

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bob Smith
Art Remains A Witness To A Life

May 10TH – June 18th, 2022

Martos Gallery is pleased to present *Art Remains A Witness To A Life*, the first exhibition of Bob Smith's emblematic box constructions in more than thirty years. In the 1980s, Smith (1944-1990) created intimate stage sets that may recall the iconic work of Joseph Cornell, though clearly possessing a sensibility, poetics, and humor that is Smith's alone, specific to their time and milieu. Known mostly by a circle of downtown artists, poets, musicians, critics, choreographers and dancers, and a cluster of devoted fans, Smith has remained a well-kept secret—he himself concealed and revealed in his miniature realms. The reason for his absence from the history of a well-documented and revisited era in New York is, in part, a matter of his free-spirited navigation of life and of fate's unexpected turn, true as it was for many in this consequential decade. Smith would settle in Madrid in the 1970s, exhibit in Europe and travel widely, spending time in Egypt and Morocco, places which exerted an influence on his vision. His 1977 return to New York and a larger creative community—including Michel Auder, Meredith Monk, Taylor Mead, Larry Rivers, and Blondell Cummings, for whom he created a stage set in 1986, as if one of his boxes was brought to life—ushered in a highly productive period, though one cut short. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1988, Smith moved to Miami, where he continued to work in his last two years.

In the '80s, a sense of mortality, arriving far earlier than expected, would resonate for artists suddenly working against time. In an homage to his predecessor, Smith inscribed a sentence, strung as if on a tightrope, acknowledging the precarious nature of existence, as well as the traces and clues left behind: *Art Remains A Witness To A Life*. This serves as a particularly poignant epitaph for every artist departed, but especially for those whose work was under-known in their lifetime, and after, and eventually finds its way to us. This exhibition comprises two dozen of Smith's finest boxes, along with a selection of related works on paper.

Smith's wall constructions, which the writer Gary Indiana referred to as terrariums, can be thought of as time capsules; the artist at play within the imaginative realm while responding to the realities around him in New York at the time. The creation of a contained world may be thought of as a means to hold onto a person or a place, to their memory, preserving it in amber, and yet the larger world can't help but intrude. Among Smith's more consequential subjects: Wall Street greed, corporate art, nuclear power, homelessness, threats to the environment, war, the AIDS epidemic, gun control, the murder of John Lennon and the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The stages upon which Smith "presents the news" may be seen as television sets, or refer to a newspaper's front page. We sometimes seem to be in a theater, a dimly lit room, waiting for a movie or a play to begin. Each of these boxes is a projection, a silent movie, whether referring to a night out at Studio 54 or to cruising the piers along the Hudson.

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Smith participated in dream workshops, and made paintings of his friends while they were asleep. He encouraged them to relate the dreams to him the morning after, and from their recollection he would depict a key image. From these paintings to the boxes, Smith continued to engage with the mysteries of a nocturnal world, with the sense that to dream is to travel, and in dreams we face or reveal our anxieties, hopes, and fears. There is also a ceding to fate and desire entwined. As the artist has remarked, "Life tells me what to do / I do what I like to do / And so / Why not." In all his work, Bob Smith's vision is an art of lucid dreaming and permission, meant to expand perception. Many of these boxes incorporate a light element, but all are illuminations. In this exhibition the gallery viewers comprise the audience, in the front row for each "performance."

This exhibition has been realized in close cooperation with Danielle Tilkin, with the design assistance of Büro Koray Duman, and organized by curator Bob Nickas.

For more information, please visit www.martosgallery.com.