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Pieces of Africa

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in Illustration with Honors

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Abstract

My Capstone project is a collection of boxes incorporating various themes from African literature and culture juxtaposed with illustrations and natural materials in a three dimensional manner. I have created nine boxes presenting the following themes: men, women, children of war, family and community, life and faith, death, love, hate, and the continent of Africa itself. Each box has various illustrations corresponding to its theme. I wanted these boxes to create a dialogue about what I believe the general public knows and does not know about Africa.

I read various African novels and recognized multiple themes that were discussed frequently throughout each novel. I chose nine themes that I felt encompassed African life and began to create illustrations for each theme. These boxes either have multiple layers of imagery, single images, or text in place of an image. Each box is meant to create a depth for its theme. Viewing various images in a single box is intended to mimic multiple perspectives on the same theme. Conversely, some of the boxes only contain a quote inside. In these boxes, specifically on love and hate, I felt that words could convey these two broader themes much more effectively than an image could. I wanted to play with a balance between powerful imagery and text, with the intent to create a cohesive unity between the two.

Each box incorporates the use of quotes from the texts that I have read, illustrations, and natural materials (dirt, polished stones, sand, dry grass and flowers, and broken glass). The colors I chose to paint each box with

correspond to the various themes. The boxes have a plate of glass on one side, showing the objects inside similarly to the way a diorama would. The viewers can look into the boxes but can not touch any of the illustrations or objects inside. This glass plate between the interior of the box and the viewer creates a wall between the two. This is a representation of the way American culture tends to be removed from the issues in Africa. Although the media covers these issues once and a while the general public pays no attention to them.

The development for my thesis began unknowingly in my sophomore year of college. I took a course in the English Textual Studies department entitled Power, Race, Study, and Culture of Africa simply because it sounded interesting. This class proved to be a defining point in college for me in many ways. This class and the literature it included changed the way I thought. I have always been interested in Africa, and felt that I wanted to know more about the people who were the heart of this continent. When I began to read the literature from this class, which included the father of African literature Chinua Achebe and his book *Things Fall Apart*, I had a realization that the world of Africa, the world of struggle and racial segregation, was a part of my life time.

At this point most young adults my age know about the struggle of other races; however, they define them in the past. For example, when a history class teaches about slavery or even the Civil Rights Movement, students are generally horrified but can not fully grasp its reality because it is from a time they were not a part of. They do not remember newspaper headlines, hearing about it discussed around the neighborhood, or the feeling of a historical event so powerful that they can recall exactly where they were when it happened fifty years after the fact. The only event that has that kind of an impact on my generation is 9/11. However, the racial discrimination that scarred Africa, specifically South Africa, was a part of my lifetime. Apartheid did not officially end until the early 90s.

Although I had heard of Apartheid and remembered seeing protests on the news in front of the United Nations buildings in both New York City and San Francisco, I was too young to understand the meaning of Apartheid. When I took

this class on African literature I realized how my generation is not removed from blatant racial discrimination. It was not until going to college on the East coast that I realized how naïve I was and how where I had grown up was very different culturally and ethnically from most parts of the country. I grew up in the Bay Area, California, where there is a cultural richness. All of my friends in high school were from various ethnic backgrounds. I, as a Caucasian female, was the minority in my high school. Attending college in upstate New York was a culture shock in comparison to what I had experienced in California. I found that most of my friends here at Syracuse were Caucasian because of a low integration of minorities into the general student body. It was a strange reality to be faced with. I had always assumed every other part of the country was as well integrated as the Bay Area.

This lack of cultural backdrop led me to delve myself into learning about various cultures, specifically African culture and tradition. I consumed the literature and ended up taking two more courses with the same professor who had taught the first course I had taken on African literature. The writing was beautiful, powerful, mesmerizing, and thought-changing. I was fascinated by the history of the continent and the struggle the people have endured for centuries. Africa has become a country defined by its loss, war-torn countries, struggle, AIDS epidemic, and Apartheid. These are the topics that are discussed when Americans talk about Africa. Yet there is so much more beauty in this continent than most people around the world, and especially Americans, realize.

Africa tends to be forgotten and displaced in the media, only mentioned for negative happenings. For my Capstone project I wanted to create a series of boxes that represented the beauty of Africa while still maintaining its horrific past. These boxes are intended to teach those who view them about the beauty of this continent and how that beauty gets lost in translation through the media. What Americans know about Africa is very limited. Generally speaking most Americans can only name a few countries in Africa, let alone point to them on a map. I hope that these boxes that I have created teach viewers how to confront the negative representations but yet still be able to look past them and truly see Africa for all it has to offer.

Once I had decided to create a Capstone project it became evident to me that the obvious choice would be to do a project on Africa. I had read over twenty books or so at this point on African literature ranging from the Ivory Coast to the Southern tip to the East Coast of Africa. Being an illustration major I knew my project would be in the creative category and I was going to need reference pictures in order to successfully illustrate images of both the people and continent itself of Africa. My aunt Stacey has traveled all over the world and spent two and a half years living in Africa. I contacted her and asked her for any journals she may have kept while she was there as well as all the photographs from her trip. My aunt was able to supply me with plenty of material to work with. She gave me twelve photo albums and six journals to use for reference. Once I had obtained all the references for my illustrations I began sorting through the images and dividing them into different categories.

Originally I had planned to create a journal with chapters emphasizing different thematic elements from the novels I had read. These chapters would include excerpts from my aunt's journals with illustrations to correspond. However, I felt that taking journal excerpts and reorganizing them into another journal format was repetitious. I began to lose interest in the project and I realized I needed to rethink my original idea. It was not until the summer before my senior year that I realized exactly what I wanted to create.

I was living in New York City and interning at the Jim Kempner Fine Art Gallery in Chelsea. About a month before the end of my internship the gallery received a shipment of sixty boxes. The boxes were a series of work created by Ellen Gallagher who took racial themes and ideas about black women and commented on society's interpretation of them. The work, entitled DeLuxe, is intended to hang all together, and the boxes cannot be purchased separately. Each box was hand made with the back and sides created out of wood and the front made of glass. The viewer is allowed to look into the box but the glass creates a partition between the viewer and the work. The glass maintains a distance from the viewer, constantly keeping the work on step removed from the viewer.

The images in the interior of the box were prints done by the artist with clay used on top to build up specific portions of the image in three dimensional forms. For example, one image is of a black woman with her hair built up in clay as the three dimensional form. Because the boxes have a two inch depth the artists can model portions of the image with clay without the clay rubbing up against the glass. This was the first time I had ever seen work like this. The

series was absolutely brilliant. The aesthetic choices of the artist were beautiful and powerful. At this point I had decided to use the idea of the box for my Capstone Project. I knew that the box could be representative of everything I wanted to say about Africa and its removal from the mainstream American consciousness.

In addition to Gallagher I have always admired the work of Joseph Cornell. He was one of the first artists to incorporate the idea of a box, with three dimensional found objects as its contents, into fine art. This idea of found objects is similar to what I chose to do with my incorporation of natural materials into the bottom of each box. Cornell's work constantly changes, which is something my work has also managed to achieve. Cornell would never glue down all of his objects, therefore when ever they were transported to various galleries or museums the objects would slightly shift. Because I chose to use dirt, sand, grass, broken glass, and dried flowers my boxes allow for the same shift. Each of these materials can shift ever so slightly with each movement of the box itself. Furthermore, the experience of each box is continually changing and may be different for each viewer.

My first step in creating these boxes was to find a company that manufactured boxes that would be appropriate for my project. I had originally intended to make the boxes by hand; however, since my skills in both woodshop and glass cutting are extremely limited, I chose to buy pre-manufactured boxes. I found that Pottery Barn was the only company I could find who created what they call Shadow Boxes that obtained the depth and size differentiation that I needed

for my boxes. In addition to this, Pottery Barn constructs all of their frames and boxes out of anti-acidic mattes and materials in order to preserve the photographs or artwork that their customers choose to frame.

I decided to create nine boxes with each box representing a different theme or topic in African literature, culture, and life. Once I had chosen the themes I sorted through the photographs and quotes from the novels dividing them into the various themed categories. The following are the nine themes I chose: Africa (as a geographical location), men, family and community, women, children of war, love, hate, life and faith, and death. Each box is represented by a different color chosen for the frame in relation to the theme. For each box I determined a color that could effectively represent the designated theme: Africa (cobalt blue), men (cadmium yellow), family and community (cobalt teal), women (sea green), children of war (maroon), love (violet), hate (cadmium red), life and faith (cadmium orange), and death (white). Each of these colors obtained a deeper meaning that tied it to the theme of the box. For example I chose a shade of green for the box about women because green is an earthly color and women are a symbol of Mother Nature. Furthermore, in African literature women tend to be the strength in the home holding everything together; they are the back bone of the family.

As for the medium for each of the illustrations I chose to use a combination of ink, watercolor, and pastel. Each illustration was done on Rives BFK printmaking paper. Because this paper is meant to be run through a printing press it is durable enough to withstand excessive amounts of water while still

maintaining a tooth on the surface to hold pastel. I chose to use watercolor because it has great experimental possibilities with mixing, bleeding, spattering, and washes. However, I felt that watercolor could not convey the intensity I needed for certain images, which is why I incorporated pastel as a second layer on top of the watercolor.

Pastels are made of pure dry pigment and a little bit of binder to hold the pigment together. The colors are intense and in their purest form. I would start working out a sketch from the photographs I collected and then transferred the sketch onto the Rives paper in pencil. I went over the pencil drawing in a water soluble ink and washed over the ink with water to get a base tone for the entire drawing. Then I went over the shapes of the drawing in watercolor and finished with highlights of pastel. I wanted to make sure each illustration obtained a sense of spontaneity. I emphasized flaws in the paper or accidental bleeds of color into one another as intended decisions of the illustration. As I developed a method for working the creative process became easier and I was able to work at a quicker pace.

All of the boxes, with the exception of the boxes themed love and hate, which are purely text, contain illustrations corresponding to the theme of the box. In the boxes representing women and children of war I layered multiple images to focus on the depth of the representation. For women I wanted to show a wide array of women, young to old. The women are shown doing work and caring for their children, the main tasks of women in traditional African culture. The depiction of various women represents how women of all ages are vital to the

female community within the larger African tradition. I wanted my illustrations of the women to be vibrant and beautiful. Many of the pictures my aunt took while she was in Africa show women in brightly colored clothing. I used the colors of the clothing the women are wearing to represent their greatest attributes: strength, bravery, and beauty.

Each box includes a three dimensional object to accompany the illustrations, as mentioned previously. In the women box I chose to incorporate a clothes line. The clothes line connects the illustrations of the women to their daily and maternal tasks in the community. As opposed to American culture, the woman in an African household is respected and admired for staying at home and taking care of their children. They are revered as the strength of the home, keeping everyone together. The quote I incorporated on the interior of the box describes how women are a presence of strength and although the man is in charge of the household the women can be very powerful when necessary.

In the children of war box I wanted to make a statement about how children are recruited by rebel groups to participate in warfare, shoot civilians, and use drugs. In addition to those children who become used by these groups are the children who are left behind. Those children become orphans when their parents are killed in cross fire. One of the most profound stories my aunt told me about Africa was when she was visiting in Uganda and she and a friend were eating lunch on the patio of a restaurant and they saw these children watching them eat. The children were in rags, hungry, thin, tired, and above all else lost. It was clear that they were newly homeless, probably having lost their parents to the

war that had ended only a few months previous. My aunt and her friend invited the children to come and eat with them. The two of them were finished with their food and knowing that the restaurant would just dump the scraps they let the kids sit on their laps and in the extra chairs and eat the rest of the food on the table.

I chose to depict some of the children who would have been at that table. But rather than show their faces I illustrated what their feet would have looked like. Feet can reveal a lot about a person. I drew the children's feet bare, dirty, and worn. The feet represent the journey of the children and all that they will endure in their life time. In contrast to these children are the children who are captured by the rebel groups to fill their armies. The image in the foreground of this box is of a child smoking a cigarette with a gun around his body. He glares intently at the viewer and written on his chest is a quote from the novel *Links* by Nuruddin Farah: "All you can get from me is war. If you want peace, go away from my country." (Nuruddin, 270) The I have illustrated child is fearless in the judgment of the viewer. He does not flinch in the face of his opponents and yet he is a child. The purity of his childhood has been stripped of him, and the viewer can only hope he will get back to that before it's too late.

In addition to these contrasting depictions of children in Africa is the representation of the casualty of war. My aunt had multiple photographs of people in villages standing around and there would be old gun shells and bombs lying on the ground. The old artillery did not faze the people standing around them, as if it was normal to have those objects littering the ground. This idea that war has become so common for this country that it's incorporated into daily life is

something, as an American, I cannot begin to fathom. The illustration that depicts this idea is located in the bottom left corner of the box showing a small child standing on an old bomb shell. The illustration in the upper left corner of the box is of a man walking with a gun strapped to his back through a village. To carry this theme through an object I included old bullets in the bottom of the box. Bullet shells strewn all over the ground, especially in the parts of Africa that are war-torn, are a common sighting. I wanted to include these bullets because they would be a natural addition to the earth during wartime.

My aunt took many photographs of writings she would find on walls and various objects throughout the villages she visited. Two of these writings are the remaining illustrations. One of which says “work have progress, remember peace comes only after struggle.” The other is written on the end of a boat: “United we stand, divided we fall.” I felt that these quotes written by some members of the community summed up exactly what the people of war torn Africa need to believe in order to survive.

For the box representing men I chose to use just one illustration rather than layers of them. When looking through photographs for reference I found these beautiful pictures of traditionally dressed African warriors. My aunt had told me how she had seen a man in tribal attire walking down the street in one of the cities in Namibia. She said it was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. He was so brightly dressed everyone stood and watched him walk by. My single illustration represents this man. He is proud, strong, brave, and brightly adorned with fabric and tribal jewelry. His eyes do not meet the viewer

but rather look beyond their gaze to an unknown place. I painted this box with bright dominating colors: red, purple, and yellow. All three of these colors obtain power and strength. Red is loud and boisterous. Yellow is vibrant and proud, never giving the viewer's eye rest. Purple is passionate, deep, and represents a love for the community.

The quote written on the glass of this box reads as follows: "From one sun to another, the combat lasted and fighting together they transfixed their enemies. But happy is the man who does battle without hatred." (Sembene, 248) I chose to juxtapose this quote with the proud image of a tribal warrior because it discusses the strength of men physically and emotionally. Although a man can defend himself against his enemies he will be happier in life if he does not let himself be consumed by hatred. The key to survival is rising above those who are the oppressors. I wanted to illustrate a man who has pride in the traditions of his community rather than the portrait of a man who has experienced hatred, loss, and war. At the bottom of the box is dirt and tall grass framing the illustration on either side. The earth and grass connect the man to his country and community.

The family and community box is the first group of illustrations I created with images of people uplifted. I found that in all the novels I read community was a keystone to the survival of any one person. Regardless of what the topic of the novel was, the community was mentioned as a strength in every situation. For this group of illustrations I chose to show the huts in the communities, a group of kids gathering fruit, a woman sowing, and a woman gathering branches to bring across a bridge. The children gathering fruit are energetic and smiling in the

original photograph. All of these illustrations create an atmosphere of building and working together in the community. The members of the community help one another. No one goes hungry because there is always someone who has something extra to share. Everyone knows each other and takes the time to spend conversing with one another.

The foremost image is of a woman sowing. Because of this I continued the illustration of the earth into real earth that fills the bottom of the box. The earth shows the scars of a community. It can soak up blood shed, grow food for the community, hold water, and show the way home. In addition to the earth is tall green grass that is attached in the bottom right corner of the box and follows around the interior to the upper left side. I chose cobalt teal for the color of the frame because it is a combination of both blue and green, the colors of land and water, which are essential to any community.

The central box of this series is the Africa box. This box contains one illustration of the African continent printed on a sheet of vellum. Behind the vellum is a sheet of white paper to emphasize the color in the image. The image on vellum and the white paper are attached to a plate of glass. Originally I had intended to leave the image on the vellum attached to glass without the white sheet of paper but the intensity of the colors were lost on the vellum so I needed the white to bring them back out. I cut out the shape of the continent because I wanted it to appear to be floating in the box, similarly to the way Africa seems to float between the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean Sea. The Africa box is filled with dirt to represent the earth of the continent itself. The

color chosen for the outside frame is cobalt blue to reflect the idea that Africa is surrounded by water. As I developed this box I realized that Africa's geographic location has become synonymous with its situation. Many times this continent is left to fend for itself and is generally isolated from the rest of the world. The fact that Africa is surrounded by water emphasizes this isolation further.

The death box contains a single image with cutouts of individual graves layered on the top portion of the box. I found a photograph of a woman standing in front of a grave almost as if she was posing in front of the grave site. This was the image I ended up illustrating. I loved that the woman wanted her picture taken in front of the grave; it was her way of taking a picture with the person buried there. Generally in American culture we mourn the dead and wear black to show our sorrow. There is a residing heavy sadness that lingers around death. There is no celebration of the life that the deceased had, but rather a mourning of the void created by the loss. In African culture the life is celebrated. Death is still sorrowful but there is a deeper understanding of the life that was. Death is not as bleak as it is in American culture. For this reason I painted the frame of the box white rather than black.

The object inside the box is tall green grass. I chose to use an object that held a resemblance to palm leaves. Palm leaves are tied to Christianity which is a faith that was brought to Africa via missionaries during the colonial times. Many of the graves in the photographs I used had crosses on them referring to the Christian tradition. The quote I chose for this box derives from the novel *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda: "Death lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying

are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?’” (Mda, 98) I felt that this quote focused on the idea that death is accepted as apart of life in African culture, it is not feared in the way that it is in American culture.

For the life and faith box I chose to use both an influence of African culture as well as the Christian faith that the colonies brought to Africa. The frame of the box is painted a brilliant cadmium orange, representational of the use of color in African culture. Many of the pictures I used for reference had women wearing brightly colored garments. This rich use of color is engrained into daily life. The colors of the continent of Africa are reflected in the clothing worn by its communities. The interior of the box consists of three separate illustrations of members of a congregation. All three men are either singing, playing an instrument, or have their hands raised, praising to the high heavens above. They all are adorned in deep purple robes.

In almost all African literature I have read there is a reference to faith and God. Generally those who suffer greatly need to believe in a higher power in order for survival. There had to be a belief that one day those who upheld government regulations, such as Apartheid, were going to be punished. Faith gave people a belief in change. Faith supported that the world could get better, that life could improve. The three men illustrated in this box are uplifted by their faith. They are jovial and rejuvenated by their faith in God. This vibrant part of African culture was a necessary addition to my series of boxes to encompass an entire range of themes.

The last two boxes in the series are purely textual. When I decided that I wanted to create two boxes on the themes of love and hate I realized I had created a difficult problem for myself. How do I illustrate love and hate? These themes are visually very difficult to represent. Furthermore, I concluded that the text in these novels was so powerful that it could speak for itself. The words can survive out of context of the novel and hold their own with the six other boxes. I chose longer quotes to use in these boxes, both of which came from Besse Head's *A Question of Power*. Both quotes talk about love and hate in a universal manner. I wanted these quotes to be applicable to all viewers, not just those who have experienced love or hate through struggle.

The hate box has polished black and white stones attached to the bottom interior of the box, below the quote. The stones are a metaphor for the integration of both the black and white races; the idea that they can one day come together completely. I used a natural material to stay connected with the idea of the continent of Africa. In the love box I dried some flowers and attached them below the text. I chose flowers because they are a symbol of life and love but they can also take on many appearances. Love can grow, blossom, wilt, and die the same way a flower can. I had a difficult time deciding which color would represent hate and which would represent love. Red is the obvious choice for both at first. Yet the more I deliberated over it I realized that I associate red more with hate because it is loud and is the same color as blood. In this association it becomes synonymous with violence. Purple seemed to be a better choice for love

because of its depth. Purple is created out of red and blue, which can be associated with both the positive and negative sides of love.

All of these boxes were created with the intention to be hung together on a wall. The Africa box, which depicts the continent itself, will be the center of the wall arrangement. The rest of the boxes will be arranged around the Africa box based off of aesthetic choices. In other words, I will hang the eight remaining boxes according to color and size. In coming up with a display plan I did take into account that I wanted opposing boxes to be displayed across from each other. For example the life and faith box will not hang next to, but rather across from the death box.

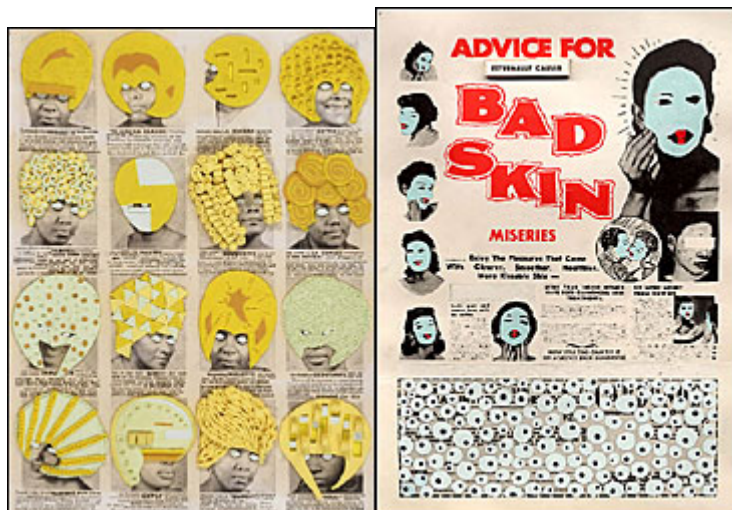
My thesis has become an incredible experience for me, both aesthetically and educationally. Working with three mediums (ink, watercolor, and pastel) has allowed me to become more experimental in my artwork. By working with opaque and transparent mediums I learned about what the mediums would and would not do on the surfaces I chose. But most importantly, I found a way to create a series of work that is meaningful and has depth both literally and metaphorically. I believe that my Capstone project describes an all encompassing view of Africa, both the beautiful and the ugly. I wanted to be honest about the subject matter and show what the general public knows and does not know about Africa, and how to find beauty in both.

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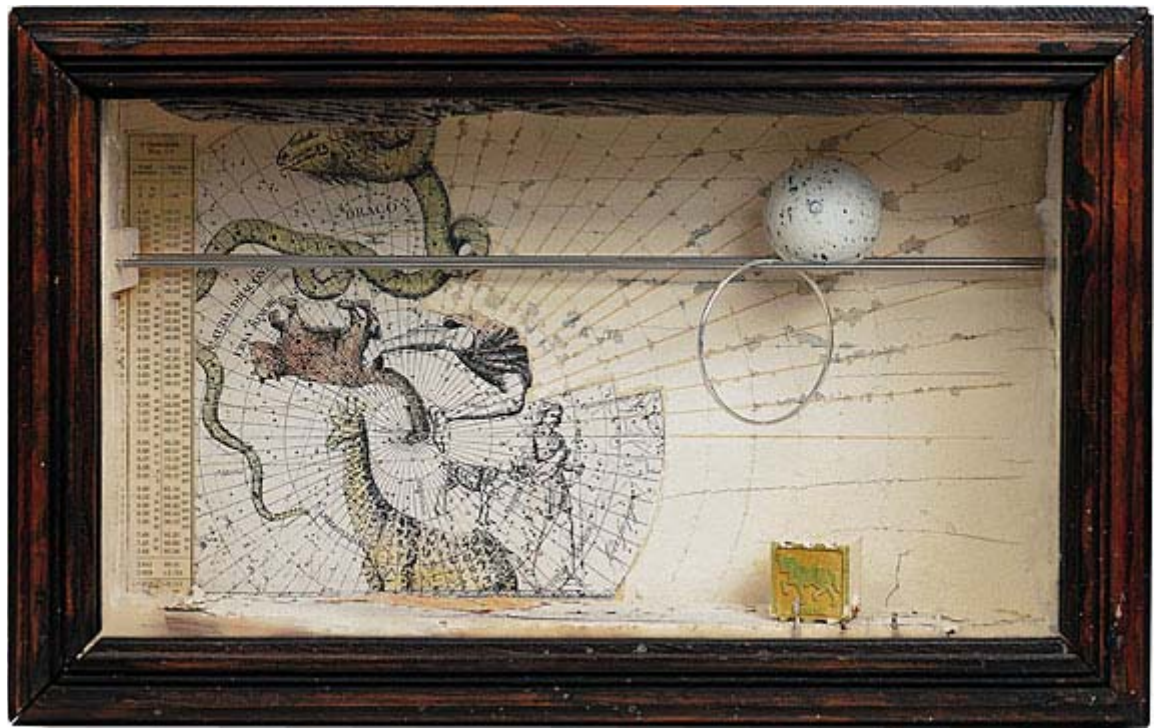
Ellen Gallagher in her studio in SoHo with her work entitled DeLuxe



Five images from the series DeLuxe by Ellen Gallagher



Joseph Cornell
Fortune Telling Parrot (Parrot Music Box), ca. 1937-38
Box construction, 40.8 x 22.2 x 17 cm



Joseph Cornell

Space Object Box: "Little Bear, etc." motif, mid-1950s – early 1960s

Box construction and collage

11 x 17 ½ x 5 ¼ inches