

Muses and Memories

Edward Winters

'The Museum as Muse' exhibition at New York MOMA is adventurously curated, draws interesting connections between exhibits, and stitches together works from different periods in ways which allow us to see these works afresh. In short, it provides a new context within which to consider them.

Museums emerged during what continues to be the protracted enlightenment as spaces within which the intelligent and inquisitive person might find education and edification. They house the rigorously collected and displayed illustration of every form of human enquiry. I use the term illustration advisedly. For a museum is a visual place, less bookish than its haughty cousin, that other repository of human knowledge, the library. And illustration means, of course, 'to cast light upon'. Small wonder, then, that the museum might form the basis of the work of visual artists.

Sophie Calle's *Last Seen* series offers an intriguing example of something like *ekphrasis*. Some philosophers have argued that our experience of a work of art must have a descriptive content. What we see is, at least in part, constituted by the descriptions of the work with which we would agree. In this series Calle records the descriptions of stolen paintings as provided by curators, guards and other staff members of the museum from which they were taken. These descriptions are then framed and mounted next to Calle's photograph of the space from which the work is now absent. We think of the absent works alongside descriptions which provided the content of particular experiences of them. It gives a ghostly air to the photographic prints exhibited here. They have a sort of forensic magic. It is as if the missing painting is on the point of being 'conjured up'.

Other exhibits are themselves small museums. Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* is built with the plan form of Mickey Mouse. It is about the size of three generous garden sheds, and houses a continuous vitrine in which we see various *objets trouvés*. Fluxus provide us with *Flux Cabinet*, a set of drawers in which each member of the group has created a work. In drawer 7, Ben Vautier has assembled a *Flux Suicide Kit*, containing sleeping pills, razors, matches and other dangerous objects with which one might make a dismal end of it. Duchamp, playful as ever, has several versions of a valise in which he has, in miniature, assembled his life's work. His *Fountain*, as we are unremittently reminded, provided Conceptualism with its foundation. Art since Duchamp, it has been argued, is inextricably tangled with the world of ideas. But here, in the valise, the urinal is not a ready-made but a crafted toy. Whatever else, Duchamp had a wicked sense of humour.

But the most poetic works in the show belong to Cornell. These go further than other assemblages, being both more personal and more expressive. In a way they are out of place here, being less concerned with concept and more with aesthetic sensibility. His seven works exhibited at MOMA are complemented by seventeen boxes and seven collages in

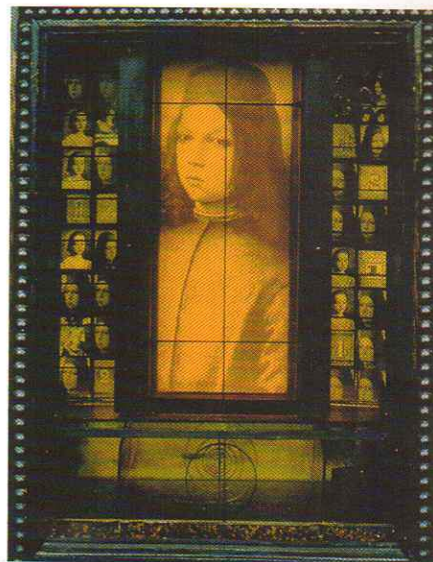
a show entitled 'Memories' at the Joseph Helman Gallery. To be in New York at a time when so much of Cornell's work was available to the public was for me an immense treat.

It was at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1980 that I first encountered Joseph Cornell's beautiful art. I was taken by its delicacy and the fragility of the feeling that it evoked. I had recently been left by a woman with whom I was deeply in love; I was about to complete my degree in philosophy; and, in part as a result of both these conditions, I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the systematic art I had been making since studying at the Slade. But Cornell's enigmatic constructions offered both faint hope and consolation. There is a sort of decency about his work. And whilst it remains intensely sad, it celebrates something. I shall try to elucidate.

It is impossible to miss the erotic dimension of some of these works. The set of boxes for actresses, together with such works as *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, *Untitled (Pinturicchio Boy)*, and the aviary series with its caged exotic birds, have a tender erotic 'care' about them. Impossible, too, to miss their innocence. In combination, the works take on the feel of loss. Cornell was removed from the world of sexual congress. So the work directed at actresses and ballerinas remains in a world in which there is no attempt to conquer the hearts of those at whom he gazed – still less to achieve sexual conquest. It is a world of longing without the dreadful weight of desire. Cornell's is a rare and precious kind of love – even if that love remains fictional. It is generous, wanting nothing for itself and wanting only celebration of the loved one. His is an art providing visual, poetic endorsement of St Paul's conception of love/charity. The loved one is removed, only ever glimpsed in the persona of a fictional character in another fictional 'box'. So here in the work everything is kept at a distance. The boxes close off their own world, creating an imaginal space into which we peer. I do not think there is anything like method in



Ben Vautier, *Flux Suicide Kit*, drawer 7 of *Flux Cabinet*, 1975–7, designed and assembled by George Maciunas, 1977, wooden cabinet with 20 drawers containing objects by different artists, cabinet: 122 × 33 × 33.5 cm, drawers 30.4 × 30.4 cm



Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Medici Princess)*, c.1948, wood box with mixed media, 44.8 × 28.2 × 11.1 cm. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation. Courtesy Joseph Helman Gallery, New York

his work. As commentators on something that is intrinsically aesthetic we might be able to find patterns of preference, but his poetic touch is never governed.

Precisely because these boxes and collages create their own fictional space, Cornell is able to fictionalise his references to art history and to Europe as well as to his beloved actresses. His is the world of the fairy tale with its sublimated sexuality. His boxes take on the feel of Vermeer or of Caravaggio. It is as if Cornell lives in and amongst these heroes; the work connects with their period. Some of his boxes are imagined European hotels. These too, have the feel of foreign places where love might find its temporary home. The references to artists from diverse periods show that Cornell collected and was concerned with images that speak across the centuries. While they are rooted in the twentieth century, these creations have a melancholy, nostalgic sensibility. In an age concerned with ideas and grand theories, they remain painfully personal, resolutely focusing upon the only thing that is really worth celebrating: personal love. These are secular shrines erected to the persons and places he valued profoundly.

In the years since my first acquaintance with Cornell's boxes I have made a considerable number of works concerned with loss and with love at a distance. Both making art and enjoying the art of others offers its consolation. Art of the distinguished kind made by Cornell does not reach for the intellectual heights, it touches the heart.

Visiting the show at MOMA was rewarding. It contains a great deal of art which is about ideas. There is much to think about. Nevertheless, ideas are often well expressed in one line. Duchamp was a master. Cornell, on the other hand, has a softer voice. His is not the voice of argument but rather that of subtle suggestion. Yet it speaks volumes.

Exhibition details: see page 77.