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Patricia Nix

ART AS A COLLAGE OF LIFE EXPERIENCES

BY PAUL BRAUCHER

THE WORLD of art has become very open and public, for we now possess almost unlimited access to a wide range of works in museums, galleries, and publications. However, there is still no richer experience than that of actually seeing the work of art within the environment that helped to shape it. I myself was presented with the unique opportunity of visiting the residence and world of Patricia Nix, an experience that provided immediate and sometimes startling insights into the work of this New York artist.

I was immediately disarmed by the warm reception I was given as I was escorted into Nix's . . . well, I would like to say living room, but it is architecturally more akin to a medieval courtyard. It is a space resembling a well that rises two stories and is bordered on two sides by a mezzanine, which can be reached by a staircase that hugs the wall opposite the entrance. All of this is generously lit by windows above.

Within this "well," Nix's works hang on three walls, high and low, and along with her antique furniture and her precious art objects, they create a rich play of color, pattern, and texture that animate her living space. I was immediately yet inexplicably struck by the congruity,

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Photo: Hans Namuth



Fat Girl, 1984, painted construction, 46 x 30. Collection the artist.

the sympathy, with which these two worlds—Nix's works and her environment—coexist, even collaborate, to form a whole that is at once both kaleidoscopic and harmonious. Prior to our meeting I was little prepared for the revelations that were to come. I had been familiar only with her work in a public

and serial fashion and had been most impressed by her modernist use of unorthodox materials in conjunction with surrealist imagery.

Patricia Nix's works range from richly surfaced tapestrylike paintings, many of which employ collage, to intensely dreamlike box construc-

tions, to freestanding sculptures. Each form employs a startling and highly poetic use of found objects—dolls, clockworks, playing cards, photographs, tortoiseshells, saws, marbles, lace, bits of furniture, violins, mannequin parts, and art reproductions. Through intuitive selection and juxtapo-

sition, she has drawn from oblivion a seemingly endless inventory of things and fragments of things—our things, our past—and molded them into a new and highly reflexive life, into art.

Although modest in scale, the box constructions are especially evocative in their expansion



Above: *City Park*, 1983, painted construction, 42 x 20. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Daomato

Right: The staircase in Patricia Nix's New York City apartment-studio.

Opposite page: *King of Clubs*, 1985, mixed media, 50 x 32. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Elberson.



Photo: Richie Williamson

from a picture plane into a real space—a room, a house into which we may peer into a world that partakes more of the fragmented and symbolic logic of dreams or memory than of impressionist or realist conventions of reportage. What we encounter are not representations of things, but the things themselves; objects that appear to be unspeakably old have found their place in a new order and thus are allowed to tell their collective stories. These conjunctions of object symbols are narrative and designed to strike us with new insights not unlike those we might gain from, say, a glimpse into a drawer full of the personal articles of a parent or a grandparent who has recently passed away.

Yet tempering this mood of transiency is the buoyant antilogical play of make-believe, where we as children, as protoartists, were engrossed by our newly found and ever-expanding powers of discovery and invention. As such, it can have been no accident that Patricia Nix's first efforts at box construction were made when she was just a child growing up in El Paso, Texas. Although her first nature boxes date to about 12 years ago, as a solitary, only child she found delight in arranging whatever was at hand—toys, dolls, and scraps of cloth—in match and cigar boxes. Even after she had begun the serious pursuit of painting, she continued to assemble these boxes solely for her own enjoyment. It was at this early age that she encountered the work of Joseph Cornell, a master and pioneer of box construction. Seeing Cornell's work for the first time, she was struck by the realization that not only had she found a kindred spirit and artistic father, but a door had been opened for her to consider box construction as an art.

I had not been at her residence for long, how-

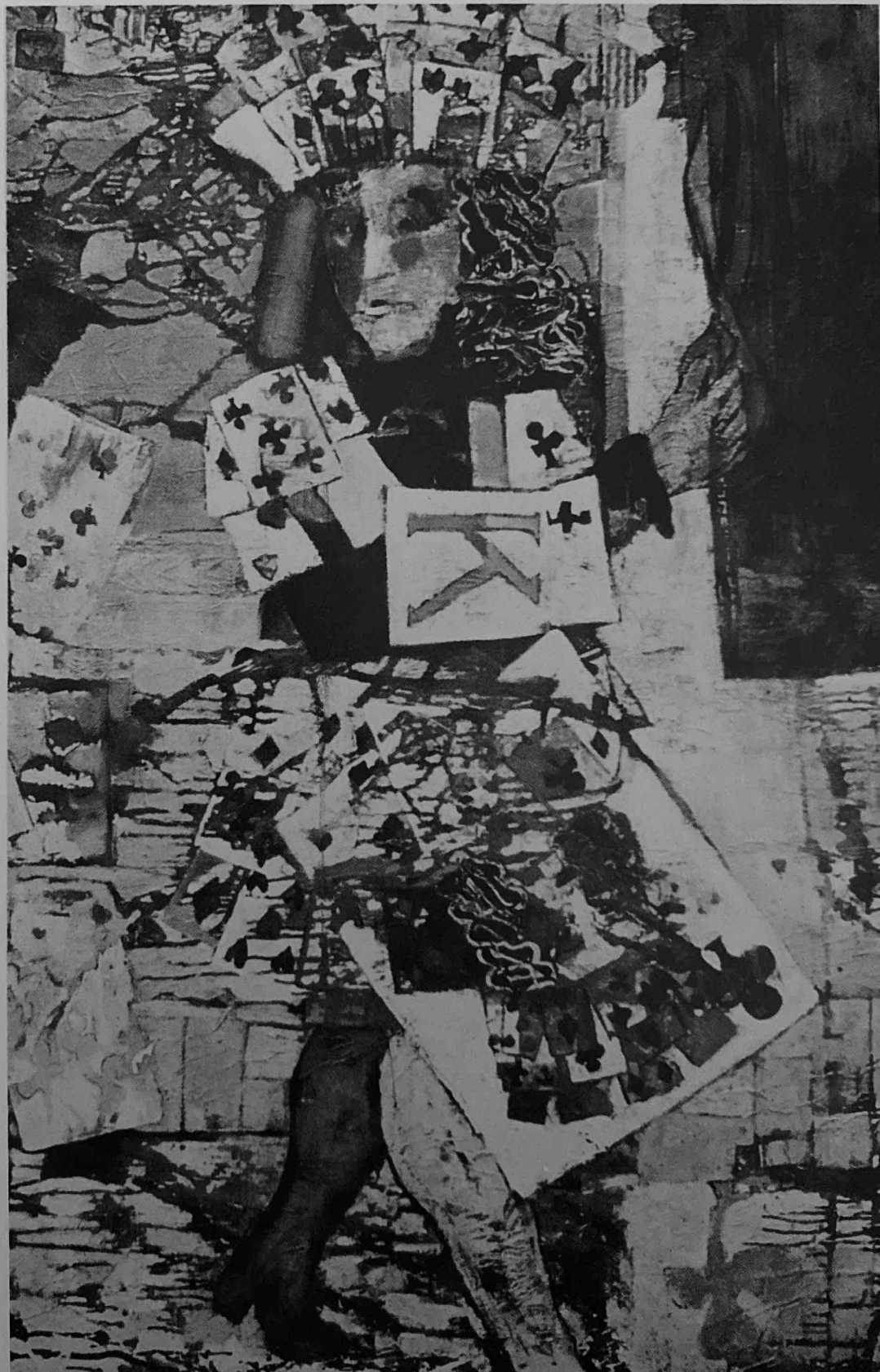
ever, when more immediate roots of her art began to reveal themselves.

Beneath the stairs the "fat girl" (*Fat Girl*) dances a little jig within her box-world. Her chubby, carved wooden face stares blankly out from above her round, concave body, which is actually the inside of a tortoiseshell bulging against

the sides of the box. Dangling in front of her painted heart in the center of her "shell" is the large mainspring of a clock begging to be pulled and set to dance. She does her little step with actual chair legs—the old animal-foot type—which are stepping outside the enclosed space of the box. Her surface is

ruddy, worn, and animated by touches of color that accentuate her warm wood and shell world. Yet my gaze had barely left this work when I saw an imposing chair a few feet away—a massive chair of carved wood, upholstered with black-spotted white cowhide, which sports the

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NIX

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same animal-foot legs as *Fat Girl*. As it turns out, this chair, which once belonged to Napoleon's cousin, Maximilian, the emperor of Mexico, has been with Nix most of her life. Across the room can be found a miniature chair of almost equal age and style that used to be Nix's chair as a child. From here, the thematic correspondence of Nix's works and environment escalates. The choir-of-angels heads at the base of an old Mexican wood sculpture of the Archangel Michael, who, with his raised sword, seems to preside over the quiet spectacle, echoes the angelic choir of her Luca della Robbia-esque *Heaven box* over the stairs.

To my eyes, the most startling relationship lay between Nix's *Stairway to the Stars box* and the actual stairway over which it is hung. In this box an elaborate, miniature stairway rises against the back plane, supported by Kewpie-doll caryatids that have been mummified in white, paint-encrusted gauze, to meet an open mannequin hand, as a circle circumscribes a heaven full of clock-face stars that loom above. Not only does this work echo, in miniature, the prominent stairway that ascends around the better part of three walls of the room, but it possesses a startling prophetic quality in that it was made long before Nix had lived at this residence.

In the end, I began to refer to her dwelling as "The Big Box." For when one ascends to the mezzanine, one beholds her world, works, and objects alike from a bird's-eye and, perhaps even, a "god's-eye" view, thereby attaining a rare glimpse of the dialogue between an artist and her world and a hint of the ways in which they shape each other. Still, it is only a glimpse, for the full script of this dialogue remains concealed from all of us, including Nix, and it is most likely a mystery that not even time will fully reveal. •