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### Random collection of experience

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

Random Collection of Experience

By

Christine Adams

June 2002

## Approvals

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Date: 6-20-02

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the themes of nature relative to time, both environmental and individual. The complexity of meaning within the natural order will be juxtaposed with the simplicity of the human experience in nature. These human experiences then reveal relationships between memory and time. This exploration will be expressed through mixed media relief constructions using natural objects and family artifacts. It is significant that the found objects came from my Grandparent's property. These objects have significance to my experience in my family and personal culture. The arrangements are simple and use recognizable objects that will stimulate the viewer's personal reference of people and events in their past.

There are 89 relief constructions in the series with 80 (fig. 1) being displayed in one rectangular grouping. The grouping signifies the multiple aspects of experience and how they combine to make a whole. The natural objects used are in different states of deterioration that time has imposed on them. Time also affects our memories and how we relate to past, present and future experience.

The items I used in the making of the relief constructions were wood, glue, canvas, and found objects from my Grandparent's land. These items were used together to compliment one another and to build unity. The approximate size of each piece is 6" x 7.25" with a variance of about .25" between each piece. The size was small enough to be easily managed and to be constructed with glue instead of screws. This greatly sped up production. The size also lets the viewer have an intimate and personal relationship with the object.



The wood that was used for the frame was painted to imitate old, naturally aged wood. It was significant to have old looking wood because it would compliment the age of the items it enclosed. The aging also represents the wood's journey through time. It is returning to a more natural state from its manmade state.

The rocks in the corners of the frame visually finished the corners where the wood did not meet. The rocks added to the visual interest and increased the continuity of all 80 relief constructions. The stones also enforce the concept of nature and how nature is the stabilizing and unifying force for everything. Some of the rocks were painted with polyacrylic to give them a jewel like shininess because even though rocks are rough, they need a second look to see what they really are.

The canvas was also another unifying element in all the pieces. Canvas was a structural element in the relief constructions that preceded the series of 89. The constructions were drilled, screwed together and were very rickety. Canvas and glue stabilized the wooden pieces and helped keep them together. In the most recent work, canvas became more of a base for the chosen natural elements to contrast against. The cotton canvas was useful as a natural element as well. A natural element would not compete with the concept or visual effect. The frayed edges are organic and in many cases these threads resemble roots spreading out from the piece. They support the concept of growth and passage of time.

The individual natural objects are the most important factor of the work. As mentioned, all objects and natural objects came specifically from my

Grandparent's property. Each object has a specific meaning and memory attached to it. For example, the relief construction in fig. 2 has numerous levels of meaning. The tree came from my Grandparent's cottage. For years my grandfather tried to save it, it was always full of tent worms that were killing it. Finally he decided the tree had had enough and it was time to cut it down. My whole family was at the cottage that weekend, my aunt and uncle, cousins, brother and sister. Everyone pitched in to help with the tree. Some cut large logs, others cut smaller branches off, and others raked up the mess. In no time the tree was taken care of and stacked behind the garage to dry for firewood. We have been burning this tree on the beech piece by piece for a long time. This tree was still in our lives but now as a warm summer bon fire instead of a shade tree. So many things have happened in our family since. The everyday things that pass by, the death of my grandfather and two marriages have all transpired while this tree has been in our lives. This past summer we burned the last of the wood. The bit of charcoal in this piece is from that last fire and the piece of bark I found in back of the garage.

The glaciers brought this large rock where zebra mussels now grow, fig.3, to rest in the shallow waters off the beach at the cottage. These rocks were ones that as kids, all of us stepped on and complained about hurting our feet. We washed many dogs on top of these rocks, caught minnows and shoved out the boat over top of them. The ducks would come into the shallow area to search for crayfish and seaweed and to beg for bread. Just recently there has been an infestation of zebra mussels in the lake. They grow on the rocks that are in the

shallow water and are like razors blades and cut the feet of anyone who walks on them. To us they are a major interference but to that rock it is just another phase in its existence. This rock has imprints of trilobite fossils. The zebra muscles are a new generation of that old family that has come again to live on the rock.

One of the relief constructions, fig. 4, has a fragment of thorn tree in it. The woods behind the house were full of thorn trees. The thorns are so hard that the thorns would go right through the bottoms of sneakers. These thorns sent us limping in to the house many times and then we were tortured with the tweezers getting the ends pulled out. When our house cat ran away, her collar got caught in the twigs of the thorn trees and she meowed so loudly we were able to find her. The dog had to go to the vet to get an imbedded thorn removed. These were the trees my Grandpa had to pass through to go hunting and the trees that my Uncle and Mom had to pass through to get to the swamp to go ice-skating in the winter.

Each of the natural objects in the relief constructions has significance. Some have greater importance than others but all have relevance. The natural objects make up the details of memories that pass through time and experience. The items are significant in themselves and contribute to the significance of entire memories (see fig. 5,6, and 7 for more examples).

Themes seem to revolve through life and it is interesting how these seem to come full circle. When I was little, I would collect stones and keep them in boxes according to size, shape and color. I would keep these boxes in my closet and add to them or go through them to look at all the rocks. Now, in my artwork, I am



collecting stones again and putting them in boxes. Nature and the experience of it shaped the way I look at things, experience life, and keep my memories.

My grandfather had the most influence on my life and now on my art. His philosophy was strong yet quiet. He always made everything himself unless it was not possible (ex. He made the kitchen table but not the car). He taught us that honesty always comes first, to work hard, rely on yourself and to help others. Things that were made by hand were the most regarded objects in the house. He respected nature and the animals always ate first because they had to rely on us. Through watching my grandfather work I learned that one could do anything as long as one steadily plugs along. He had an eye for detail and nothing was ever completed without the details. There were never any major events when I was growing up, just the day to day goings on that gave me time to look at the details of every day existence and appreciate the small and simple experiences of life.

There are three artists who have influenced me. They are Joseph Cornell, Jim Dine, and Andy Goldsworthy. Each of these artists has aspects in their artwork that I can relate my artwork to.

Goldsworthy uses found objects from nature for his sculptures. He uses leaves, stone and sticks to create new relationships to the objects out of the old experiences. Goldsworthy's sculptures are site specific and transform the natural landscape. The materials I have used in my relief constructions have come from a specific site but I transform the object by removing it from the landscape and placing it in the frame to memorialize and record the memory. Goldsworthy

records his sculpture in photographs and lets the materials continue in their natural process of decay. In my work, I have stopped the natural decay of the material by removing it from nature. The path to decay is recorded in the natural object's state as it sits in the frame.

Goldsworthy stated, "A stone is not inert, but a living witness to the place in which it sits. Rich in that place – many layers of that place within it. Every tree, every rock has a feeling of the lives that have lived there, and I see myself as the next layer that is to come" (1). The reason I chose natural objects and found objects from my Grandparent's property is very similar to this statement. The rocks, trees, and old items have been witness to the comings and goings of the three generations of my family that have lived there. Seasons have come and gone and families grew while the trees have matured and rocks have been stepped over. These have been silent bystanders to the layers and experiences of our lives. They become mementoes to the experiences that we can measure our time by, connecting the past with the present and future.

Goldsworthy's "Sheepfolds" project also has a similar tie to my relief constructions. He said about his project, "....the fold is a forum for something, the idea that something has happened in it: not just leaving an object but leaving a story or idea, space charged with the memory of things that have happened there. I feel that it's such an intense space. I think that's why I'm so attracted to the enclosures, because of that intense atmosphere inside". Goldsworthy is building and repairing sheepfolds in Scotland. Within the circular structure he is building permanent sculpture. The circular structure creates a strong feeling to

intensify the sculpture inside. The frames I enclose the natural objects in also does this. The wooden frame emphasizes the uniqueness and importance of that particular object and therefore intensifies the visual and emotional connection.

Jim Dine works with themes of self, memory, and human form. He combined paintings and objects to create his assemblages. He would take a mundane item and raise its status. Among many things, Dine made drawings and paintings of tools to create a personal symbolism. These were influenced from memories of his father and grandfather's hardware store. The natural objects I have chosen also create a personal symbolism and record where I came from, what kind of environment I lived in, and what became important to me. The size of the grouping and quantity of the relief sculptures raises their status.

Dine painted a kind of history, whether reminiscent of hardware store or the evidence of a body that had been in a robe. He created a bridge between the past and the present recollection of memories. It was said about his art, "the theme of his art is the contrast between the everyday life of little things and little people. In the presentation of the thing or object, the subject of 'history' begins to disappear, at least to define a more localized, individual history" (2). My relief constructions are not about the history of all the trees or rocks but about specific trees and rocks and their individual histories. By putting them in individual frames out of context with the landscape they came from, makes their individuality pronounced.



The natural and found objects I chose are the ones that define a day-to-day existence. I did not choose objects that signify important or grand events but the ones that silently intrude and incorporate themselves in our lives. This is the most important similarity my relief constructions have with Dine's work.

Joseph Cornell made shadow boxes full of found objects and personal mementos. The items he used are sentimental and include letters that he wrote, maps of places he would like to go, and images of pop culture. He used pieces he had collected that were relics of the past in New York City. To most people, these things he collected would be considered unimportant. Cornell used these objects to create surrealistic images with hidden meaning. These constructions were created to express specific ideas and images he wanted to portray. (3)

The influences I have taken from Cornell include the use of a box to display found objects. The use of the actual object and not a painting of it is also important. The object can speak for itself without alteration. Most people will have experiences with common items and can define them both culturally and personally. They can bring their experience to them and build a personal relationship and meaning with the artwork.

Cornell combines different objects to suggest a meaning outside the objects themselves. These items have meanings of their own but their definitions are changed when combined with another object. My objects have a meaning (memories) outside themselves as individual objects. The viewer would not know this meaning and the objects are not combined with other elements that would alter the meaning.

Quilts and sewing are also a part of my past that influenced my thesis work and the making of the 80 relief constructions. Sewing and knitting take time and are tedious but each little piece adds up to make a whole. Memory quilts commemorate major life events. Quilts were also made by slaves as maps to free states. Each stitch and step was a way to a new experience built from the old. The 80 works have much to do with these ideas. Each frame is like a quilt block in time that adds up together to make a whole. They lead from one experience to another on a road through memory and influence the future.

The process in which the relief constructions were created was very systematic. I started out with measurements from a previous work and made a template to make the pieces that were needed. I cut 90-6 1/4" x 4 3/4" pieces of luan. The next pieces that were cut were 90- 5 X3" on which 3'x5'x1/2" pine pieces were attached to the center with liquid nails. This 1/2" pine was recycled from earlier work, and created a base piece to support the 2"x2" framing.

The next parts that were cut were the 2"x2" pieces that make up the frame. I applied Burnt Umber, Payne's Grey and Unbleached Titanium acrylic paint to the frame to create the look of an aged piece of wood. I made a generic template for the long side and the short side of the frame. I roughly traced the template onto the wood and, using a handsaw, roughly mitered each piece of the frame. These pieces were then glued to the sides and the edges of the base with construction grade Liquid Nails. To create extra durability, a 1/4" square of balsa wood was cut to fit on the inside of the frame. Liquid Nails was added to both the top edge



of the pine and the 2"x2" framing and the balsa was glued into place to create a larger glued surface area.

The next step in the construction was to add the bit of canvas backing to the inside each of the frames. The canvas was washed and dried so that it would lose its stiffness and create a softer frayed edge. The canvas was torn into pieces that varied slightly in size and were glued down to the face of the 1/2" pine.

The last step in the construction was securing wire to the back with nails for hanging. This needed to be done at this point because once the objects were glued onto the front; it would be very difficult to nail to the backs. Since I didn't know which way I would orient each individual work, I attached 4 nails in a square pattern so it could be hung in any direction. After all the construction and a few mishaps in cutting, I ended up with 85 finished frames. The frames were now ready to be individualized.

During the time I was constructing the frames, I was also collecting the family artifacts and natural objects from my Grandparent's land. I collected these items in bags, sifted and cleaned rocks and stones, searched through the basement, garage, chicken coop and the yard. When applying these natural objects to the frames, I used clear Liquid Nails and various other construction glues depending on the material I was attaching. The stones in the corner of the frames were added last. Some of them were coated with a clear polyacrylic to give them a different texture and surface. Cement mixed with Elmer's Glue is also painted on

to some of the objects and the frames to create texture and color variation. In this manner, all 80 works of the grouping were made.

The thesis was successful in the terms discussed. The relationship we have with our environment and things around us have an effect on experience and memories. Personal history is represented through the use of family objects; the natural objects chosen represent nature and time. Natural objects by their very nature take time to grow and decay. This progression was halted when they were put into the relief constructions. They have become frozen in time and represent where they are in their specific progression. The objects also have specific meanings attached to them that are frozen in time in the form of memories. I feel that the final artwork was also successful because viewers can bring their own experiences to the relief constructions. The natural objects that are used not only have specific significance to me but also are simple objects that everyone can relate to.

There is more to explore with these 89 relief constructions. For the time being, I plan to stop building the relief constructions and use them as inspiration for drawings and paintings. I would like to do a series of large (20"x30") charcoal drawings of some of the relief constructions. I would like to experiment with building up an encaustic surface. These then could be drawn back into and embedded with small items such as wire, copies of family photographs, dirt, and small rocks. I also think that they would be very interesting as painted images.

Another direction will incorporate printmaking. I would like to expose a non-toxic printmaking plate (18"x24") to a computer printout of the relief constructions.

Some will be altered in the computer that will incorporate ghost images of pieces from other relief constructions, family photographs and documents (old tickets for ocean passage from England, maps, ect.). Some images will be printed exactly as they were exposed. Other images will be worked into. The plates will be scratched and built up with screen filler in order to degrade the print. Each time a print is taken, the plate can then be altered and changed before the next print until the images are unrecognizable.

The experience of making a large series has had many advantages. The relief constructions I have made will continue to be a source of inspiration for a long time to come. I was also able to fully explore the subject and force myself to experiment with many combinations within the limitations of the found object materials. This was advantageous, even though I was working with restricted size and materials, I was able to fully give attention to all the details and achieve the outcome I wanted. I hope to continue to explore large series with the planned work for the future.

## Bibliography

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(2) Bell, Clare, and Celant, Germano. *Jim Dine: Walking Memory, 1957-1969*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1999. p. 14.

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Fig. 1





Fig. 2





Fig. 3





Fig. 4



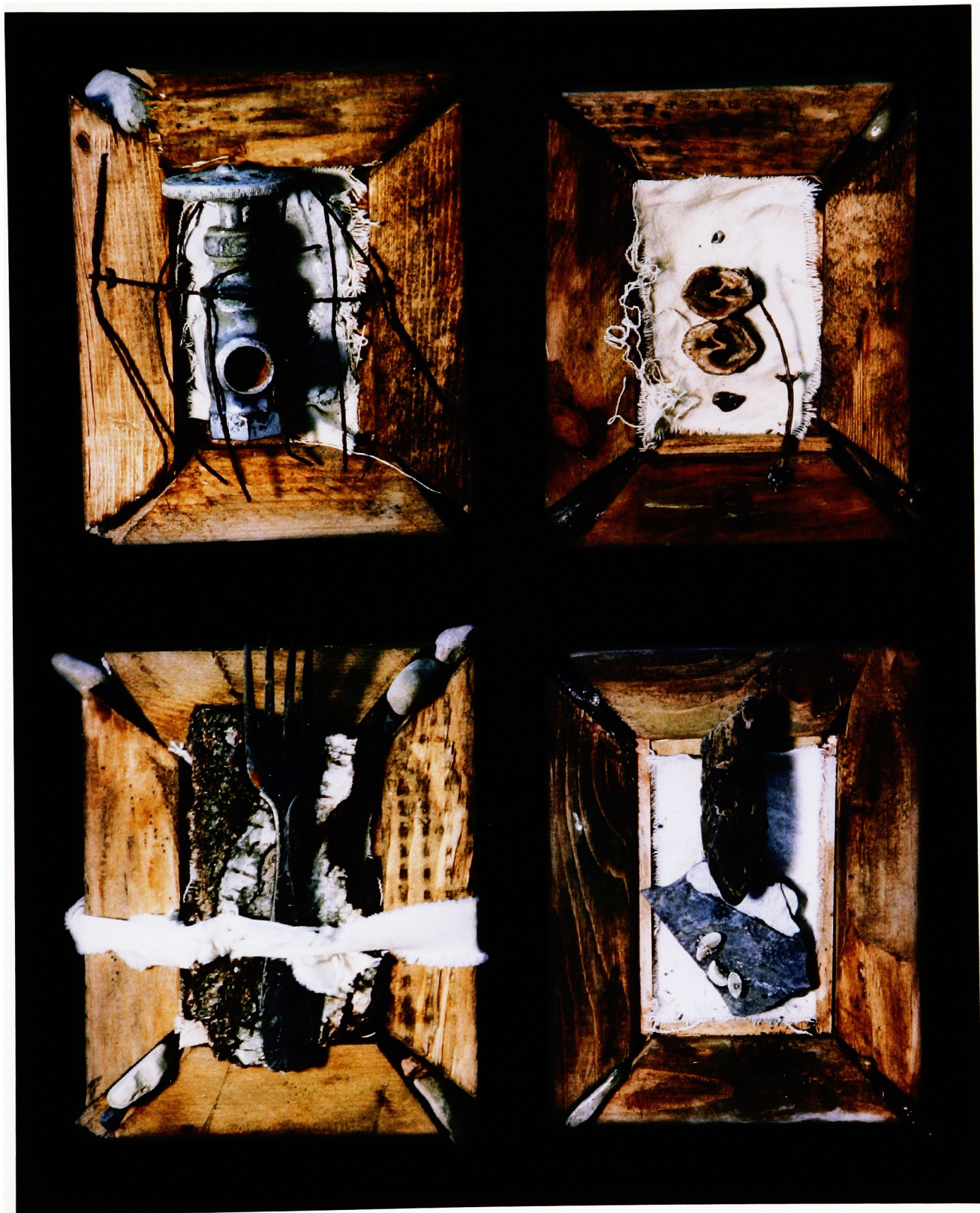


Fig. 5



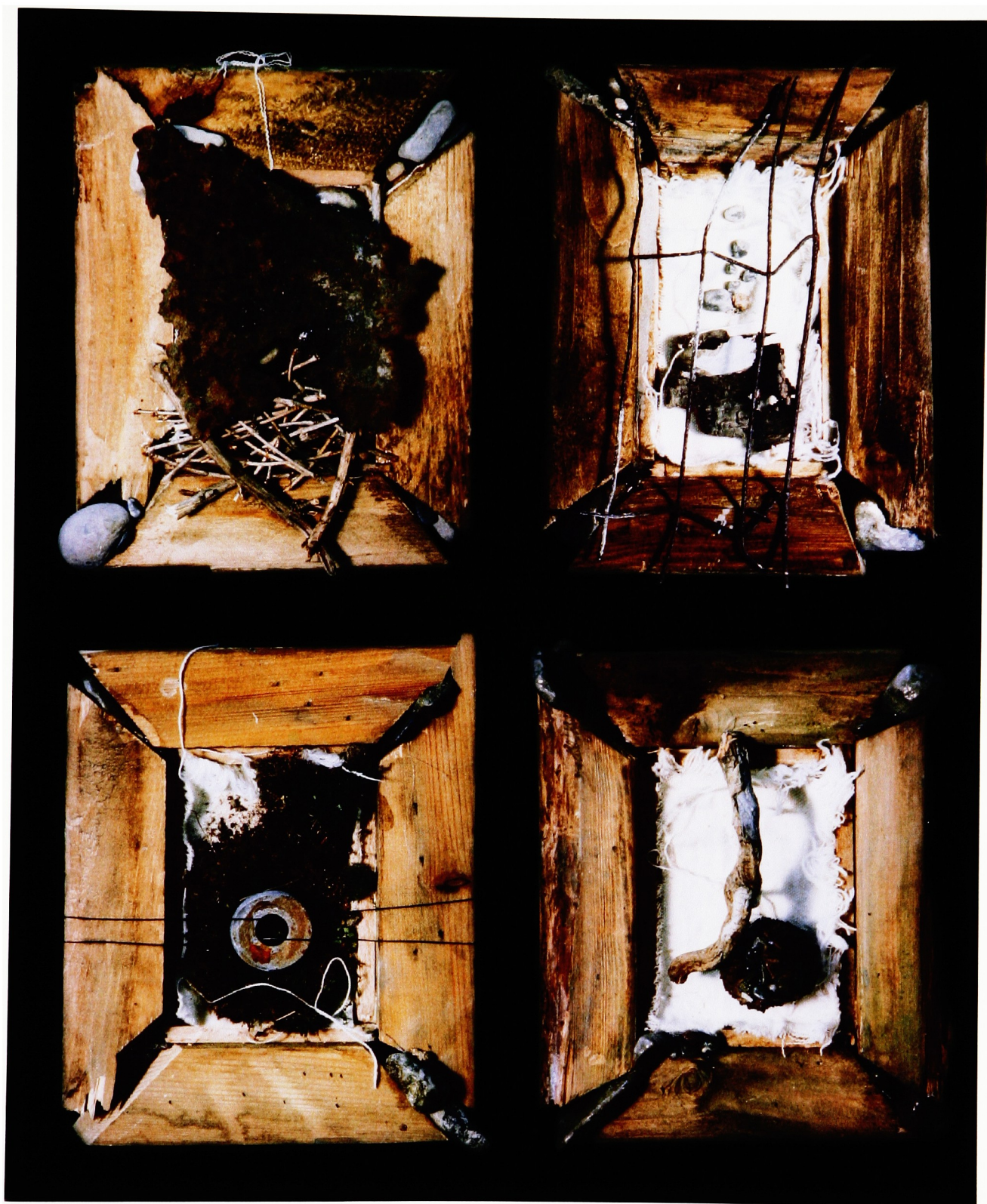


Fig. 6



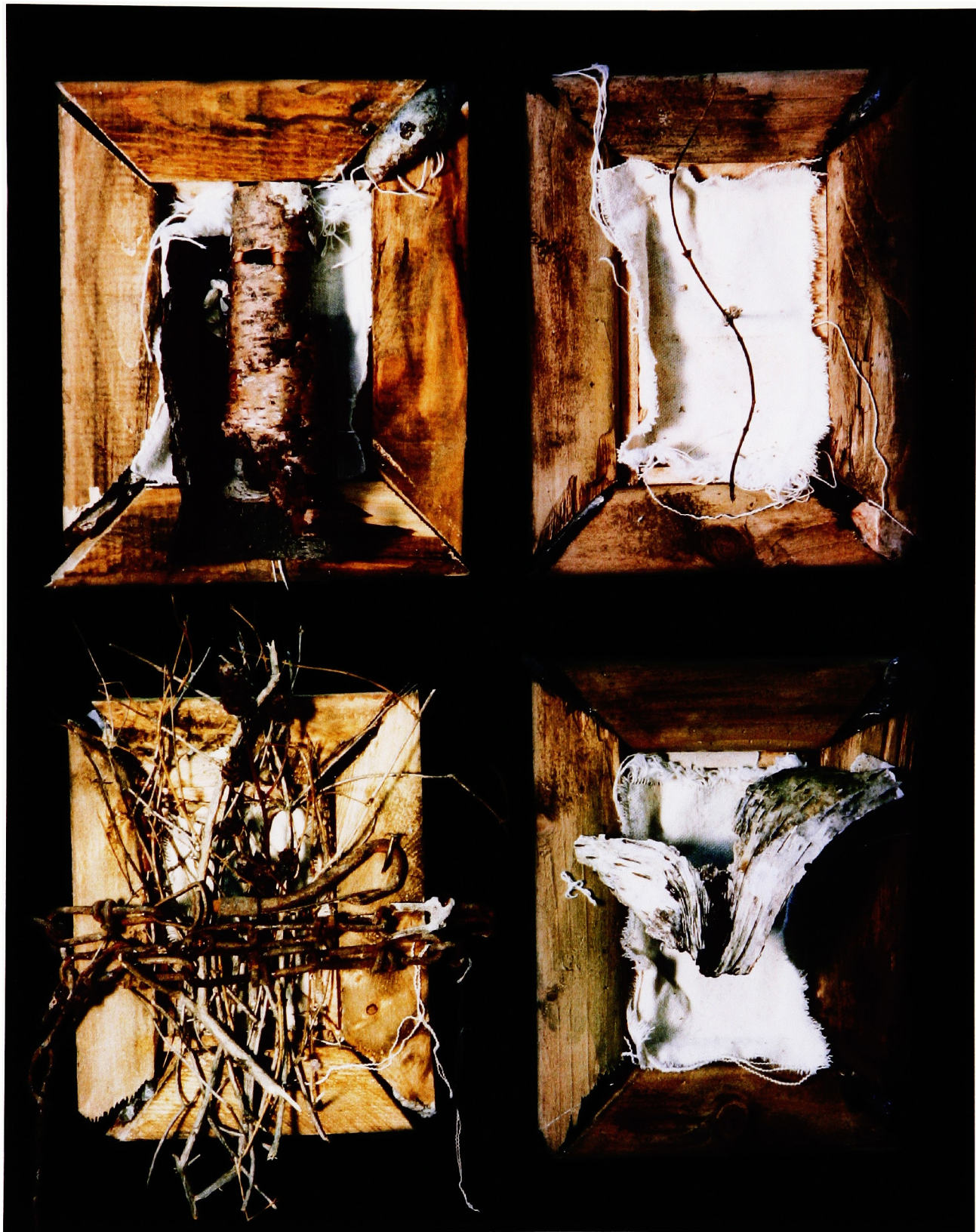


Fig. 7