

Art in America

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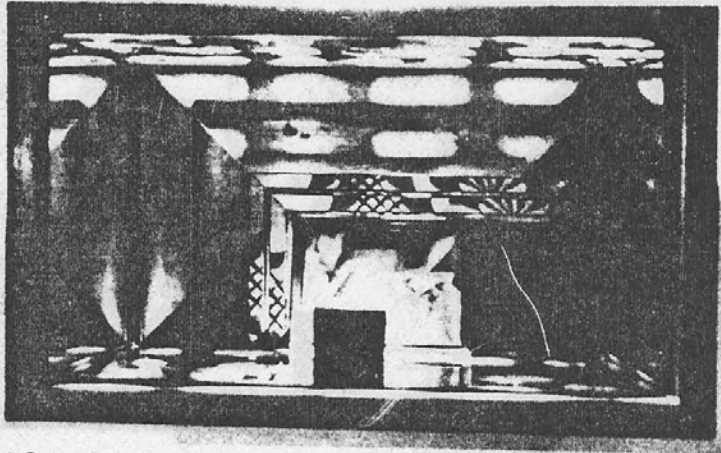
Bob Smith at Yvonne Seguy

It would be impossible to encompass this long-belated, geographically importunate retrospective of Bob Smith's environment-boxes in a single go. There were more than 40 works, of a very mixed character, installed in an eccentric series of gallery spaces, in an eccentric building. At least the show was there, if you knew about it.

Smith's boxes are not really boxes but terrariums. They contain found objects and accumulations, miniature objects, printer's platens, photographs, serial images, wallpaper, glass, wood, mirrors, tiles, columns, metal rods, artificial forests, animals, fur, and

much more. Many have internal lighting from miniature lamps; some can only be viewed through peep-holes; quite a number of them produce spectacular effects with mirrors. Often the basic box has a flamboyant outer shell with objects and images along the sides or on top.

Each of these boxes has its own peculiar atmosphere, its own funky dollhouse effect. Cornell comes less automatically to mind than you might suppose; Smith's boxes usually have a deeper perceptual depth, and his bric-a-brac has a less contrivedly "surreal" appearance. Cornell's imagery is often culturally rarefied in its "natural" state, whereas most of Smith's finds only become mysterious in their new context. Smith occasionally makes a corny gaffe, Cornell never. On the other hand, Smith's boxes at their best present us with models of consciousness that are more ambitious, more engaging of the darker edges of our actual fantasy life, than Cornell's sublime but deliberately circumscribed miniuniverses ever are. To put it plainly, there is a cloying chastity in Cornell's work; in Smith's, an explicitness which is equally dream-transmuted and not as seamlessly agreeable, but perhaps a truer index of the modern imagination.



Bob Smith: *Front Page*, 1983, mixed mediums, 14 by 24 by 12 1/2 inches; at Yvonne Seguy.

The Piers (1982), for example, is just what you're thinking it is. And it's done with a beautifully precise abstraction of detail: some architectural chunks, a few rusted metal rods, light pouring from jagged rips in the ceiling, even a vista of the river and the skeletal debris of the building's other end. *Conference Room* (1982) perfectly evokes the gray zone of modern decision-making. *Emotional Situation* (1983) contains a balustrade and outer fringe made of dental samples, a pastiche of luxury wallpaper at the back, four square columns covered with the same material, a round sea-green bath encased in a red plastic square, a smashed crystal bowl, all embedded in a two-pattern vinyl frame studded in a butterfly pattern with upholstery tacks. *Front Page* (1983) 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*. Smith has quieter effects, some of them literally pastoral (*Danish Cows* and *Swedish Cows*); in each of his boxes some fantasy is decked out to completion, including the element of otherworldliness that keeps fantasies mysterious and compulsive.

—Gary Indiana