

Lawrence Jordan's *Mythopoiesis*

Lawrence Jordan (b. 1934, Denver, CO) is an American avant-garde filmmaker and master of the cutout and collage animation techniques. His first foray into the genre happened while he was a student at Harvard University, motivated by the European Surrealist films he saw there. In 1953, Jordan left Cambridge for Denver, where he and collaborator Stan Brakhage carried on experimentation with film. Their inexorable search for an audience ultimately brought them to the California Bay Area, connecting them with like-minded artists, including Jess Collins, Bruce Conner and Michael McClure. In his summing-up on the milieu, McClure described a collective effort to reinvigorate a wearied American consciousness through varied kinds of assemblage.¹ Jordan recalls a "sensibility" toward the art form even before he created his first full-fledged construction.² In 1955, during a temporary stay in New York, Jordan met Joseph Cornell, who would become influential in shaping his career as an assemblage artist. Cornell's constructions of found objects inspired Jordan's enthusiasm and prompted him to try out new concepts and ways of working in the medium.

Lawrence Jordan: Box Assemblages and Collages offers a survey of the filmmaker's allied practices through archived constructions and his new, previously unseen *Celestial Fantasy Series*. The compositions in this exhibition appear fresh and familiar at the same time, bearing the influence of Cornell and Jordan's peers in the San Francisco Renaissance. Here, clipped reproductions of Victorian engravings link up to form fantastical vistas: birds and butterflies float over an armillary sphere, a putto and a dolphin frolic amongst clouds, and a sea serpent swallows a sadiron. Boxes accommodate a Blanchard-style hot-air balloon with oars jouncing in front of an array of planetoids, a primordial fish surveying a tethered orb, and a tray of magnetic compasses with pointers trembling. Jordan plunges viewers into the hollows of imagination, guides us toward strange teeming regions, and allows us to glimpse the cavernous spaces and panoramas of his mind.

The difficulty in categorizing Lawrence Jordan indicates the degree to which he embodies the multi-disciplinary approach to art characteristic of West Coast counterculture in the 1950s and 60s. An endeavor to classify Jordan – for the purpose of appreciating his work – might first draw from the literature on Cornell and the movement he is most directly associated with, Surrealism. Jordan's creative output clearly shows the influence of his mentor; it exhibits many characteristic themes, motifs, and techniques. The box assemblages *Untitled (Système de Descartes)* (c. 1952), by Cornell, and *Le Système Planétaire* (1966), by Jordan, serve as examples. In both, a celestial map covers the back of the box, cordial glasses fill the lower register, and, at the top, a circular ring hangs from a rod. These works as well as others from the artists' respective oeuvres have Surrealist overtones. However, Cornell questioned his identity as a Surrealist. He wrote to Alfred Barr, Jr., in 1936, "I do not share in the subconscious and dream theories of the Surrealists. While fervently admiring much of their work, I have never been an official Surrealist."³

Cornell's letter to Barr continues, "I believe that Surrealism has healthier possibilities than have been developed."⁴ The implication is that the French Surrealists practiced a kind of black magic, with certain strains urging reckless mischief. Cornell preferred the so-called "healthier possibilities" of his own white magic, a magic used only for good

purposes. His unwillingness to join in the illicit, potentially corruptive, and profoundly political features of European Surrealism effectively made Cornell ineligible for a full embrace by the movement's leading figures.

In contrast to his mentor, Jordan confronts these topics head-on. His semi-automatist, intuitive method is in accord with Surrealist tradition.⁵ Jordan's embrace of the pneumatic realm, owing to his milieu among West Coast Beat artists, fuels this accord. An example is found in the box assemblage *Celestial Tune: La fumée et la flamme* (1995). Tilting the cabinet activates the cutout tuba and pocket watch that are tacked onto curled wires. They rebound in front of a figure pictured mid-fall, corkscrewing toward a void. However an interview with Jordan conducted in 1995 by Paul Karlstom complicates a decided impulse to label the artist as Surrealist. Jordan is, in his own words, both in and out of the Surrealist mode:

[Surrealism] [t]ries to get under the skin of conservative mindset. I'm not really interested in doing that [...] [M]y work is not very interested in shocking. [...] But the thing that's most important about surrealism and what I do is that I've been able to discover how the surrealists made concerted efforts to be able to tap the unconscious [...] I like being in that area.⁶

The boxes brought together in the present exhibition constitute a vision of physical and pneumatic wanderlust. The preformed and familiar stuff of everyday life moves from standing as one thing in their commercial and domestic purposiveness, to become something else. The craftsmanship of the boxes is praiseworthy, however they testify to more than well-honed handed-down technique. They are not intended as model cosmos or explications of celestial navigation; rather, they are devotional meditations, creative ruminations that captivate the viewer and inflame the imagination. Jordan's method, derived from Cornell, is at one with the *mythopoietic* project of the mystical.

Mythopoiesis in the sense conveyed by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard pertains to adapting diverse elements for use in a different purpose; *mythopoiesis* "turns life into an artwork."⁷ The concept is elaborated on in *Signed, Malraux*, originally published as *Signé Malraux* in 1996, a hypothetical biography of the French writer, political activist and politician André Malraux. Lyotard's Malraux possessed the power of *mythopoiesis*; he was "capable of stripping the life from any historical context, rendering it exemplary, and saving it from the ordinary putrescence to which it is condemned."⁸ Lawrence Jordan works in a similar fashion – he collects, archives, and then repurposes the ephemera of earlier times.

Lawrence Jordan: Box Assemblages and Collages showcases *mythopoiesis*, bringing into focus Jordan's poetic transformation of life. The exhibition, in conjunction with film and video screenings, presents comprehensively the varied forms of Jordan's assemblages and illuminates their evolution. These objects present as manifestations of negentropy, reversals of decay. Jordan seizes anything at hand, and, by some alchemy, delivers new profundities. Miscellaneous objects and pictures of little value, broken-down or unneeded, undergo transfiguration; they shine in their new conformations.

Jason Derouin

Student, Fine Arts Doctoral Program, Critical Studies and Artistic Practice
Texas Tech University (Lubbock, TX, USA)

¹ Michael McClure, "Sixty-six Things about the California Assemblage Movement," *Artweek* 23, No. 10 (1992): 10.

² Lawrence Jordan and Paul Karlstrom, *Oral history interview with Larry Jordan*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1995 December 19, 1995–July 30, 1996

³ Cornell to Barr (New York: Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, 1936), quoted in Dawn Ades, "The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell," in *Joseph Cornell*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ R. Bruce Elder, *Dada, Surrealism, and the Cinematic Effect* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 433.

⁶ Jordan and Karlstrom.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, trans. Robert Harvey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*