

INSTRUMENTS OF INITIATION

by Robert G. Edelman

may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secret of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men not hear them men are old

Excerpted from, *may my heart always be open to little*, e.e. cummings,
100 selected poems (From Collected Poems, 1938). Grove Press, New York, 1954.

Collage, that lively offspring of Cubism known as papier collé, often the preferred medium of the Dadaist and Surrealist, and more recently an exploratory device for American artists from Dove to Rauschenberg to Baechler, in many ways parallels the development of 20th century Western art. In its particulars, the assembling and reconfiguration of disparate objects and images reflects the social fragmentation and political upheavals that have occurred everywhere since the (relatively) halcyon days of Impressionism. In effect, the history of collage stands as a kind of cracked mirror held up to the complexity and multi-layered character of contemporary experience.

Collagists are hoarders by nature; they tend to collect anything and everything that might prove useful at some future moment of inspiration and confluence. The Dadaist Kurt Schwitters was known to carry around a suitcase full of used railroad tickets and scraps of discarded paper for his Merz compositions. Patricia Nix has for many years gathered a vast array of curios and seemingly innocuous detritus; vintage photographs, bits of magazine illustration, and art history reproductions, elaborately patterned book covers, pieces of cloth, delicate fabrics (such as lace), pendants, doll parts and much more. Not much escapes her discerning eye, and over a period of time, these objects and images eventually find their way into her boxes, wall "totems" and collages. Nix's collages of 1990 through 1992 are actually an extension of her earlier three-dimensional works, in that they combine the artist's interests in illusion, unexpected juxtapositions and formal design.

Nix's evident affinity for the work of American master collagist Joseph Cornell should not preclude an appreciation of her unique contribution to the medium. Rather than as an homage, her collages should be seen as an extension of her constructions and paintings, as expressions of a distinctly piquant and quirky vision that is all her own.

Take, for instance, the whimsical layering of images in *Baptism* (1991), in which the ritual suggested by the title seems to taking, in subtle ways, before our eyes. An immaculately coiffured naked woman (the artists?), emerges from a bouquet of roses. Her white dress (purity?) floats in front of the door leading to a neo-classical facade, with details from art masterpieces visible in its tiny windows (the museum as the instrument of the artist's initiation?).

An out-of-scale bird (artistic license, perhaps) sits perched on the ledge, beneath a huge blood-red rose (experience?). Nix mounts these pictures on top of a wood colored, stained book cover that miraculously forms a halo around the entire scene. Other elements



Plate 112



Plate 113

include a wooden ruler as a base for the building, reminding the viewer of "true scale", and a faux-grass lawn in the foreground. The area behind the woman is a sky that is the negative shape of the facade, with a tilted envelope above that repeats the upper section, an announcement, in Spanish, for a baptism. The success of Nix's collage resides in the balance between its slightly askew structure, and its wry inquiry into the process of experiencing and making art.

The gentle, unabashed nostalgia for bits of Americana in works like *New World* (1990) and *Home Sweet Home* (1992) lends these collages a folk art flavor. On the other hand, pieces such as *Eastern Star* (1990) and *Western Union* (1992) demonstrate Nix's pure joy in found materials that speak volumes when placed in close proximity. It is this quality that can be found in so many of her collages, and that marks Nix's best composition with their special blend of mystery and beauty.

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Plate 112. *Eastern Star*. 1990.
Collage. 14" x 9"

Plate 113. *Home Sweet Home*. 1992.
Collage. 18" x 12.5"