

 treatment spotlight

Wonderland—Preserving the Art of Joseph Cornell

Bric-a-Brac. Objects from thrift stores. Old clock parts. Ticket stubs. These were just some of the unlikely components in the work of the celebrated American artist Joseph Cornell. And they're also one reason why preserving Cornell's art represents one of the more challenging efforts in the career of CCAHA conservator Samantha Sheesley.

Born in 1908, Cornell became one of the best-loved artists of his era with an imaginative style known for his use of mixed-media shadow boxes, delicate 3-D assemblages, and elaborate collages. In 2007, 35 years after his death, he was the subject of *Navigating the Imagination*, a blockbuster retrospective co-organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and the Peabody Essex Museum. The show not only featured Cornell's finished works, but included a section devoted entirely to the artist's reference works, works-in-progress, and source material. Now, two years later, a few of the contents of that section — *Wonderland* — are at CCAHA, where Sheesley has taken a particular interest in preserving them.

"Most of the finished artworks presented in the exhibition were already treated and in very good condition by the time I got there," says Sheesley, who first treated Cornell's material during her tenure as a SAAM conservation intern during the run-up to the *Navigating* show. In preparation for the show, she and a small team of the museum's conservators were charged with the triage and stabilization of the diverse objects making up *Wonderland*. "It was a wonderful opportunity for me as an intern. While it might not look like it, most of his pieces have a paper component. Whether it is the cardboard boxes, a paper layer adhered to a wooden board, or collage elements adhered on top of a support, there is usually paper somewhere."

Indeed, the complexity of the conservation task speaks to Cornell's creativity as an artist. Growing up in New York City, Cornell took full advantage of the city's cultural offerings. He was passionate about film, books, ballet, and the theater; he became involved with subjects as diverse as Christian Science, the mind, the imagination and astronomy. His art, as a result, was influenced by thinkers ranging from American transcendentalists to French symbolists, and inspirations that varied between Hollywood starlets to images of birds.

The sheer range of his interests meant scholars had their work cut out for them after Cornell's death in 1972. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, curator for the *Navigating* exhibition, in *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay, Eternity*, writes: "Just imagine the contents of his tiny house at the time of his death: easily three thousand books and magazines, a comparable number of record albums and vintage films, enough diaries and letters to now fill more than thirty reels of microfilm, and tens of thousands of examples of ephemera — from postage stamps to clay pipes, from theatrical handbills to birds' nests."

Because of Cornell's belief that "all things could be used in a lifetime," it's often not clear to the viewer why he brought certain elements together in any particular piece. For example, one of his famous shadow boxes might have a ball in one corner with a pipe standing on its side, maybe some rolled newsprint and blue or white paint all behind some glass. Each of these elements has a precise reference and *Wonderland* provided a context and a peek inside Cornell's mind.

To ensure that future generations, researchers, and scholars enjoy the opportunity to study Cornell, it's critical to preserve this material. Sheesley notes, "The majority of the treatment work will be stabilization, surface cleaning, and consolidation. Although the treatment sounds minor, there is a range of complex issues when examining modern materials. The questions posed by Cornell's material selections and working methodologies create a lot of research possibilities. I hope to collaborate with curators and analytical scientists to find solutions to some of the more universal problems such as cleaning and consolidating matte media or identifying and preserving the artist's intent and aesthetic." Cornell clearly strived for an aged and weathered appearance in his objects. One



A 5" Cornell paper sculpture including French and English book papers, rolled into tiny scrolls.



Two Cornell works-in-progress

goal will be to maintain the appearance of flaking paint while securing the media to its support for safe handling, exhibition, and storage. Sheesley will also work with the curators to determine the desired level of cleanness. It may not always be clear what was applied to the objects by Cornell and what has transferred to them over the years.

Sheesley has worked to bring 11 of these artifacts from the Smithsonian American Art Museum to CCAHA. She's chosen works in process from the Joseph Cornell Study Center (the Center *Wonderland* drew from) and will work in consultation with curators from SAAM to treat and analyze the works. She hopes to make discoveries on the artist's working process that will lead to treatment of additional objects housed in the Joseph Cornell Study Center.

Joseph Cornell has been the subject of 20 books, just since his death in 1972. Authors as diverse as Jonathan Safran Foer, Octavio Paz, Rick Moody, Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Pinsky, and Deborah Soloman have all written poems and essays inspired by his work and life. Yet even with all this scholarship, he and his art remain somewhat of a mystery. The conservation treatment that Sheesley, CCAHA, and SAAM are undertaking is helping to shed light on Cornell's processes and to ensure that Cornell's enigmatic art is available and appreciated by future generations of scholars and museum goers.

— Keltie Hawkins