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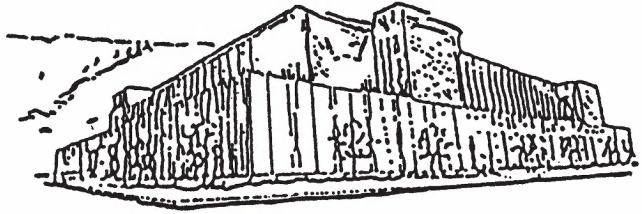
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DRAWERS THAT DON'T CLOSE, DOORS THAT OPEN:
EXPLORING CURIOSITY

by

Holly Fisher

B.F.A. Northeast Missouri State University, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

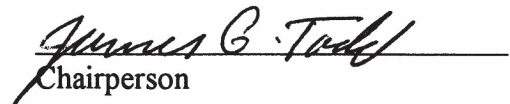
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

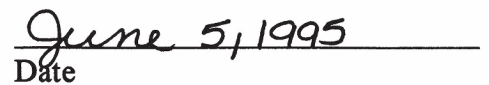
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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art often alienates its audience. The work intellectually isolates or confuses them as they search for what appears to be a hidden meaning. This usually occurs when a work relies too heavily upon concept and not enough upon form and craftsmanship, or a pleasing visual experience. My goal as an artist to alleviate audience alienation by actively engaging a viewer visually and through the visual experience, encouraging physical and subjective intellectual exploration.

Dialogue takes place on many different levels, the first and most immediate of these is visual attraction, or a pleasurable visual experience. My boxes are recognizably well made and have rich surface characteristics. A pleasing overall form combined with decorative elements and minute details encourages a more thorough visual investigation.

Visual investigation; the next level of interaction, is facilitated by the familiar form and function of the box. By their previous experiences with containers, an audience is more comfortable with the work and more likely to get closer to it and utilize peepholes and viewing space to peer into the interior of the box. Acting on the natural curiosities of the viewer to see

more, the peepholes offer limited sight of the interior and encourage the viewer to utilize doors and drawers to see more than what the peepholes offer.

Doors, drawers, etc. move the viewer onto a physical examination of the piece. Here, hardware (handles, latches etc.) plays an important role. The viewer's previous knowledge of its particular function in relation to the function of the box (i.e. latches hold doors closed, handles open drawers) directs the viewer's interaction with the piece, encouraging them to touch it, open it, or otherwise physically interact with it (i.e. handles are to be grasped, latches turned).

Typically artworks are not to be touched. Mine are the opposite, designed for a tactile as well as visual experience. I have been encouraged to post signs reading "Please touch the art", but I refrain from doing so because I do not want to shortchange the capacity of my work to move a viewer into committing a forbidden act. Instead, I may introduce the aspect of touching by opening a door for a viewer, or planting "touchers" in the audience to provide examples for the others.

Physical interaction with the work leads to yet another level of interaction; an intellectual one. My work

approaches its viewers' intellect by appealing to their sense of intrigue. Once the work has been opened, pulled or otherwise manipulated, it becomes an object of intrigue because the result is not what was expected. A drawer may be frozen shut, or what was thought to be a drawer is a closed container. A door opens not onto a passageway, but a barrier etc.. By confounding the assumed functions of elements of entry or display I encourage the viewer to question the work. The viewer asks, "Why am I not allowed to get into this box? What is it hiding?"

During this phase of interaction perhaps the most important realization on the viewers' part is that the boxes are empty. This empty space, defined by the six sides of the box connotes an intangible center, in other words, an Axis Mundi.

The Axis Mundi serves as the driving force behind my work. It has been used throughout time by varied cultures as a central reference point for interpreting physical as well as spiritual space. In my work it translates into a personal center, a center inside oneself by which to interpret space and the spiritual realm, a viewpoint. Each person's Axis Mundi is entirely subjective, based upon personal history, experiences, genealogy, etc. By creating containers for empty space and encouraging my audience to explore and discover a void, I am encouraging and validating subjective interpretation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest beginnings of my present body of work date back to my junior year of college when I was studying Modern Art in a survey class. Mid-semester I was introduced to the work and philosophy of Kasimir Malevich and the Suprematist manifesto.

Malevich, a Russian, organized the Suprematist movement in 1915. He felt that painting could exist independent of any reflection or imitation of the outside world. He sought to "unobjectify" art, making it completely abstract and apart from the everyday workings of the world.

I was instantly struck by Malevich's bravery and straightforwardness as he organized a movement around his philosophy and made statements as bold as "The square is the ultimate expression of man."¹ Aside from his outspoken attitude, I respected Malevich's work because of its almost umbilical tie to geometry, and call for order and structure.

At this time I had already chosen sculpture as my medium. Sculpture allowed me to work rapidly, assembling, disassembling, and reassembling, all the while with tangible proof of my efforts. I enjoyed the physicality of sculpture, its realness, the fact that it did not attempt to create illusion. I valued the freedom of using a wide variety of materials at my discretion.

Using Malevich as a guide; translating his square into my cube, I began my first boxes. (fig.1) Somewhat akin to a shrine, this first box was ornately decorated but in a rough manner, given the nature of my materials. I paid close attention to all sides of the box and its physical relation to the viewer.

These blind moves launched my work into a new direction. I purposefully made the box with an open end, designating that the interior was to be viewed and where the space was to be viewed from. Also, I lowered the level of the box so that a viewer would have to bend over to get a good look. In short, I began to concern myself with the viewer-object relationship.

In doing this I contradicted Malevich on a primary level. He sought to "un-objectify" art and I was highlighting the "object" aspect of it. He saw geometry as a way to escape the representational aspects of art and I was using geometry to directly engage humans. I chose to overlook this contradiction because I could not let go of my love of objects, and my love of making them. Instead of echoing Malevich or even interpreting him, I chose to refer to him as a departure point for my own ideas.

My Senior Thesis Exhibition (fig. 2) consisted of seven boxes resembling the aforementioned box. Here, I relied upon geometry and The Golden Mean as systems for making decisions

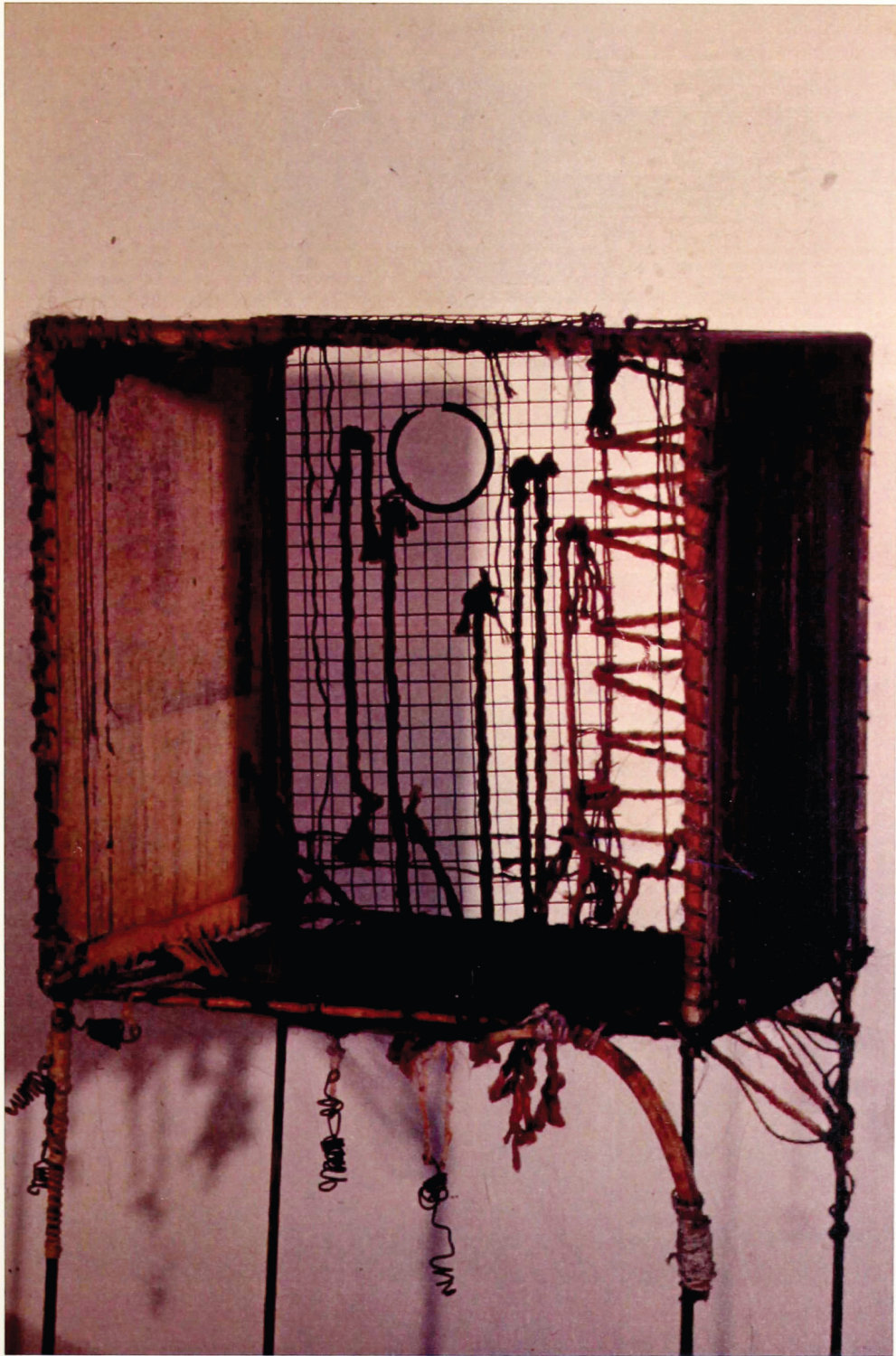


Fig. 1 Untitled
Steel, Jute, Muslin, Bone
15" x 15" x 15"
Holly Fisher, 1991

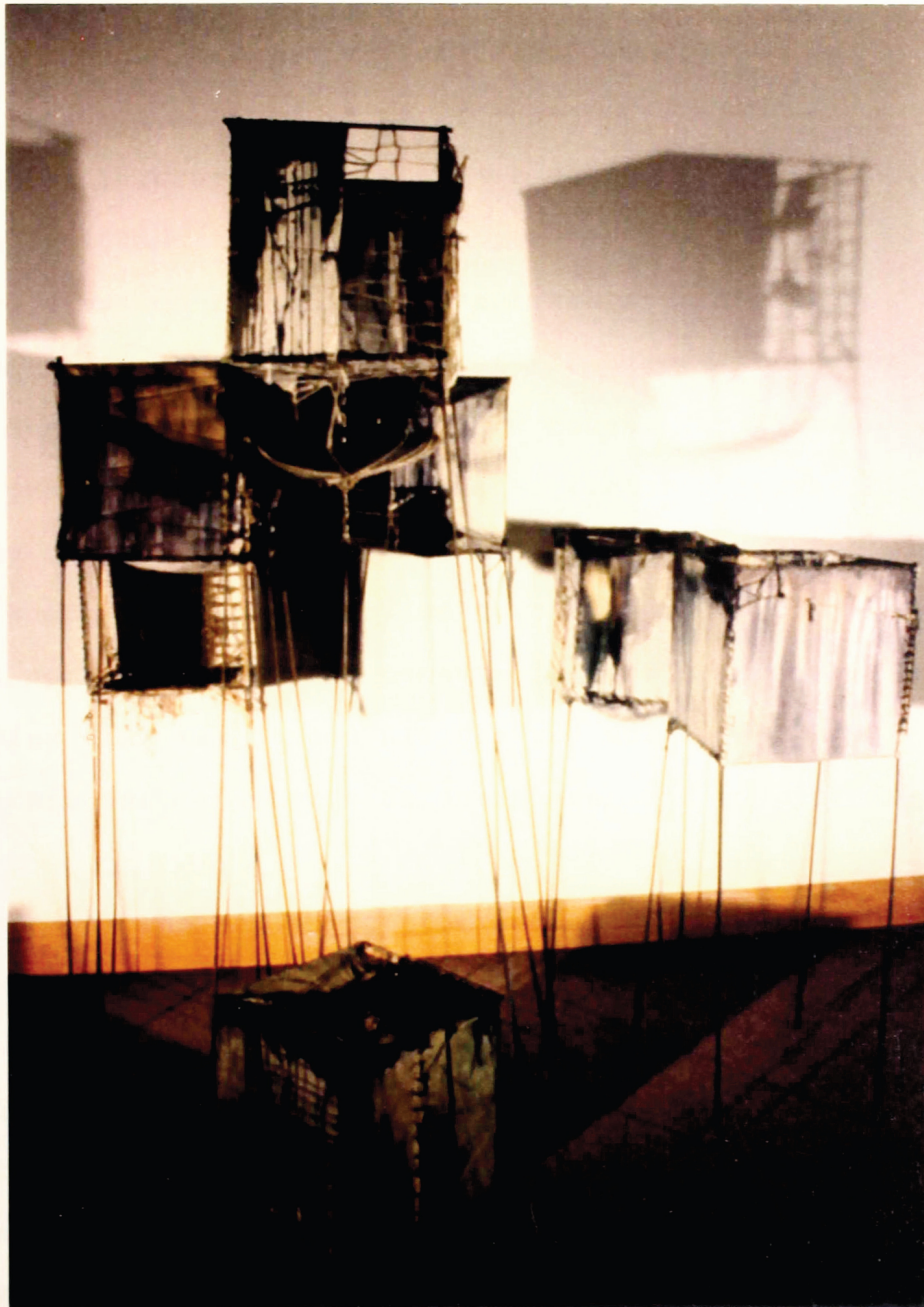


Fig. 2 Senior Thesis Exhibition
Steel, Jute, Muslin, Bone

Holly Fisher, 1992

as to the initial form and scale of my work. Utilizing systems for decision making helped me to ward off indecision and fear brought on by the overwhelming multitude of possibilities available to me. The systems served as a stronghold; a reference point and a venue by which I could explore my ideas.

Geometry and The Golden Mean translated themselves well into the initial form and scale of the pieces, but when I began to "decorate" or enshrine the boxes, I utilized a much more organic, chaotic or less-than-structured approach. I made the boxes into six-sided compositions, where I could weave, knot, wrap and otherwise fuss with them for a long time. I worked in this way because it felt good, as if my creativity dial was turned all the way up. I could concentrate for many hours on one piece, and enjoyed doing so.

This was the beginning of my efforts to reconcile the creative impulse versus a disciplined and logical approach. My efforts to employ a structure for decision making often clashed with my enjoyment and success when utilizing an unstructured, more intuitive approach toward creating.

When I arrived at graduate school in August of 1992, I continued to work with cubes, and began to investigate geometry more thoroughly. I studied the relationships between the square and the circle. Geometry was simply a

system of thought so I investigated other "systems" of thought that had close ties with geometry like mathematics and logic. The work of systems artist Sol Lewitt was invigorating with its tight structure and powerful statements through the use of geometry.

Like Lewitt's work, the Russian Constructivists served as an example of how succinctly works of art can be tied to philosophies, and still be deemed successful and pertinent. The Constructivist movement was founded by Vladimir Tatlin in 1918. The Constructivists, as Communists, sought to produce culturally relevant and useful works. Their structures were a combination of architectural engineering and social relevance. Tatlin spoke of "truth to materials" meaning that each material had properties which dictated the forms in which they should be constructed. The Constructivists produced works that were logical within themselves, in that each part of the work (i.e. materials, scale, site, etc.) held direct relations to one another. Every aspect of the work was well planned and executed.

The untitled piece which was the centerpiece of my pre-candidacy (fig. 3) was an attempt to invest myself more thoroughly in structure, but still convey a sense of humanistic concerns (i.e. evidence of care and concern being invested into the piece). I wanted to make works that, like Lewitt's, made perfect sense, but unlike Lewitt's reflected

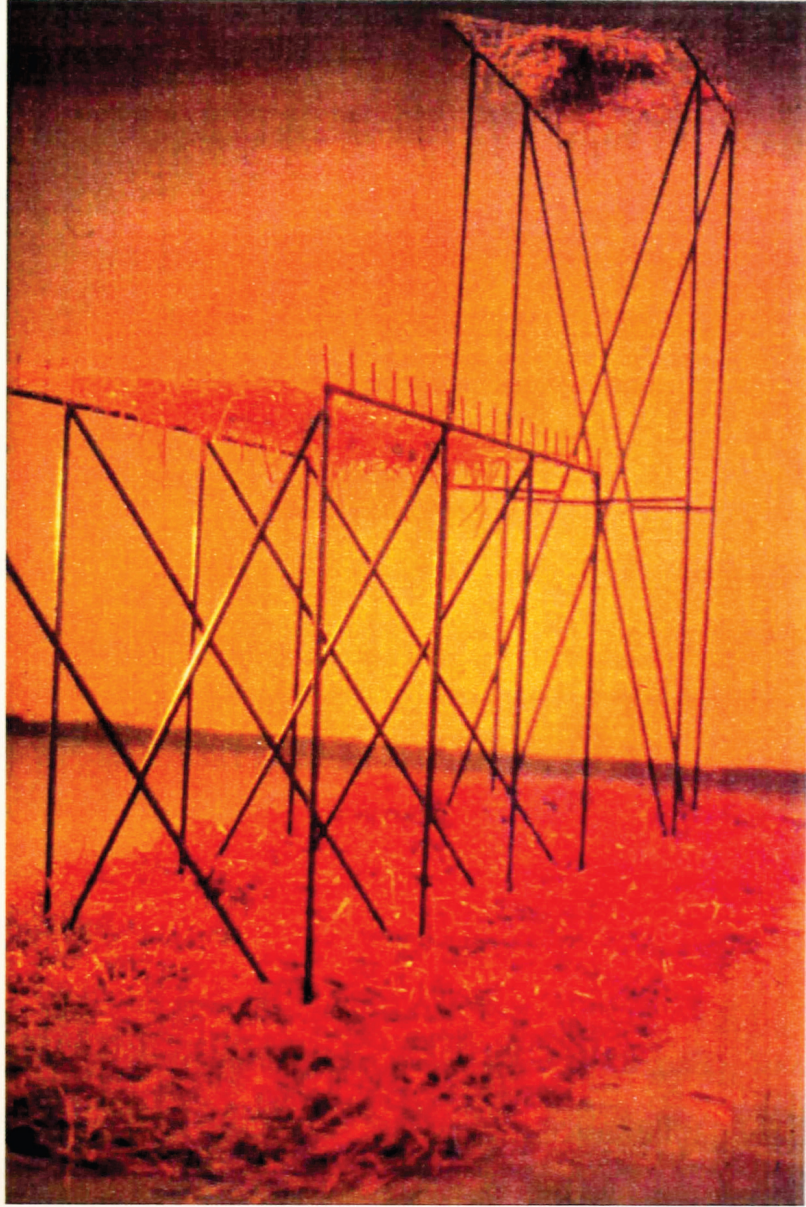


Fig. 3 Pre-Candidacy Exhibition
Steel, Jute, Straw
7' x 2' x 9'
Holly Fisher, 1994

a softer approach, a more viscerally based sensibility.

The structure I created was made of steel round stock combined with jute and straw. By my material choices alone I had addressed opposites. Manmade steel - heavy, cumbersome, representative of industrialization and machinery - melded with sweet-smelling straw, and jute netting - organic nostalgic, appealing and comfortable. The result was a visually disjointed and confusing work which did little to enlighten me or my audience. But it was a giant step in the right direction.

My present body of work is the result of ending my study of structure, assessing what I have learned and utilizing it in a more extensive study of the seemingly unstructured aspects of an artwork. This entails creating works that are visually attractive, inviting, compelling and intriguing. Since these elements are quite subjective, so my research has become more personally based.

Initially a danger lay in embarking upon such an individualistic manner of working. I was wary of becoming too eccentric, removing myself from common experience, thereby cutting off communication. Also, how was I to trust my own judgement?

Beth Lo encouraged me to find a more personal approach to my work and assured me that it was a worthwhile venture. She set an excellent example by creating works of sincere

yet individualistic expression that were relevant and engaging.

The literary works of Kurt Vonnegut provided examples of how opposites could be addressed, but in another form. Vonnegut's work has a clear message delivered in a style so off-handed, it breeches the absurd. He addresses serious topics and laughs it off. Vonnegut's style is at once expansive and individualistic, poignant and humorous. Reading Vonnegut also provided me with a literary parallel to my work; it clarified both my direction and intent.

The work that makes up my thesis show integrates my effort to forge structured, logical statements that pertain to the human condition and create objects that appeal to both visual and tactile sensibilities.

MATERIALS AND TECHNICAL CONCERNS

My choices of materials and processes involve efforts to produce a well crafted, visually appealing object. I use a variety of ferrous materials including new processed steel and found objects. The application of a patina adds luster and depth while store bought brass hardware compliments the patina and lends specific areas of visual interest.

Steel is an incredible medium. It is easily obtained, very permanent and lends itself to a variety of forms. Steel found objects are vast and varied, often carrying a sense of nostalgia due to their age and prior uses. Many times a found object will inspire a piece because of its unique form and beauty.

Steel is very cooperative when it comes to constructing a well-made and sturdy piece. It can be measured and cut precisely, and assembled into geometric shapes with a small degree of error. Jigs and clamps insure square angles and minimize distortion.

Because the pieces are joined together with the same material, smooth transitions can be made between fabricated elements and found objects. Mistakes can be corrected and amendments made with ease and positive results. Grinding erases the evidence of fabrication. Sanding and sandblasting also contribute to the construction of an homogenous form with an even uniform surface.

Decorative elements such as piping or face plates relieve flat surfaces, creating a more varied and intricate piece. As well as decorative and visually attention getting, brass hardware plays an important role. Knobs, hinges, handles and latches invite interaction by way of their familiar functions.

Highlighted by the hardware are the rich surfaces that result from the application of a patina. A patina oxidizes (rusts) the surface of the steel, producing intricate patterns and color variations. A patina, unlike paint or glaze is an integral part of steel, not a covering. It reflects the nature of the material to which it is applied, and changes its look according to variations in the makeup of the steel and surface qualities. A thin coat of Tung oil stops the oxidation process, darkens the surface, and provides a hard, long-lasting lustrous finish.

All of these elements combined with great attention to details and finishing, result in a work that exudes its own kind of inviting presence. Appealing to visual and then tactile sensibilities, the objects unmistakably call attention to themselves.

BODY: THE AXIS MUNDI

In the simplest of terms, the motivation for me making boxes stems from my desire to fully understand the world around me. Creative thinking, like the making of art objects, requires curiosity and problem solving. For me, making sculpture and understanding the world go hand in hand.

My boxes are the results of research into the inner workings of the world. I make my boxes with built-in curiosity triggers, like handles, latches, doors, or elements which suggest investigatory processes, which encourages a viewer to conduct his/her own research. My research results not in a singular statement, but in more questions, by people other than myself. Encouraging myself and others to explore and discover is a positive and constructive endeavor.

The notion of discovery as integral to my work may seem somewhat contradictory in that the boxes are hollow and access to their interior is sometimes difficult or denied. Why point at an empty space? What is to be found in nothing? Drawers, doors, and peepholes lead to an empty center for the sole purpose of encouraging investigation. If I were to place objects within the boxes, the symbolism of those objects would convey other meanings, apart from that of

exploration and subjective interpretation, therefore the boxes are left empty, containing only a void.

But even a void can be understood by mapping. And once true mapping has occurred, a center will become apparent. Physically and metaphysically, a center is the ultimate reference point by which all things can be understood in their relation to it. My boxes each contain their very own Axis Mundi..

"Here, then, we have a sequence of religious conceptions and cosmological images that are inseparably connected and form a system that may be called the "system of the world" prevalent in traditional societies: (a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the Axis Mundi."

--Mircea Eliade "The Sacred and The Profane"₂

I have a history of researching systems of thought in order to gain an understanding of the way art works, and consequently, the world. The Axis Mundi is "the system of

the world". By connecting all six directions, it serves as the primary reference point for all other spaces. It points at the heavens, and pierces the earth to touch the underworld. It addresses North, South, East and West and all directions in between.

The Axis Mundi is a manifestation of humanity's relation to space and the elements that are in it. As a center for reference, it can be interpreted spiritually as well as physically. Each of us has our own internal reference point which is arranged in accordance with the grand scope of things. By finding our own centers in addition to those of others, we can gain understanding, and through our resultant knowledge we can behave wisely; positively.

This is less of a religious notion than a reflection of our relationship to space and how we function within it. Cultures from different time periods and locales have utilized this system of the world, basing many rites, myths and beliefs upon it.

"Religious man's desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences."₃

What significance does the Axis Mundi hold today? There are very few physical centers left. They have been broken down into smaller gathering places, unaligned with one another. Cultural Centers have become churches, shopping malls, art galleries, coffee shops, baseball stadiums, etc., while spiritual centers are also vast and varied, ranging from orthodox Judaism to unorthodox subcultures. References for the interpretation of our world are scattered and disconnected, entirely reliant upon subjective factors.

All that is left then, is one's own Axis Mundi, our own center and the knowledge that the centers of others are no more subjective than our own. Through recognition that multitudes of other centers share our space, and using our center as a reference point to interpret them, we again can begin to map the structure of our world and gain understanding.

I construct containers for voids which have centers. I provide only the container (which includes ways of reaching the center by exploration) as I cannot possibly dictate what each viewer's own center may be. My message is this: Go forth into the world, be curious, investigate and discover your own center. Although your point of reference is subjective, it is no less valid. You are your own best judge and critic in unlocking seemingly inaccessible spaces.

THRESHOLD WITH YAWNING STOOP:
ITS RELATION TO THE AXIS MUNDI

The paramount piece in my thesis show, "Threshold With Yawning Stoop" (fig. 4) incorporates my theories derived from the Axis Mundi to the fullest degree. On a primary level, it signifies a sacred space. A place where reflection and enlightenment can take place.

"The Threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds--and at the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible."⁴

The door is a curiosity trigger, it makes the viewer open it to reveal its contents. To open the door, the viewer must first stand on the stoop, therefore fully physically interacting with it by placing their bodies within the boundaries of the work.

Contained within the space designated by the door are fifty-two individual boxes. Each has its own handle that asks to be pulled. The viewer mistakes the boxes for open containers; like drawers, and pulls the handle to view the box's contents. The result is a discovery that the boxes are

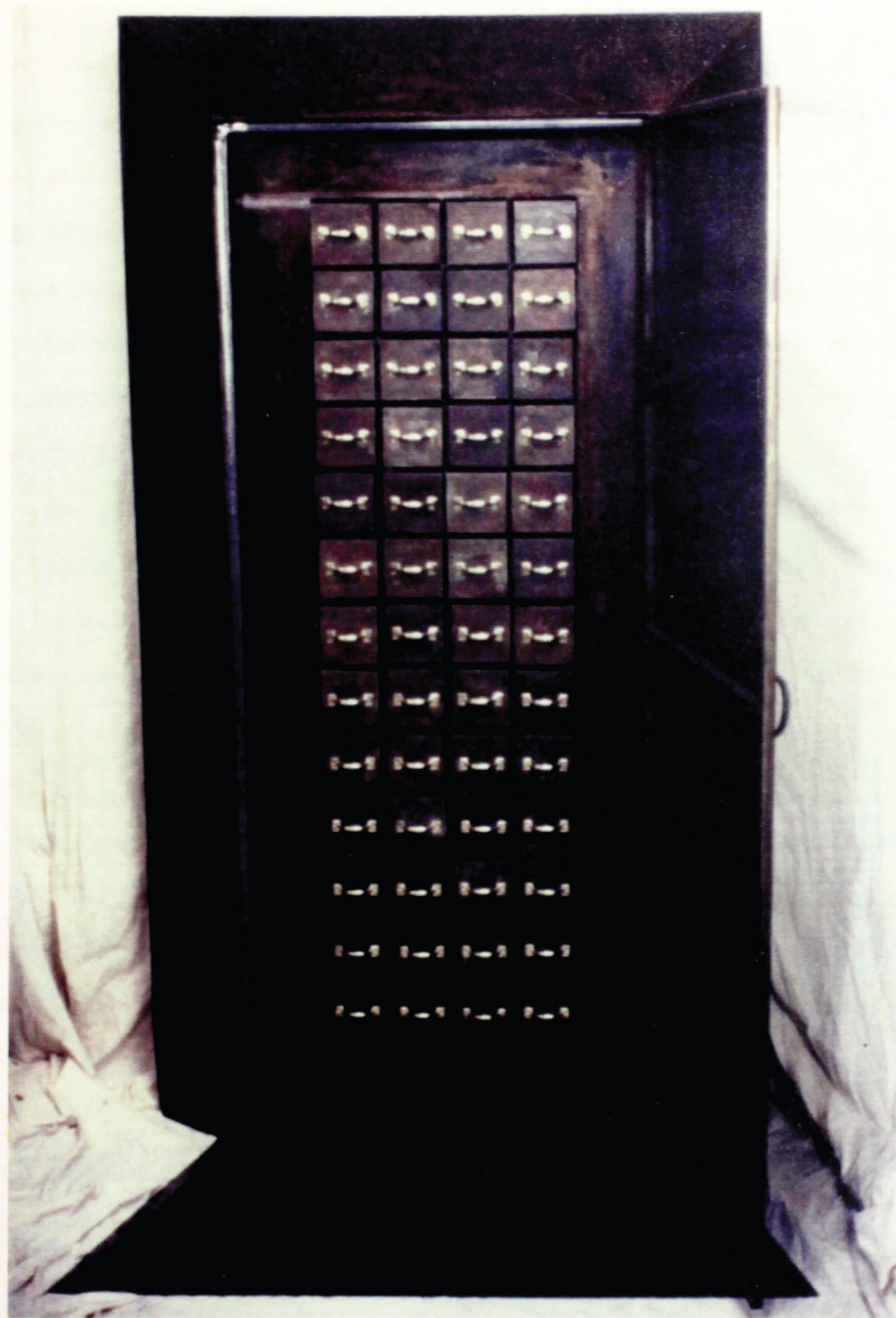


Fig. 4 Threshold With Yawning Stoop
Steel and Brass
3' x 5' x 9'

Holly Fisher, 1995

closed, empty containers. Here it is interesting to note that much activity takes place to solve the problem of a container that denies access. Some shake the boxes, hoping that a sound will render some notion of its contents, some continue to remove box after box, hoping that one will be open. The end result of such activity; apart from the sheer engagement of physically interacting with the work; is the discovery that the boxes are empty.

As stated previously, the void contained by these boxes has a center, so in all actuality, the threshold contains not necessarily boxes, but fifty two centers, each in relation to one another by their arrangement on a grid and their collective enshrinement within the primary container; the threshold.

This metaphorically references the natural world, where each center (individual) has its own distinct characteristics, but resembles the others around it by its likeness in form and spatial relationship to others. The active exploration of these centers by a particular individual, each according to his/her own internal reference point, yields a discovery of relationships analogous to those present in the natural world.

SUMMARY

My goal as an artist is to encourage viewer - object dialogue; creating works which render a pleasurable and enlightening experience. I do this in a thorough manner, addressing all levels of interaction, from visual attraction to physical and intellectual exploration. The work is relevant because it creates opportunities for subjective experience and speaks of the importance of it.

ENDNOTES

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