he is right to feel honored. "It's a place of honoring. You're bringing someone from outside into the bosom of the family."

The anthropologist found more religious messages on fridge doors in the South and Southwest, noting that women especially often draw encouragement from the inspirational sayings.

In the homes of professors, Maschio frequently found magnetized letters of the alphabet so family members could play competitive word games or compose poetry with them. "It's the interactive, intellectual refrigerator," he said.

Through the fridge door ritual, Maschio said, women who are busy with jobs demonstrate they still can run a warm, efficient home and master domesticity.

But Barbara Haber, a women's history specialist, food historian and curator of books at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, says Maschio may be drawing too many conclusions from the faces of the fridge.

"To a point, this can be illuminating, and then it can get a little ridiculous," she said of Maschio's anthropological study. "It defies human nature and common sense."

Yes, "everyone goes to the refrigerator," she said. "The door is a bulletin board where I put bills that have to be paid and invitations. Things marking family treasures like the birth of a baby stay up for years. It gets so cluttered, it's not a message board. You'd never see the message. It's a memento board."

Haber does not buy the hierarchy theory of fridge pictures.

"Magnets slide. Things fall down. You bring them up again so they don't interfere with the opening of the door. That's it. I don't constantly rearrange the refrigerator.

"If a picture turns up that's especially fetching, I put it up until it gets a frame, and then it goes on the piano. I put recipes up there, and if they're good, they stay up for quite a while," said the author of "From Hardtack to Home Fries: An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals" (Free Press, \$25).

Sheryl Tynes, an associate professor of sociology at Trinity University in San Antonio, does find ritual, intention and eye level significance on the fridge door. She likens it to the memorial altars in some homes and sees a link with larger events.

"The refrigerator door is a place where we put things we want to remember, and the frequency that we're there plays a big role," Tynes said. "We don't put things up there that would make us unhappy. It's public, and we're OK with it being public. That's why we don't put our bills up there, at least I don't. What we choose to put there is interesting. Our private space and certain parts of our homes, we view as important retreats. And since Sept. 11, people think about home and family as being the most important parts of their lives."

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