

BOXING DAY  
JEAN-LOUP CHAMPION

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Exhibition organized by  
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# BOXING DAY

Un jour vient ou c'est peut-être une nuit  
Que le temps se meurt d'une mort humaine

Un jour vient que rien n'est plus qu'un récit  
Rien ne fut rien n'est comme on le raconte

*A day comes or perhaps it is evening  
That time dies away from a human death*

*A day comes where nothing is but a narrating  
And nothing was nothing is not how it is told*

Louis Aragon

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1.

A day comes when your life no longer agrees with you.

It would be indiscreet to ask why. The reasons are never lacking. And whether more or less grave, they are all rather equally valid when they give rise to the feeling in the head of “what’s the use?” A bereavement, a divorce, a departure; an accident or a sickness—or even more simply the suffocating and dumb routine of existing. I will say nothing more for now. It is enough to situate here the memory of the darkest moment in one’s life.

It is in such regions that art is necessarily located, whereby the very hypothetical justification results exclusively from the disaster it witnesses, and to which, taking hold of what lies at hand, it is necessary to give an appropriate form. To say “a signification” would be extreme. A work? Rather, a gesture—addressed to oneself and to others—toward the world. So that it never be said that one ever consented to the movement by which everything in oneself is successively drifting toward the void.

2.

A day comes for everyone. Let us call it “boxing day,” to introduce a bit of irony that will lighten the grav-

ity and grandiloquence of the preceding lines. This is the name given in England to the day after Christmas. 26 December: that is to say the day after the festival. The one of sales and New Year’s gifts. Before life retakes its course. The moment, still, for final gifts.

It was only a few days ago that I saw the boxes of Jean-Loup Champion for the first time, in a vast empty room, piled upon the ground, and arranged in a semicircle at the foot of a grand statue set upon a pedestal. Thinking back now, even if we are in the midst of summer, it was exactly like Christmas presents around the tree, just at the moment before we undo the wrappings to peer inside the packages.

And there is also a little of this same childlike air. One finds—or I do—when examining each of these wooden boxes, that they are like packagings halfway open and leaving visible their contents like, in the old days, the “surprise-packets” for children. And inside are figurines such as animals from the zoo or farm, bathers and soldiers—minuscule creatures installed amongst dollhouse settings and fixed to the walls of their presentation case only to await the moment where someone will come to play with this puerile panoply,

and therefore—if only for a moment—make these arrested characters exist and bring to life their story.

3.

In English of course the word “box” means both container and the act of punching. I cannot help but indulge in this silly play on words that comes to mind, establishing a rather absurd link between what is called the “noble art” in sports magazines (boxing) and the name given across the Channel for the confection of Christmas presents.

Furthermore, I write the preceding lines with a bit of reticence. For I do not overly appreciate the myth that compares art or life to a combat, whereby each of us is supposed to prove his value in the ring. In point of fact I would say the analogy rather annoys me, by its suggestion of virile and aggressive virtues that are supposedly necessary to take the upper hand over a phantom-like enemy, that destiny sends to you. As if against sickness, death, or any other forms of fatality, it is a question of fighting, and as if those who suddenly succumb should locate their misfortune in a guilty lack of combativeness. No, neither art nor life resembles the sport of boxing. Even though both of them do require as much endurance, courage, and energy.

If I were to make a portrait of the artist as a boxer, I would tend to imagine him before his sandbag, fighting no one, and instead confronting an insignificant mass of inert matter—a stubborn heap always returning to its same spot no matter how many blows you give it, with the artist moving around this leather and corded pendulum and bestowing upon it all of the savage energy instilled in him by the world and which he now sends back. This is somewhat like the attitude of the sculptor with his block of stone or marble, at least as I imagine him—the only sort of artist to construct by destroying. According to the vow of Nietzsche, rare are those who philosophize with hammer blows. Yet when one is a sculptor, how otherwise to proceed?

4.

If you ask Jean-Loup Champion—because otherwise he does not speak of it—he makes no mystery of what

he did on his *boxing day*: the day where, breaking whatever fell under his hand (incidentally, a statuette of Napoleon, already missing its head through accident and now willfully finished off by the artist!), he subsequently took these broken pieces of his world and arranged them inside his first box.

I can imagine—but only imagine since I have never gone through it—what must be the experience of someone who, finding his life threatened, undergoes an organ transplant. It would surely make one’s head spin. Already there is this: to take the euphemistic language of doctors, progressing to the surgical act means that the “vital prognosis” (whether in the long or short term) has entered the equation. And most especially: in the face of such an operation, all of those oppositions that we naturally use to imagine our own bodies in relation to those of others (interior vs. exterior, self vs. stranger, life vs. death) are literally flipped and reversed like a glove turned inside out—the exterior moving to the interior, and part of another person inhabiting space in oneself—this other person whose death is the requirement for one’s own survival.

Undoubtedly such a trial can only be mentally endured through a certain process that operates over and above the technique limited to the operation of scalpels and drugs. And since no such treatment exists, and we can count upon no one to procure it for us, the patient must invent and administer this antidote himself. It is in this way that I imagine the boxes fabricated by Jean-Loup Champion—as his personal protocol for a hand-worked cure. And this by no means detracts from their esthetic dimension, for the only art that is truly worthy is that which is not separated from life.

5.

In 1917, and therefore long before the coinage of the term in official art history, Guillaume Apollinaire pronounced himself as the prophet of a “new realism”—which, he declared, “perhaps will not be inferior to the so poetic and so knowing one of ancient Greece,” and which he added would find

itself connected to the new image that man would make of himself in the modern mirror of engineering. Apollinaire questioned thus: “*But is there nothing new under the sun?*” We will have to wait and see. Yet! My head has been X-rayed, so that during my life I have seen inside my skull—and is not that new? *Yeah, right!*”

Since the time when poor Guillaume had his head opened and was among the first to see his X-rayed cranium displayed on a negative, medical imaging (ultrasound, scanning, scintigraphy), along with surgery and all the rest, has certainly made notable progress—and this to everyone’s satisfaction. Yet despite the use of colored dyes or three dimensions—in spite of films made by tiny cameras introduced into the body through every pore—and no matter the exhaustive cartography these processes can give us of our bodies, making them appear like engulfed continents and subterranean or faraway galaxies, and transforming our reality into an involuntary dream—with all of its perfections medical imaging is unable to produce a *credible* and *thinkable* representation of the inside part of ourselves, which is us, yet still remains all the same and forever the old *terra incognita*.

Each one of us rests within himself this eternal charade—for which art no more than science holds the solution, but of which every work can suitably rearrange the rebus.

6.

Medical expertise—whose utility no one contests as the instrument of healing—also has its reverse. It dispossesses the patient of his body by making this body an object of analyses and treatments. This is why the mental health of a sick person requires that he retake possession of himself symbolically, by opposing his own images to those he has been reduced to. That is, meditating in his own fashion and in his own terms the great enigma that no sophisticated knowledge can ultimately fathom. And this is the work of art as well, figuring in its way the “something” of oneself that escapes each one of us, this great fold of the interior, of both soul and body. The artist constructs and

composes with the intention of giving himself the feeling that this “something of himself” is still yet his own.

Without a doubt the objects fabricated by Jean-Loup Champion should, from such a perspective, be seen as propositions for a *counter-representation* of the self, which the individual elaborates in order to substitute it for the supposedly objective facts furnished by science. The objects mimic and expose this “inside,” which is suddenly displayed within the frame of a box having all the appearances of the “operating field,” in the strict sense that surgery gives to the phrase. The works are also *écorchés*, or “flayed bodies,” but ones that tend less toward anatomical exactitude and more toward another kind of truth. Boxes that gape like opened stomachs and leave us to see through their openings the piling up of bones, the twisting of organs—all of this internal material disposed in the manner of impossible landscapes consisting of all manner of forms from the exterior world—vegetal, mineral, animal—a complete bric-à-brac of objects, with the result that one sees playing before oneself what would otherwise remain hidden to the eyes: the drama of one’s death, and of one’s life.

7.

A new and meaningful work—especially when, as in the present case, it is made by someone immersed in the history of art through his taste and profession—recalls all those that have preceded it. As if the ensemble of what was before now finds itself recapitulated in the new work, with centuries and centuries of past creations being introduced into the box. And ready to break some of the contents of museums in order to respect the limits of the volume at hand, thereby accomplishing a gesture of iconoclastic homage.

One of the most fascinating effects produced by the boxes of Jean-Loup Champion is how they immediately evoke multiple references, to which they connect without corresponding exactly to any. From reliquaries and ex-votos of ancient religions, and from the *écorchés* and *vanitas* of the Baroque

or classical ages, to works of the modern age: the ready-mades and suitcases of Duchamp, the accumulations and rages of Arman, and of course the series of related productions emanating from Surrealists like Breton, Man Ray, Prévert, as well as the artist Cornell. Yet at the same time—and perhaps precisely because the boxes resemble all of these diverse works *simultaneously*—they distinguish themselves from these earlier, more or less canonical works, whose memory they summon at the same time as they dismiss it.

Something else is operating here, related in part to the boxes' fundamentally classical workmanship. Conforming to the esthetic predilections of the artist, this quality gathers the real—its leftovers, debris, and waste—and submits it to an art of sure composition, giving to the disorder an air of fearless harmony. A note of sufficient and sovereign grace.

8.

To speak of “*déjà-vu*” risks a misunderstanding, unless we consider it in its original meaning: as a description of the experience where the world—suddenly—appears in all of its famous “strange familiarity.” That is, in the manner of a paradoxical spectacle that we witness *at the same time* as it repeats itself interminably and since forever, taking place perpetually as if for the very first time. We must also remember Freud's notion of the “*déjà-vu*” as being in truth the “*déjà-rêvé*.” In other words, what we believe to know of reality actually comes back to us from the fine depths of a dream. And this is why every authentic artwork surprises us with the sentiment of returning to us something that we had lost or forgotten—and which, by being restituted, yet enters for the first time into our full and primitive possession.

Dreams are continually compared to life, and in turn life to theatre. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, “*We are such stuff as dreams are made of and our little life is rounded with a sleep.*” Amongst all of the associated ideas sparked by the boxes of Jean-Loup Champion, for me the strongest one is their suggestion of the interior maquettes where scenery

is placed for the theatre or opera. A drama is going to commence. We do know the intrigue. However, it is as if we are just on the point of discovering it. A representation will take place. A body opens and the flayed man reveals the scene where, still immobile amongst the accessories, all the actors are already in place.

9.

Contrary to what is often said there is nothing more impersonal than a dream. This is why we recognize ourselves in each dream as if it were our own. While the artist touches the intimacy of his own night, the forms that he takes from it—white shadows in the darkness of communal obscurity—belong to each of us because they participate in the same shared representation.

The box, as such, is a theatre. Upon the scene that it simulates, and whose shallow depths contain the immensity of life, the box calls and makes happen all of the dreams that humanity tells itself in fables—since the dark of eternity and within the darkness of time. As a break with his typical practice, Jean-Loup Champion has given a unique title to one of his objects, or more precisely the same one to several of them: Actéon—the hoof of a deer that is held in the hand like a torch, under which lies a pack of dogs in wait. At times, the image appears so strongly planned that it silently suggests the legend: Two ends of wood mimic, between angel and virgin, the colloquium of an Annunciation. The same and eternal massacre of the Innocents makes infant cadavers rain upon the earth. Here is it Orpheus, Holofernes, or the Baptist who holds his decapitated head between his hands? And is it I who imagine seeing Alice's white rabbit thrusting his head into the open hole of a burrow of bones?

Each scene, belonging to a dream, is both completely recognizable and totally unrecognizable. It tells a story we already know, but gives to the tale such a singular form that we are struck in the same manner as when we scarcely awake from dreams with only the slashed remnants of their enigmas: monstrous insect chimeras within flesh merges with horn, a root like a

Siren languishing on a beach, a bit of anatomy originating from who knows what skeleton and floating like a sea anemone in an aquarium, corals squeezed up against each other in imitation of the disquieting disposition of intestines in an opened belly—everywhere bodies in weightlessness, stairways impossible to mount and leading nowhere, and great blocks of white fallen from an obscure disaster and pushing to fill up the entire space.

10.

A true artwork looks back to the entirety of art history that precedes it. The artwork remembers that history. It also forgets it. Leading toward an origin that is surely fantastical but which magnetizes the field, and with the same stroke making available to itself all of the world's forms. Let us say: *it's child's play*.

And the childhood of each one. It is with it that every artist renews a relationship. The great game of “as if”—or “*Let's pretend*,” as one reads in Lewis Carroll. The world that the child builds from the broken pieces of different construction games, designing houses, palaces, and châteaux, and placing inside them little characters of differing proportions, who find themselves rather absurdly cohabiting the same space—dolls, tiny soldiers, monsters, or animals. So that the same story continues eternally, where the artist like the child can imagine that he directs the tale since it is he who tells it: the narrative of a deep, dragon-infested forest where one loses oneself with ogres and sorceresses, but in which the hero never despairs of finding his path to safety.

The childhood of all, as well. And this is almost the same thing. Art returning to the time when it mingled with magic, resting in the end upon the same belief—the belief in signs as sympathetically connected to the things they signify, and the belief that one is acting on the latter while manipulating the former. The artist thus borrowing in reverse the “road” that Breton evoked—“from which it is clear...that humanity only parted to its great injury: the ‘royal path’ where the profound introspection of the men-

tal field and the lost participation in the storms of the cosmos and passion are one and the same thing.”

11.

That which we call a black box (“*boîte noire*”) is a term used to designate the receptacle where the facts of a catastrophe are recorded. I like to think of the works of Jean-Loup Champion as the inverse, or as the negative of this negative : white box. And this is in terms not only of their uniform color, which contributes so strongly to the spectral allure and dreamlike dimension of the boxes, but also with regard to their appearance that inscribes them within the clear lineage of ancient bas-reliefs and classical statuary.

The opposite of a black box. A box that does not register a past catastrophe but instead projects its possibility in the present, as a means to conjure away fatality. Giving a consistency to the drama, but in order to better unfix its baneful logic. And positioning this drama at a sort of calm distance where all the elements of a slightly morbid mathematics (bones, wounded and mutilated bodies, all the shapeless material of an unmade world) take on a hieratic quality, and the grand movement of the scythe of time is fixed and suspended.

Black magic or white magic? In the end, the question rests here. What I am thinking of is what Artaud said of those bewitchments that befall humans, that are ruthlessly interpreted by the medical profession according to categories pertaining to our mundane society, both in asylums and hospitals: “All the earth is nothing more than an immense tricked-up theatre, a Châtelet theater of black magic that imbeciles wish not to see and which the filth of the initiated dissimulates as much as it can.” To this falsified theatre, art opposes another—a possible place of truth where, against the spells threatening to wrench the artist from himself, he saves his skin and what it contains, and offers the contrary charms of a sort of infantile white magic—a process that gives him back his body and his spirit, if only in the spectral form of a salutary sub-

terfuge and within the ephemeral illusion of an eternal glory.

12.

“*Boxing day*”

Thus arrives the day of the boxes.

Today no one can say where the custom originates or what it means. Some would connect it to the feast of Saint Stephen as formerly celebrated in Ireland, and to its pagan symbolism. On that special day was feted the funeral of a minuscule bird—the wren, the sole bird said to sing in the full depths of winter. From house to house his effigy was led in a cage, while celebrants sang a song that said:

*I have a little box under me arm,*

*Under me arm under me arm.*

*I have a little box under me arm,*

I imagine that it was a rite meant to announce the imminent return of springtime and the new year. This is what all the rites promise. It is from these rites that artists inherit. And in one way or in another, they always say the truth.

Philippe Forest

*Boxing Day* is translated from the French by Patrick Cable

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© Philippe Forest, 2011

Philippe Forest is a French writer, born in 1962, author of six novels and numerous titles of non-fiction. His books are translated in ten different languages. His latest novel translated in English, is *Sarinagara*, published in 2009 by Mercury in San Francisco.

He is a professor at Nantes University and is currently an editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF.) He is writing a biography of Louis Aragon.

## JEAN-LOUP CHAMPION

Jean-Loup Champion was born in 1947. He is an editor of fiction, non-fiction and art books at Gallimard in Paris.

He is also an art historian and exhibition curator. He is currently curating exhibitions in Le Havre, Paris and Roubaix (on Danish Painting of the Golden Age), Baroque Art of Naples, and The Sculpture of Jean Gauguin (1881-1961).

Jean-Loup calls himself a very late bloomer because he started making these boxes when he was sixty years old and after a serious illness. He describes himself “*as someone who never thought of being an artist until very late in my life, after a few dramatic events (three liver transplants so far), even if I was, all my life, confronted with art, artists and art historians.*”

His first exhibition was in 2011 at Galerie Thierry Mercier in Paris. His works are now in the collections of the Piscine Museum in Roubaix; of artists such as Pierre Alechinsky and Jean-Jacques Lebel; the French gallerist and art historian Elisabeth Royer and private collectors including the Prince and Princess Charles d'Arenberg. It is clear that his life experience has manifested itself to produce provocative works of art which we are pleased to present to a New York audience.

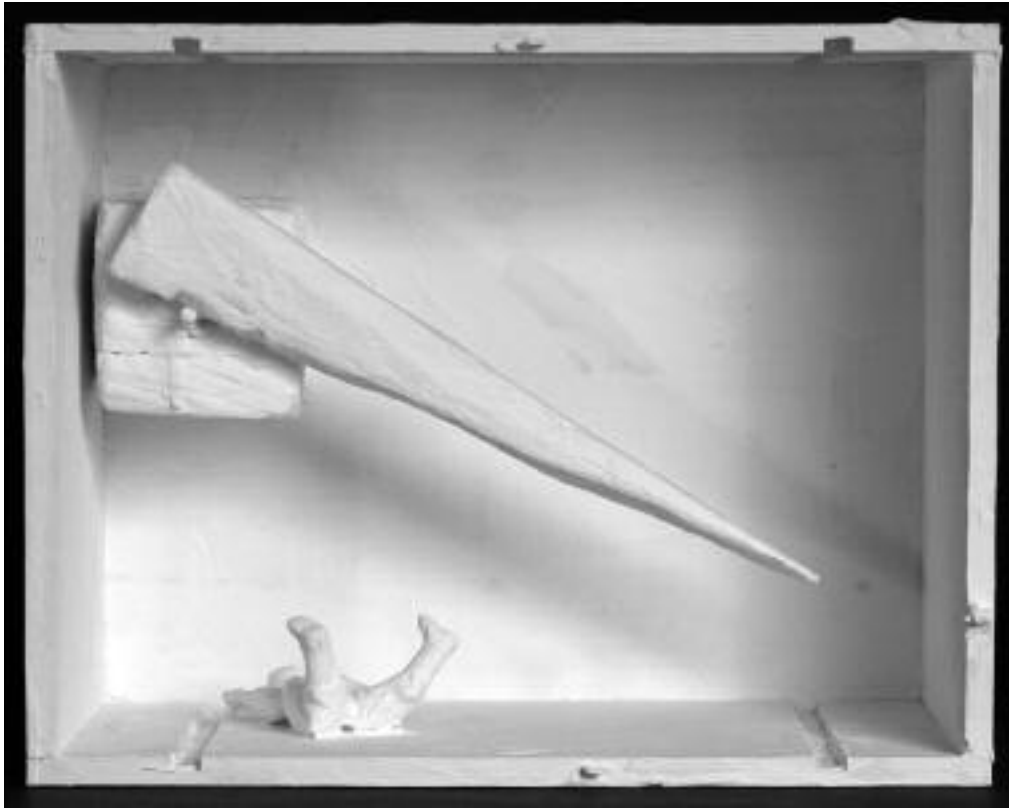
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# CATALOG

1. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (29.9 x 21 x 11.8 cm).
2. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2011, 8  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 11 x 3  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (22 x 28 x 8 cm).
3. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 7  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (18.3 x 38.5 x 12.5 cm).
4. No title, painted wood and shell, 2008, 13  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 9  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (34 x 23.8 x 20.5 cm).
5. Acteon IV, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 13  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (33.6 x 28.1 x 20.4 cm).
6. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2007-2011, 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (35 x 45.5 x 29.9 cm).
7. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 13  $\frac{3}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (21.6 x 33.4 x 17 cm).
8. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (29.8 x 21 x 11.6 cm).
9. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2009, 10  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 12  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (26.2 x 32.6 x 17.3 cm).
10. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2010, 13 x 19  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{13}{16}$  inches (33 x 50 x 17.5 cm).
11. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 13  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 7  $\frac{7}{16}$  inches ( 33.9 x 28.2 x 19.4 cm).
12. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches ( 21 x 29. 9 x 11.8 cm).
13. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (21 x 29.9 x 11.8 cm).
14. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2009, 13 x 13  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (33 x 35.3 x 12.8 cm).
15. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2009, 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (24.9 x 25.2 x 15.6 cm).
16. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 13  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{16}$  inches (33.4 x 19.5 x 10.1 cm).
17. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2010, 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 11  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{9}{16}$  inches (21 x 29.6 x 11.7 cm).
18. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 15  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 10  $\frac{7}{16}$  inches (35 x 39.5 x 26.5 cm).
19. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2009-2010, 22  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 20 x 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches (57.8 x 50.8 x 24.5 cm).
20. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2009, 10  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 13  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{1}{6}$  inches (26.2 x 33.2 x 18 cm).
21. Fire Island, painted wood, 2008, 10  $\frac{1}{8}$  13 x 15/16 x 4  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (25.5 x 35.5 x 10.5 cm).
22. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2008, 13  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 8  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (34.7 x 21.3 x 10.6 cm).
23. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2013, 8  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 3  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (22 x 27.8 x 7.8 cm)
24. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2011-2012, 10  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 13 x 10  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (27 x 33 x 17.8 cm).
25. No title, painted wood and various materials, 2012, 14  $\frac{5}{16}$  x 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (36.6 x 29.1 x 20.5 cm).



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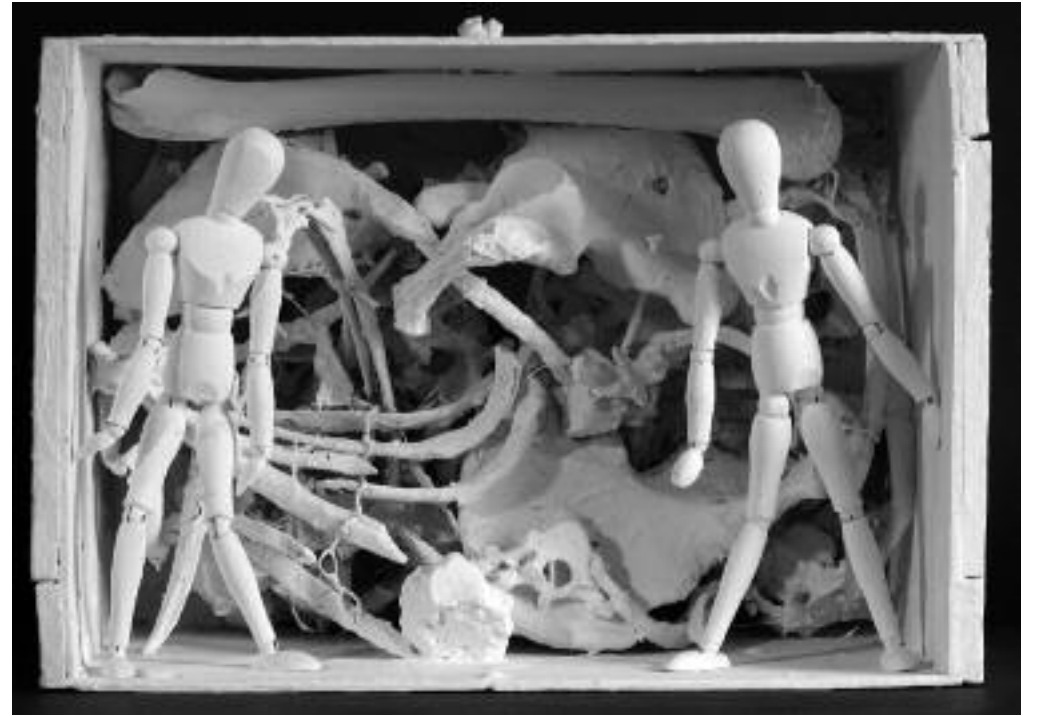


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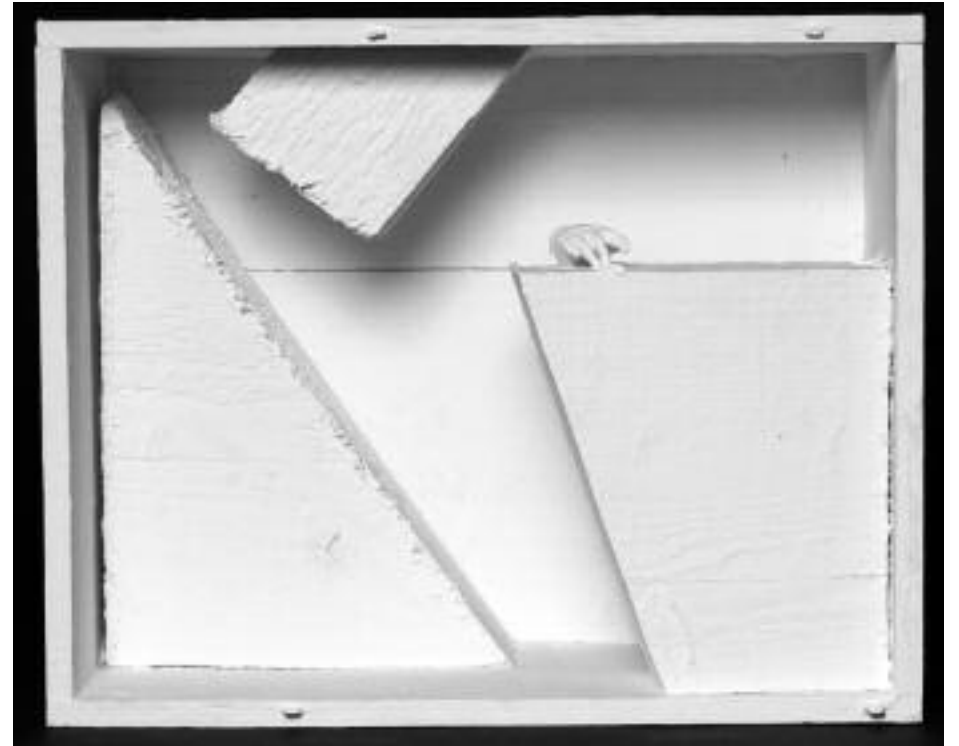
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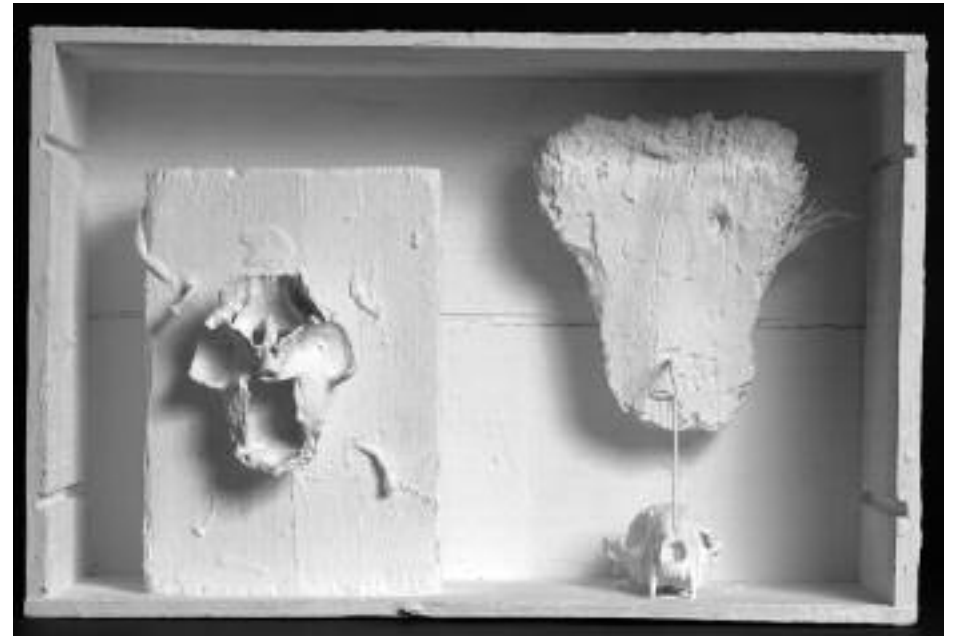
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