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MS. COSMOPOLITE

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Introducing a Guest Blogger...

As I prepare for my summer sojourn, this week I turn over the blog to guest writer Ashley McLean Emenegger, who stopped by CAFAM last month to view **Celestial Ash: Assemblages from Los Angeles**. Currently the managing editor for *THE Magazine Los Angeles*, Ashley is a Los Angeles-based writer, visual artist, curator, arts advisor, and artist career coach. She was Executive Director of the Los Angeles Art Association and founded McLean Fine Art in 2004 and was also the director of Bandini Art, Culver City.

So taken by the **Celestial Ash** exhibit, Ashley took the time to prepare her thoughts and share them with us. We are thrilled to have her eloquent and nuanced review for you to read below. If you haven't yet, we hope Ashley's words inspire you to come by and see this extraordinary exhibit for yourself. Feel free to share your thoughts with us here on the blog, in the gallery guest book, or with CAFAM staff.

Until next time, good summer tidings!

Ms. Cosmopolite

Celestial Ash: Assemblages from Los Angeles

by guest blogger Ashley McLean Emenegger



For **Celestial Ash**, curator Kristine McKenna culled artists Exene Cervenka, Gail Greenfield Randall, Matjames, and Michael C. McMillen around the aura of assemblage's super nova Joseph Cornell. Like Cornell, the artists' three-dimensional manifestations and microcosms possess his alluring *je nai se quois*, yet their physical expressions remain uniquely varied. With undeclared through-lines of passages of life and a longing to reconnect with something lost or elusive, the work feels like contemporary mythology rendered in 3-D.

What began as journaling while on the road with her band X, Exene Cervenka's daily notions blossomed into full-fledged art. More collage-like than traditional assemblage, the pieces are translations of "her fears and obsessions" coupled with the joys and par-for-the-course perils of love. Despite their initial personal tenor, her pieces are right at home with the universal. Cervenka's work feels like fragmented poetry, poignant and profound while retaining a gritty truthiness. Her compositions are concise with a rough-around-the-edge quality that is their distinct charm. With her visual vernacular incorporating bits of Americana – road souvenirs, gospel song books, religious iconography and votives, newspapers, vintage valentines – she is adept at rendering fun and pithy word and image play. A sense of displacement is also prevalent in the work – no surprise with her 20 years on the road with X – adding a bittersweet, wistful quality that is endearing for its vulnerability.

Matjames spent a nomadic childhood living hither and thither in Europe, eventually settling in New Orleans only to again be uprooted by Katrina. Without heavy burden, obvious or trite sentimentality, his work carries a pervasive sense of longing with home-oriented leitmotifs. Mostly miniature in size but not stature, Matjames' work seems to condense or halt time, as if trying to assert or regain understanding of the present

through visitations of a by-gone era. His sepia-toned tales are told through Victorian photos festooned with string, discarded pens and pencils, pins, bones, watches, crocheted patches, rulers, and yellowed measuring tapes. The delicacy of the work bespeaks of a serene sensitivity, accented with a rustic folksiness and earthy earnestness with its hand-made frames cobbled from scraps of wood. There is a tremendous amount of work on display, however not breathless, and at times it towers above you in the space. This interesting touch insinuates the mimicking of cathedral spires which reemphasizes the notion of a sacred place.

Gail Greenfield Randall's pieces feel the most like Cornell's first cousin as she deftly assimilates his penchant for exactitude and fastidiousness. However, while Cornell's brilliance was the distilled silence that seems to whisper through his work, Randall's pieces are much chattier and dense. A good deal of her work feels like homage or paraphrasing of the master himself, particularly in her compartmentalization of objects. She also incorporates similar motifs such as shells, vials of water, and perhaps in reverence or as a kitschy spin, ceramic bird figurines. Her pieces don't seem to recite the same pining quality felt in other work in the show, but the leitmotif of a journey in process is indeed present.

For **Celestial Ash**, Michael C. McMillen fabricates a deliciously satisfying tableau. McMillen's worlds tend to have an ethereal quality in which we are never sure if the viewer is the subject or object. In *The Asylum of Lost Thoughts* we physically enter his space, a darkened chamber with squeals from pulleys counter-weighted by a cluster of rusty keys that groan when activated from opening the entrance door. Inside awaits an array of chairs, from kids' seats to a rocking chair, placed in front of a spooky, Kienholz-esque metal bed frame that supports no figure, just two pillows made of cement. Projected behind the bed is a black and white film that splices together found and created footage (again, we are never sure which is what). Inspired by the passing of a childhood friend's father, McMillen creates a bed-side encounter in which we are either witnessing a person's life flashing before them/us, or a past-looking-at-the-future, pseudo scientific, semi-surreal film that attempts answers to the unanswerable question of life. It is the perfect encapsulation of McMillen's ability to blend the profound and bizarre with his own brand of humor, never revealing the genie behind the curtain. In *Asylum* there is acute sense of introspection tinged with melancholy, a contemplation of mortality and memory that leaves with us as we pass under *Asylum's* illuminated exit sign.