

Thirty Years of Box Construction

The historical importance of the box form lies in its universality. It has played a major part in most aspects of life, from entombing pharaohs in ancient Egypt to enclosing and protecting our most precious belongings and bodies from the elements, to the disposing of garbage. Being one of the oldest decorative and functional art forms, it has undergone and overwhelming metamorphosis in the 20th century, growing from perhaps a dozen artists in the 1940-50's to a separate category of expression in the '60's and '70's, involving hundreds of contemporary artist, revolting against the limitations of the 2-dimensional picture plan, moving towards 3-dimensional, multi-faceted reality. The sheer volume and diversity of the excellent work being created within the context of the box environment has necessitated an examination of this emerging area of modern art. Box art is somewhere between painting and sculpture, not totally definable, and possibly for that reason, fascinating.

Within the Cubist and Dada movements, the works of Karl Schwitters, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp stands out as those who ventured into the isolation of ideas within a box format, with Duchamp taking the concept the furthest. He challenged traditional attitudes towards what qualified as art with commonplace objects removed from their familiar surroundings, and glorified. In 1914 and 1917, a coffee cup, bicycle wheel and a urinal entitled "The Fountain" were entered in exhibitions under the pseudonym to avoid favoritism, reflecting Duchamp's new sense of the absurd, a result of his anger and disillusionment with a society that accepted and validated war.

Max Ernst and the Surrealists heavily influenced Joseph Cornell, replacing cubist structures with haunting atmospheric narratives and psychological themes inspired by French symbolist poets Andre Breton, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine.

Cornell related to the tradition and history of European culture, and according to Brian O'Doherty "felt the survival of culture an urgent matter to be accomplished through the most pure and transcendent obsession."¹ Concerned with time, mortality and the infinite, Cornell imagined himself a traveler in time and fantasized methods of communication with the dead idols of European art. A frequent visitor and annoyance to Duchamp in his New York studio, Cornell told Duchamp of a dream in which he asked Duchamp to get the handkerchief of Delacroix for him.

Duchamp was said to have found Cornell's endless dialogue on his thoughts "boring" as he (Cornell) lacked a sense of irony. Possessing opposite theories about art, Duchamp was concerned with the prodding of society with wit and sarcasm, while Cornell saw "culture as a sacred emporium of spirits living and dead."² Very concerned with etiquette "Cornell acted as he thought aristocrats might, with good breeding appropriate to one who bore major responsibilities as a curator of culture."³

Joseph Cornell's work in the late '30's grew out of creating games for his ill brother, Robert, who lived at home with Joseph at their mother's house on Utopia Parkway in Queens, New York. Largely self taught but extremely literate, Cornell worked out of an elaborately organized workroom in the basement of the house, full of carefully categorized and marked boxes of watch parts, tinfoil, maps, balls, Caravaggio data and multitudes of special materials needed for his works in progress. His *Untitled (Hotel de la Clef D'or)* box reflects his association with the French culture and the need for European reference is again evident in the blue newspaper, which encases *Untitled*, from the soap bubble series.

¹ American Masters, The Voice and The Myth by Brian O'Doherty, pgs. 273-278.

² American Masters, The Voice and The Myth by Brian O'Doherty, pgs. 273-278.

³ American Masters, The Voice and The Myth by Brian O'Doherty, pgs. 273-278.

A man with an aura, Cornell worshipped glamour and beauty in young women, and developed friendships with movie stars, ballerina Allegra Kent, a waitress in a coffee shop on 42nd Street. He dedicated works in their honor and often gave them boxes as presents. He hated to be called "eccentric," yet his aversion to physical proximity, his fragility, purity of spirit and adolescent wonder were more than unusual. Joseph Cornell's symbolist, victorian thinking, reverence of the sacred and profane, balancing act of paradox and innocence, and magic fingers composing mysterious arrangements were a source of inspiration to his contemporaries and the current generation of artists as well.

Ilse Getz's *Timeless Game #4* and *1 plus 1* have a strong sense of the past that is shared by Cornell's two boxes. Getz uses materials that have highly personal visual appeal: porcelain dolls with expressive eyes, old clock faces, dominoes, and fragments of parchment that remind her of her childhood in Nuremberg, Germany, before World War 2. In *The Rainbow* and *Tokens* Varujan Boghosian integrates symbols – a doll and the heart- in his wood constructions, that share with Getz an homage to memory, association and death. Edith Schloss suggests more a stopping of the clock than looking backward in *El Funador*.

In *Nightleaf* Louise Nevelson's powerful interplay of shape and negative space command silent attention. *Cloud Box* by Lenore Tawney and Ro Berg's *Jazzdust* are impeccably elegant in design and execution, simple and serene, while generating enormous privacy and ambiguity. Wayne Nowack's wooden briefcase contains mystical ponderings, combined with fantasy assemblage and personal notation.

William Beckman's box *Woman, Pregnant* mirrors and old master nude contemplating her large abdomen in solitude. Peik Larsen's constructions *Pass* and *Slow- Regatta* reveal his concern with the painterly integration of movement within a sculptural fusion of ideas.

The functional expectations we place on an object identified as "furniture" is parodied in Richard Artschwager's box *Untitled Object*. Hannah Wilke's sensual white porcelain and brilliantly colored chewing gum boxes identify and elevate the ultimate box. A vending machine with neon instructions, *EAT*, by Gwen Iin Goo, reprimands society for its values, the fast paced, instant product oriented American lifestyle obsessed with quantity, in much the same vein as Duchamp did sixty years ago. Dan Basen's *You're the Top* and *If You Think Time is Running Out, Turn Me Over* give visual and literal pop translations of the plastic requirements of living, combining strategic placement and deft drawing, connecting the dots between concept and object.

The artists selected for this exhibit have different concerns, personal mythologies, techniques and relationships with the spectator. The technology that permeates our lives is utilized as readily as the paintbrush and wood saw. Cesar, during this period of the 1970's, encases works in boxes and used the process of expansion and compression. *Kodak Camera* is a compression which is the result of Cesar's alteration of an original object to a reduced state, affected by some form of destructive process. The final result is then encased in a box to achieve its permanency. Varying levels of participation are needed to activate and fulfill David Beck's *Stork Box* and *Dancing Man's* needs. The willingness of the viewer to execute the instructions of the artists Bradshaw, Hesse, Kaltenbach, Nauman, Saret, Serra and Sonnier's joint piece *7 Objects in a Box*, or explore the potential of the contents, is a controversial point.

This exhibition only begins to explore the contemporary box construction, and the past thirty years have seen a blossoming of the form, a seemingly limited problem, with infinite solutions. There are many artists not included in this exhibit due to geographic limitations and I encourage a museum to do a major historical box show to bring further awareness and recognition to the artists that have, and are, making boxes.

I would like to thank all the galleries, private collectors and artists involved whose generosity, enthusiasm, and co-operation made this show possible. I would also like to thank Sunne Savage-Neuman for affording me the opportunity to organize this group of box constructions, and for presenting it at her gallery for the Boston community.

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November 1979
Boston, MA