

MARTOS GALLERY

Bob Smith: Art Remains a Witness To a Life

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The past twenty or so years in art have been an extended period without decades or the discernible movements which previously offered, in parallel, a useful if imperfect frame around cultural production. Artworks themselves serve as markers in time, and whether or not they align with the established image of a particular moment. We often can't see this until well after the moment has passed. Works created by those who come to define a particular period are at risk to appear dated as time goes on, while those of an iconoclast tend to lead longer lives. And why? Because we come back to them anew. This recent period across which the art world has been increasingly eclipsed by the art market is distinct in one valuable respect: the discovery and re-discovery of artists, previously unknown or forgotten. In much the same way that archaeologists sift through history to better understand earlier cultures, to identify how our predecessors lived and worked and died, tracing through-lines between past and present, art historians and curators, galleries and museums, have engaged in acts of unearthing what was previously lost. As with fragments of a stone vessel from antiquity, artworks may be thought of as pieces of a puzzle we had never seen before, meant to be fitted together, reassembled, suggesting a bigger picture perhaps never to be complete. Without exception, every generation will have its lost or forgotten figures, to be retrieved or not. Our comparison points to a commonality between art and archaeology: each may be understood as a social science. Without doubt, the world of antiquity entered the popular imagination between 1976 and 1979 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized *Tutankhamun*, which traveled to major cities around the country, considered the first blockbuster exhibition of our time. Among more than 1.6 million visitors in New York was the artist Bob Smith (1944-1990), who had experienced many of the objects on display at the Met when he visited Egypt years prior, and who is the subject of rediscovery before us today. As with the artists of the past who are new to us, we inevitably ask, confronted by his wondrous art: "How is it that we didn't know about this work before?"

Smith, who was active between 1971 and 1990, spent the first seven years of his career outside the United States. After spending time in Morocco, he settled in Madrid in 1971 and traveled widely in Europe and North Africa, exhibiting in Spain, France, Italy, and Germany. Following his return to the States in 1977, his first New York exhibition was presented a year later, and he began his series, *Egyptomania*, primarily comprised of works on paper. The box constructions for which he would be come to be known, first appeared in 1981. Within ten years of his return, having been diagnosed with AIDS in the late 1980s, he would move to Miami, where he continued to work in his final years. Today we may be aware of what is happening in art almost everywhere, nearly in real time, but this was not the case in the 1970s/'80s when information moved much more slowly, often by word-of-mouth. The artist Paul Thek, whose reputation was on the rise in New York in the mid-1960s, offers a compelling example. After working for many years in Europe, orchestrating fantastic installations that were only experienced directly by those present, which were subsequently dismantled, Thek returned virtually unknown. Affinities may be drawn between Smith's boxes and Thek's early sculpture, particularly a number of his "reliquaries," among them *Meat Pyramid* (1964), and the fish tank pieces of 1969/'71; both artists offer an encasing of objects in miniature worlds. Thek's most ambitious early sculpture, *Tomb* (1967), also known as "Death of a Hippie," presented a life-size cast of the artist laid to rest inside of a ziggurat burial

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chamber, a psychedelic Pharaoh who may be thought of as Thek's symbolic leaving his previous body of work behind. Smaller pieces were installed in the structure's perimeter, that he described as "an archaeological site."¹

Paul Thek's life was also cut short; the artists would die less than two years apart. Theirs and other passages from that difficult time serve to remind us of something that is always true and always will be: the artists live on through their works, and through those who knew them intimately, who are able to give us a sense of the lived texture of their lives. As years go by, these human connections to the past are inevitably lost to us as well. In the end, the artists are only represented by what they left behind. Do they know this? They must, even if unconsciously. Each work, like acts in a play written as it unfolds, leads to and follows another. The artist, as composer and director of the productions they direct—the gallery is a stage after all—hopes to provide enough evidence, sufficient clues, for the audience to follow in their absence. Artists are never certain for how their work will be received. The title of a 1980 box construction of Smith's makes this explicit: *Opening Night Jitters*.² In their lifetime, the artists are present to defend what they have done. But the reception of their work long after they have left us, if we are fortunate to eventually re-discover them—and here we find ourselves thirty years after Bob Smith's passing—is something they could have only imagined. For an artist fascinated with the tombs and burial chambers at Giza, aware of the ancient Egyptian's belief that death, rather than an end, was part of one's passage to the afterlife, Smith is now poised to have his own.

Re-settled in New York, Smith was part of a mostly downtown milieu of actors, artists, composers, choreographers, dancers, and poets, a number with whom he would go on to collaborate. Among his friends: Gregory Corso, Blondell Cummings, Taylor Mead, and the painters Alice Neel and Larry Rivers, who have all since passed. He knew Michel Auder and Viva (having shared a loft with them at one time), Carole Bovoso (now known as Lone), Gary Indiana, Bob Holman, Meredith Monk, Annie Sprinkle, and Jack Waters. Smith's works were shown in exhibitions alongside those of Colette, Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, Ray Johnson, Carolee Schneeman, Richard Tuttle, and, perhaps most significantly, Joseph Cornell (in the 1982 exhibition, *Homage To Joseph Cornell* 3). Smith's signature works of the '80s are his box constructions (Gary Indiana referred to them as "terrariums") which could be seen both in relation to and distinct from the boxed assemblages of the great American master who preceded him. Working a decade after Cornell's death, in his shadow, inevitably, Smith's own visual poetry would suggest that for all its humor, the shadows of the times had lengthened. From one work to another, levity and pathos, buoyancy and undertow commingle, as when Smith admits by way of one box's title, from 1985: "I don't mean to depress people it's just one of my talents." While the creation of a miniature realm may be thought of as a means to hold onto a person or a place, to their memory, to keep it in suspension, life preserved in amber, the larger world can't help but intrude. It always does. The more consequential subjects of Smith's boxes include Wall Street greed, corporate art, nuclear power, homelessness, threats to the environment, war, the AIDS epidemic, gun control (*The Difference Between Men and Boys Is the Price of Their Toys*, 1981), the murder of John Lennon and the assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The stages upon which Smith "presents the news" may be seen as television sets or newspapers. Two works, in fact, are referred to with the title *Front Page*. Gary Indiana described one from 1983, which features a tabloid photo of an anguished woman, as if we are viewing a movie projected in a dimly lit room:

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The work “pulls us into an Art Deco theater whose center screen features a sepia still of some unimaginable trauma; mirrors expand the mise-en-scène into something truly monstrous on a scale with Grauman’s Egyptian during a screening of *Psycho*.”⁴

The movie theater is, of course, an awake dream, images unfolding in a darkened room. The experience is similar to a trance, one in which we are equally alert and unconscious, transported out of ourselves. Smith had been involved in dream workshops and created two series, *Sleepers* and *Dreamers* (1981-82), based on photographs he had taken of people asleep in public places, on benches, in parks, and on the street, and of friends at night at home in their beds. He encouraged his friends to relate their dreams to him the morning after, and from their recollection he would depict a key image. The *Dreamers* are diptychs, with the sleeper or sleepers (when he paints couples) represented in the lower or left-hand panel, and an image of their dream above or alongside them. From these paintings to the boxes Smith continues to be engaged with a nocturnal world, with the idea that to dream is to travel, and in dreams we face or reveal our anxieties, hopes, and fears. At times, maybe when we need them—or they need us?—we are reunited in our dreams with those we have lost. Dreaming provides a place where we can never rationalize away our behavior, where we may understand our motives and desires. In a dream state: this is the only time we are completely honest with ourselves. The paintings in this series relate to Smith’s subjects. His box constructions are little theaters into which we are the invited audience, engaging intimacy and wonder, where we are allowed to be voyeurs. What appears to be a fringed carpet in one work, *Inside Out*, 1981, is in actuality a mirror. What lies beneath? Our own reflection. Any number of Smith’s boxes have peepholes and mirrors, ways of peering inside or beyond. Many that appear as nocturnes are illuminated, suggesting a day-for-night dislocation. *The Piers*, 1982, whose subject is the popular site of gay male cruising along the Hudson River, circa 1970s’-80s, calls to mind Giacometti’s *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, transformed by way of Smith’s vision into *The Piers at 4 p.m.* With *Area Code 212/Andy At Studio 54*, 1982, set inside of a drawer turned sideways, Smith imagines the New York disco as a sidereal location, a proscenium upon which a shadow-play takes place among “superstars” and shooting stars alike. As with a late night out in a club, we don’t always recall what took place the night before. Although everyone dreams, not everyone is able to recall them, or only as fragments. Every image in a dream, every inhabitant, comes from an experience, an observation, a memory from waking life. As the artist has remarked, “Life tells me what to do / I do what I like to do / And so / Why not.”⁵ In all his work, Bob Smith’s vision is an art of lucid dreaming and permission.

There is a temporal aspect to these works. A stage has been set, but is the play about to begin, or has it already come to end? Have we arrived too early? Are we too late? Many of the boxes are filled to the brim with images, objects and decor, volume visually turned up, while others are nearly bare, silent, spookily haunted, a theatrical minimalism echoing that of Samuel Beckett’s, or the tableaux of Scott Burton in Smith’s own time. In the quietude and empty set of the more vacant stages, the text of a word painting by Christopher Wool comes readily to mind, from Vasily Rozanov (whose contentious work was suppressed and forgotten, though later revived), by way of the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem:

“The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around. No more coats and no more home.”

Stairs allow for an actor to make an entrance or leave a stage. Stairs can be seen as the architecture of arrivals and departures. Stairs occur frequently in Smith’s boxes, so often that they constitute his most recurrent motif, appearing as well in works on paper. While stairs are symbols of ascent and descent, the

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idea of going down into a space, into the unknown, is particularly suggestive, and potentially dangerous. We fall asleep, we fall in love, we fall from grace. When we metaphorically descend into one of these boxes, do we enter the unconscious? Is it Smith's? Is it our own? Do we fall under the spell of the artist, if only briefly? Descent is encountered in boxes of Smith's referring to the subway, New York's underground (*Canal Street Crossing*, 1981); to an underwater blue grotto and its diver (*The Shepherd's Son*, 1983); to a cavern with stalactites icily tapered from its ceiling (*Down Under #1*, 1986). Smith beckons, and we follow. But isn't this true of all art that aspires to take us elsewhere? To transport us from the everyday? And as the everyday itself can prove to be transporting? There is an aspect of urban archaeology in Smith's work, where the element of chance proves fortuitous. The camels that appear in many of his *Egyptomania* works? He came across the image in the street when his attention was drawn to a discarded pack of Camel cigarettes. As with many artists who find themselves without adequate means to acquire art materials, Smith readily incorporated found objects, availing himself of whatever was at hand, an improvisation and recycling which, as we have seen across a tradition of object-collage and assemblage, going back to Kurt Schwitters, can be a means to conjuring magic. Necessity, as is often the case, leads to the formation and refinement of a sensibility, to finding beauty in what others have cast off, teasing out an object's evocative potential. From Laurie Parsons and Arthur Simms in the 1990s to Lonnie Holley and Ryan Foerster today, artists have long engaged with objects and materials imbued with their own poetics, poignant mystery, and palpable histories—histories that can be roused like a sleeper, half awake, who hovers in that in-between space of consciousness. The eyes open slowly, the world appears before us once more.

In Bob Smith's *Hommage To Joseph Cornell*, created almost exactly ten years after Cornell's passing, dated 11-10-1982, the picture window of the box is filled by a dense crowd of ET's, over which Smith has affixed a clear plastic plate with the hand-printed message: "Joseph, I'm sure you've had a chat with them by now." (The movie *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* had been released that summer and its otherworldly character had become an immediate phenomenon.) Here, Smith's humor, serving as an irreverent acknowledgement of his artistic predecessor, comes to the fore. At the top of the box there are five porthole-type windows in which are glimpsed the Earth, Saturn, and possibly a UFO. Above them there is a sentence, strung as if on a tightrope, a reflection forever resonant, in honor of Cornell then, as well as for every departed artist who continues to amaze and delight a world upon which they briefly touched down, and a fitting epitaph to Bob Smith himself: ART REMAINS A WITNESS TO A LIFE.

Notes

1. Richard Flood, "Slow, Fade.," in *Paul Thek: The wonderful world that almost was*, With de With, Rotterdam, 1995, p. 108.
2. The text reads: "Valley of opening night jitters but they promised me a one man show"
3. The exhibition was held at Gabrielle Bryers Gallery in New York, in 1982.
4. Gary Indiana, "Bob Smith at Yvonne Seguy," *Art in America*, Nov. 1984.
5. Bob Smith, "Hmmm ...," prologue-poem from the catalogue of the exhibition at the Galeria Vandrés, 1971, quoted by Francisco Rivas, "Thirty Days of Images, Bob Smith: This Side Of Paradise," *Zoom Magazine*, Madrid, January 1977.