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## Thinking Inside the Box: Lawrence Jordan

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Lawrence Jordan  
 "Prodigies of Physical Phenomena: An Exhibition of Dioramas & Collages"  
 April 4-30, 2013  
[K. Imperial Fine Art \(http://kimperialfineart.com/artistpages/Jordan.html\)](http://kimperialfineart.com/artistpages/Jordan.html)  
 49 Geary, Suite 440  
 San Francisco, CA

by John Held, Jr.



(<http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Jordan-Prodigies.jpg>)

Lawrence Jordan, "Prodigies" (Detail), 2012. Original Paper Collage. 27" x 37"  
 Courtesy of the gallery

It was said of Ray Johnson, the Father of Mail Art, that he was to the letter what Joseph Cornell was to the box. But over the years, I've come across many correspondents that were equally adept at conceptualizing creative correspondence, and Lawrence Jordan is a case in point of someone equally as skillful in the construction of boxed dioramas. It doesn't hurt, however, that he learned at the foot of the master and continued to devote himself to the medium for the next thirty-five plus years.

Nor was it a disadvantage to have lived within shouting distance of Jess (Collins), one of the great collagists of our era. Jordan was central to the mix of San Francisco Fifties bohemia, having migrated here with fellow filmmaker Stan Brakhage from Colorado, where they grew up together. Soon after arriving in The City, they feel in with the likes of Jess and partner Robert Duncan, Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Michael and Joanna McClure. Jean Conner, Bruce's widow and fellow collagist, who attended the reception for the current exhibition, remembers Jordan picking them up at the airport in a convertible when arriving from Kansas on September 30, 1957.



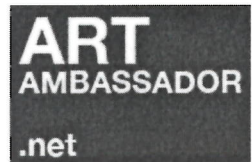
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([http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/LJ\\_IgnusElectrici.jpg](http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/LJ_IgnusElectrici.jpg))

Lawrence Jordan, "Ignus Electrici", 1964. Mixed Media Diorama. 15.5" x 11" x 4.5"  
Courtesy of the gallery

Gallery Director, and curator of the exhibition, Aimee Friberg, relates Jordan's first meeting with Joseph Cornell and his first forays into dioramas and cut-up collage animation. "He met Cornell in the mid-Fifties at Maya Deren's Greenwich village apartment in New York with Stan Brakhage. Brakhage and Jordan, who went to high school together in Denver, were in their early twenties, and after staying with Maya, as they often did, rented a little cold-water flat on Spring Street for the summer. Joseph Cornell came to Maya's apartment with a young actress, and they were like, 'Who is this guy?' He was very thin, almost emaciated, but he spoke for a couple hours. Jordan has no memory for the content of Cornell's monologue from that day, just that they were fascinated watching and listening to him."

"That first interaction between Cornell and Jordan led to a decade of correspondence between them, on life, poetry and art—namely avant-garde film. Jordan was primarily making contemplative diaristic films. He had an obsession with transfiguration that Robert Duncan had picked up on and led the poet to casting Jordan to read Faust in his performance "Faust Fautu" at Six Gallery in San Francisco."

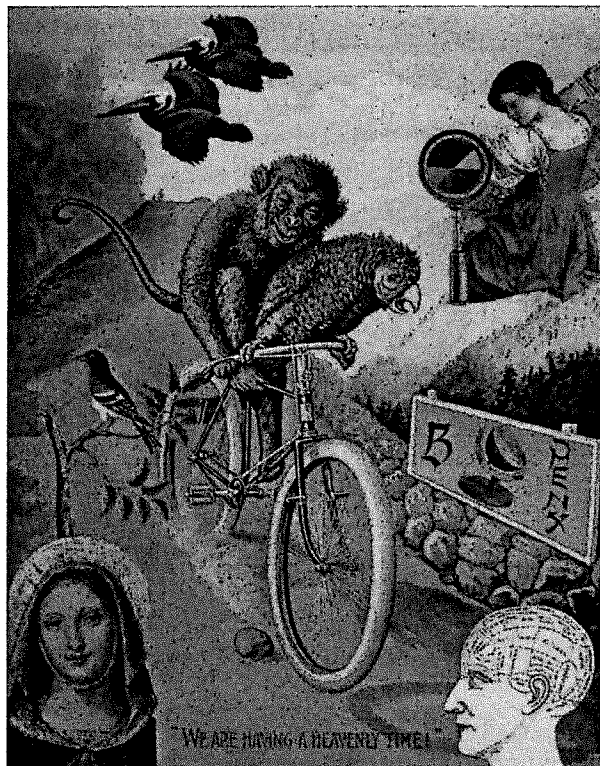


(<http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Jordan-Wheel-Walker.jpg>)

Lawrence Jordan, "Wheel Walker", 1983. Mixed Media Diorama. 7.5" x 10.5" x 3.5".

"In 1959 Jordan began his first forays into cut-out collage animation—with "The Soccer Game" and "Minerva Looks Out Into the Zodiac." It was this new animating of collages that Jordan came into his own really unique style. Lawrence has said, that interest in collage at that time was moving collages—in fact in his words: 'Pictures that didn't move, didn't move me.' Which points to a distinction in Jordan's boxes from Cornell's—the propensity and intention for them to move."

"Jordan made his first box, "Telegraph Madonna" (with an actual antique telegraph machine in it) in 1960. In 1965, Cornell invited Jordan to stay with him and work as an assistant. That summer in Flushing [Queens, New York], Cornell showed him his style of box-making, and the craftsmanship of the woodworking. They also worked together on films. That summer Jordan edited Cornell's "Fable for Fountains" (shot by Rudy Burckhardt), and Cornell gave Jordan "Cotillion" and "The Midnight Party" for Jordan to finish. Jordan made a film that summer on Joseph... "Cornell" (shot in 1965, edited in 1979)...It's a really incredible little diary of Cornell. He's the only filmmaker that Cornell allowed to make a piece about him in his home, in his studio, looking down on him as he's in the backyard assembling things."



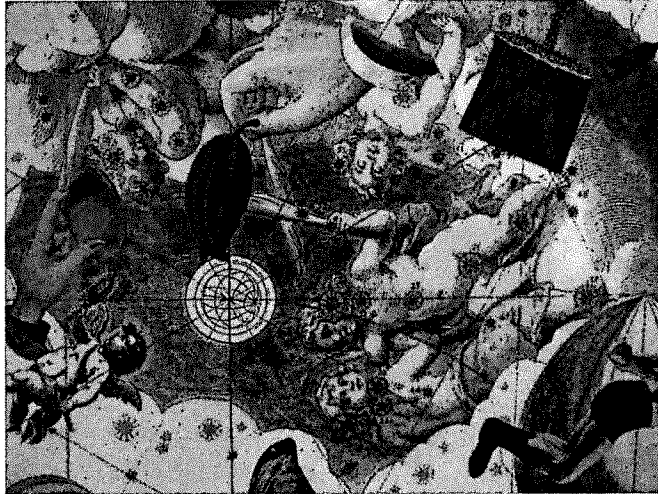
([http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/A\\_Heavenly\\_Time\\_LawrenceJordan\\_26.5x21\\_sml.jpg](http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/A_Heavenly_Time_LawrenceJordan_26.5x21_sml.jpg))

Lawrence Jordan, "A Heavenly Time", 2012. Original Paper Collage. 34" x 28.5".

Courtesy of the gallery

Jordan went on to make many films in his distinctive cut-out collage animation process, after being introduced to the collage work of Max Ernst by Jess. In 1969, Jordan initiated the Film Department at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he taught for thirty years. He has since made over fifty films, including, "Circus Savage" (1961/2007-2009 (tel:1961/2007-2009)), a twelve-hour filmic autobiography available on, "The Lawrence Jordan Album," available from Facets Multimedia.

He has said of another work ("The Season's Change: to Contemplate, 1960"), but which may relate also to "Circus Savage," and indeed the body of his work, that, "A profound work is almost by definition a subtle one. There are resonances undiminished by time. Significances seep out only years after completion. A diamond is never impatient to be discovered, nor does it ever lose its integrity...There is time. There is the Moment (timelessness). And there is change or outcome. That is what the film is about." (From a letter to P. Adams Sitney, as quoted in the April 2009 Artforum issue containing Sitney's article, "Moments of Illumination: On the Films of Lawrence Jordan").



(<http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Jordan-While-She-Watches.jpg>)

Lawrence Jordan, "While She Watches Her Blue Heaven Awaken" (Detail), 2011. Original Paper Collage. 27" x 35".  
Courtesy of the gallery.

Elsewhere in the Artforum article, Jordan articulates his debt to Cornell, quoted as saying that his mentor's boxes were, "the best work I'd seen in any of the arts, and so I was completely devoted." But whereas Cornell's dioramas were nostalgic odes, a revivification of past memories, Jordan employed artistic practice as a transformative tool. His thoughts are never far from the alchemists, whose pseudo-scientific experimentation was not only meant to transmute lead to gold, but to aid in the metamorphous of the practitioner's psyche.

"I'm a practicing alchemist," he is quoted as saying. "I don't think the practicing alchemists ever had a codified system. Every one of them were off on their own kick. They had imagery that was like a common language and I use that language...Alchemy and constructionism are two ways of saying that you take the things laying around you as detritus, as litter, and you make something that is formal art out of it...I've been manipulating old imagery with new technology as part of my alchemy."



([http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Untitled\\_Occulus\\_LawrenceJordan\\_sml.jpg](http://www.sfaqonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Untitled_Occulus_LawrenceJordan_sml.jpg))

Lawrence Jordan, "Untitled (Occulus)", 2012. Original Paper Collage. 19" x 27.5".  
Courtesy of the gallery.

The dioramas in the exhibition date from 1965 ("Ignus Elecrici") to 2004 ("Her Scales of Fate"), serving as a mini retrospective of the artist's oeuvre. Nearly eighty, Jordan has currently forsaken the medium due to the strain of their rigorous construction. He continues his work in collage, the current works on display all dating from the past two years.

I have had the good fortune of visiting Jordan's Petaluma studio, which does indeed remind one of an alchemist's lair. His vast body of work cries out for deeper examination, not that he has been ignored these past few years. His participation in the forthcoming exhibition, "Jess and His Circle," at the Crocker Museum of Art, Sacramento, opening June 9, 2013, is a case in point. His films have also gained increased recognition, most noteworthy with the inclusion of, "Our Lady of the Sphere," in the National Film

Registry in 2010, selected by the Librarian of Congress "to be preserved for all time...as works of enduring significance to American culture." That alone seems a fitting tribute to an alchemist's success.

Preview several of Lawrence Jordan's films on Fandor : <http://www.fandor.com/filmmakers/director-lawrence-jordan-613>

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