

Artist Joseph Cornell: Observer and observed



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Salem -

The Peabody Essex Museum's new exhibit, "Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination," which opened April 28, is an elegantly-conceived retrospective of the artist's work. The thoughtful thematic arrangement of Cornell's works, contained and displayed within its own metaphorical "box" of a museum gallery, provides a pleasing aesthetic of its own to the visitor's experience.

There is a flow between the thematic settings that helps to highlight the various pieces to their best advantage, varying the palette sufficiently between the rooms to allow a visitor space and time to appreciate individual art works without becoming weary of the framing theme.

And, not coincidentally, the layout of the exhibit and the exhibit labels attempt to guide a viewer by suggesting meaning and implying context for Cornell's conceptual intent — albeit with varying results.

As has been much touted, this is the first major retrospective of the artist's work in 26 years, and the museum has expended much effort into securing press coverage of the event. This is not surprising in view of both the scope of the show — a few of the nearly 200 works had never been displayed publicly — and

the fact that exhibit curator Lynda Hartigan is also the chief curator at the PEM.

Hartigan has devoted much of her own career to studying and championing Cornell's work. She organized the exhibit with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which hosted the exhibit over the winter.

Donna Desrochers, public relations manager for the PEM, said when Hartigan came to the museum nearly five years ago, she drew connections between the work of Cornell and the museum's new mission.

"He was not afraid to mix these seemingly different things to make something new. I think you would find that throughout the museum," said Desrochers.

The autodidactic Cornell (1903-1972) has been "celebrated internationally for his boxes, collages and films since the 1930s," according to the Peabody Essex, although many conventional art-history texts do not mention him. His influence and "his place" however, has been documented in recent scholarship. His boxes and box-constructions have received the most attention from commentators. This exhibit contains 180 of these works, several of which have not been shown previously, according to the curator. Taken as a whole, they are thought-provoking, often troubling or disturbing, and sometimes amusing.

Cornell attended Andover's Phillips Academy from 1917-1921, but did not graduate and reportedly suffered from anxiety during his brief scholastic career. His personal life thereafter became quite "commonplace," to borrow a word used often in connection with Cornell's work. He worked as a textile salesman in New York as an adult, never married or partnered, and continued to live with his mother and brother in their little house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing his entire life.

He roamed throughout the city of New York, "collecting" and "exploring" in shops, galleries and theaters. He collected books, objects, ephemera and, evidently, made constant and somewhat objectified, sometimes voyeuristic observations. He began his art constructions with these resources in the early 1930s. Although physically he remained very much constrained by time and place, and was almost as famous for his reclusive nature as for his public works, his mind apparently roamed widely and without constraint by formal conventions and rules.

Through the years his intellectual interests, nourished through reading and “exploration,” including studies of popular science, nature, astronomy, music, literature and the visual as well as the performing arts, informed and shaped his work. As demonstrated by the exhibit at Peabody Essex Museum, the concepts that fascinated him were often expressed in somewhat overt fashion. Yet in some works, the conceptual statement is extremely subtle and inferred. The concepts and subjects to which he alludes are legion, and show an acquaintance with many of the important ideas of his time.

Inside the box

Cornell did not master art techniques such as painting, sculpture or photography. He assembled his works from found objects, cut and pasted illustrations, all manner of unrelated materials, taken out of their ordinary contexts, and re-imagined by the arrangements he devised for them. Then — sealed within a box.

In his use of surprising juxtapositions he had much contemporary artistic company. In his use of the box as a framing device, and in using the box as one of his most consistent artistic comments in and of itself, he is a landmark figure.

His works also evidence a decided romantic bent, and there is a fascinating tension between the images he chose to utilize in many of his works and the media he chose to work with, which will, for many viewers, evoke specific emotions, philosophical impressions and intellectual associations.

Those associations are concentrated and yet at the same time contradicted by his choice of materials, and the nature of his constructed settings — which are decidedly modern in method and philosophy.

Much has been made of his focus on “the beauty of the commonplace.” However, it is more telling, and perhaps more significant, that he combined those carefully selected, though randomly-found, images of romantic and historical allusions and contemporary materials within a circumscribed — and therefore highly-bordered, deliberately directive and visually-guided — space.

Time, history, context and space are thus connected — and yet simultaneously abrogated.

Cornell’s documented love of nature and science and his acquaintance with the concepts and discoveries of contemporary physics, to which he overtly alludes in late works such as his 1966 pencil collage “The Uncertainty Principle,” supports this assessment.

The Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics (of which Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle” is an important component) is the basis of modern understanding of the world, with fundamental implications.

Cornell and many modern artists, either by study or intuition, or a combination of both, tap into this zeitgeist with boundary-breaking results. The evolution of thought as a result of the discoveries of quantum physics underscores the very surprising nature of reality as being complementary, rooted in probability and uncertainty, and, most of all, dependent on observation. Observation selects from potentialities and probabilities, and observation, therefore, creates the reality.

We change things by looking at them, in other words. Observation also, however, is complementary, for there is no pure, self-contained way to “look” in human terms. In our observation and selection, we too are observed — but we cannot see ourselves at the same time. (Perhaps one of the implications of containing art behind glass is to reflect that fact — even beyond the reminder that the artwork is being protected from theft or vandalism.)

Furthermore, all potentialities continue to exist whether or not our observation has selected them as real. And that insight erodes concepts of time and space.

All great art— performing, visual, musical — articulates, illuminates and communicates this insight. Sometimes this is expressed in intellectual terms but, more often, and more successfully, by visceral and emotional impact.

One visitor to the Cornell exhibit during the opening weekend expressed this understanding when she remarked, upon looking at one of the more famous works and reading the panel description, “I don’t want to be told what to think about it, I just want to know I like it, even if I don’t know why.”

In a 1994 Art Journal article by Nancy Grove, who interviewed Cornell in his home just weeks before his death, he set even himself within a box to be observed and from which to observe. The interview began in his “glassed-in front porch” with his “darkened house” behind him, from which he watched his neighbors

come and go by peeking from behind a curtain. Later, in the kitchen of his “cluttered” house, where dishes had been replaced by “prints, newspapers and books,” they discussed art works, film, sex, Christmas, his diaries and nature. He rarely looked at her directly, she reported.

In this retrospective at the PEM, viewers will see the faces Cornell selected. They are of children, women, usually idealized women at that. No adult men are the main subject of a piece. When men appear, they are turned away from you, incidental to the scene, dressed as clowns or in other costumes; half-hidden. Even a rooster does not look at you.

You do not see the men’s faces fully from the front; a woman’s gaze meets yours, a child’s as well, but not the men.

In Cornell’s “The Uncertainty Principle,” the face is that of a serene 19th-century woman, and beneath her portrait are three different expressions of mathematical fractional relationships in three blue boxes. One-half; one-quarter ... and the fraction stretches on to infinity.

Joseph Cornell: the observer, and the observed.

“Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination” is on exhibit until Aug. 19 at the Peabody Essex Museum in East India Square.

In addition, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan will give an illustrated presentation on the exhibit Sunday, May 20 at 2 p.m.

For more information on public programs associated with the exhibition, including gallery talks, artist demonstrations, workshops, film screenings and performances, visit www.pem.org.

Jim and Maggi Dalton

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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

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and concerts ~

Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.