

ARTnews

JANUARY 2009

Artists to Watch

**The Mona
Lisa Theft:
Missing
Pieces?**

**The Hidden
Clyfford Still**



UP NOW

'Image in the Box'

Hollis Taggart

Through January 10

Joseph Cornell (1903–72) was the first great master of what has come to be called box art. His assemblages of scavenged objects—often alluding to places he'd never been and to people he'd never met—lovingly arranged in shallow, glass-covered boxes, first made their appearance in the 1930s and are now considered icons of the art form.

In this fascinating exhibition 14 pieces by Cornell are displayed alongside works by five contemporary American artists—Elsbeth Halvorsen, Maureen McCabe, Leo Rabkin, Lucas Samaras, and Ted Victoria—who have, so to speak, taken the box and run with it. And they have done so in remarkably diverse directions.



Maureen McCabe, *Ionia*, 2007, mixed media on 1930s game board, 32 1/4" x 18 1/4" x 4 1/4".
Hollis Taggart.

A glass-covered Samaras box of drafting compasses suspended like flies in a web, above a pebbled ground, at first seems remarkably close in format and technique to Cornell's reliquary-like (*Untitled*) *Sun Box for Carol* (ca. 1962) and *Soap Bubble Set-Lunar* (1958–59). But while Cornell evokes a world of childlike innocence, Samaras portrays an uninviting and possibly dangerous place. In Vic-

toria's boxes projected images of such banal objects as a razor blade and a metal pop-top tab eerily materialize on a darkened screen. Halvorsen's almost monochromatic boxes feature ladders and architectural elements ordered with a geometric rigor that recalls the constructions of Louise Nevelson.

By contrast McCabe's boxes, festooned with gaudy feathers and toy animals, have a riotous, carnivalesque quality. *Ionia* (2007), one of many constructions incorporating antique pinball-game boards, pays homage to the celebrated lady illusionist of that name, who vanished mysteriously in 1911, as well as to the artist's own Celtic heritage with its paganism and magic. Rabkin's delightfully whimsical works are notable for their ingenious use of found objects. In one, miniature moonlike orbs that appear to float in a carrying case are in fact the glass balls used for roll-on deodorant.

As an interesting art-historical aside, the show includes a group of trompe l'oeil paintings of objects in fictive boxes by French Surrealist Pierre Roy (1880–1950), which, according to exhibition curator Jeffrey Wechsler, may constitute an important but heretofore overlooked source for Cornell's box constructions. Their inclusion dovetails nicely with the issues of artistic tradition, influence, and originality raised in the show.

—Elizabeth Wilson

UP NOW

David Stern

Yeshiva University Museum

Through February 8

This exhibition, titled "Abstraction, Figuration and the Spiritual David Stern: The American Years (1995–2008)," covers the full range of this artist's activity since he moved to New York from Germany nearly a decade and a half ago.

A self-described Action Painter, he also considers himself a genre painter. He uses brushes, small brooms, spatulas, and pieces of cardboard to apply layers of paint on canvas—or, conversely, to

scrape them off—but he never loses sight of the figure.

His landscapes are crusty dark forms looming against roiling blue skies, as in the diptych *Skypiece-SoHo 1 and SoHo 2* (2001). All the elements—the violent movement of applied paint and intense colors—come powerfully together in *Skypiece 3: Sundown, New Jersey* (2000).

In *The Gatherings* (2001–2) the surface texture of the canvas occludes the image; life-size figures emerge from and dissolve



David Stern, *The Gatherings* (diptych, right), 2001–2, oil on cotton, 82" x 73". Yeshiva University Museum.

into the paint. In *Square Times (Common Ground)*, 2000, and *Random Cycles-Fluorescent Run* (1998–99), the figures that issue from the impastoed surface look anguished. The emotional undertone is no less intense in Stern's portraiture, as can be seen in *Grave Diggers* (2007), in the moving series "Woman in Labor" (2001), and in the festive *Bryant Park* (2008).

Preparatory studies and drawings in this show, cocurated by Karen Wilkin and Reba Vulkan, reveal the artist's stratified approach to the painting process. Most interesting in this regard are Stern's "Daily Drawings" (1997–2003), a series of self-portraits in mixed media on paper, drawn without a mirror, that capture the artist's sense of himself. They are also an expression of Stern's faith as an artist. While he wrestles with the Jewish prohibition against reproducing the human form, he affirms the infinite possibilities of creation in his paintings.

—Charles Ruas