Making Connections

The box is a form often used by Dada and Surrealist artists. Whether open or closed, boxes have a strong connection with the idea of 'treasure chests', 'keepsake boxes' and 'memory chests'. They can be containers for dreams and magical ideas, minute stages on which a drama can be played out. Joseph Cornell and Lucas Samaras are both American sculptors who played with the idea of collecting every day objects, and juxtaposing them in such a way that the collection becomes a narrative about their lives, memories and childhood.

Both artists' boxes are embellished with everyday objects that are made unusual by their combinations and juxtapositions. Their complex psychological invention is built from accumulation and implication. Cornell once stated that “everything can be used, but of course one doesn’t know it at the time. How does one know what a certain object will tell another?”

Joseph Cornell lived all his life in his mother's house in Queen's, New York City, where he spent every evening taking care of his invalid brother. During the day, Cornell scoured second-hand bookstores and antique shops in Manhattan, collecting images and objects that served as the raw material for his art. Birds often figure in the intriguing small wooden boxes for which he is best known.

“In this assemblage, a lithograph mounted on wood shows a parrot perched
on a branch; the parrot's beak appears to be pulling a string, which in turn activates a rotating disk. The disk may be a reference to fellow Dada artist Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*..." (National Gallery of Canada)

Joseph Cornell was friends with many of the Surrealists, and even exhibited alongside them, but he didn’t like to explore the idea of the subconscious or the sexual. His boxes are more about the innocence of childhood and wonder. The *Hotel Eden* feels clean and unsullied with its white compartments and pigeonholes. By putting his objects behind glass, his memories are protected and safe. There is no feeling of violence or passion in his work.

“That glass, the 'fourth wall' of his miniature theater, is also the diaphragm between two contrasting worlds. Outside, chaos, accident, and libido, the stuff of unprotected life; inside, sublimation, memory, and peace, one of whose chief emblems was the caged bird, the innocent resident of The Hotel Eden, 1945". (American Visions, Robert Hughes)

In contrast, Lucas Samaras's boxes have darker, more violent and fetishistic connotations. His boxes frequently contain both soft and sharp materials. Broken pieces of glass both repel and attract. Samaras has said, "this force to touch or not touch, destroy or caress, has always been with me" (Tate Gallery). So Samaras is offering the viewer a choice, the opportunity to touch – but at the risk of getting hurt.

The use of pins in Samaras's work also has a strong biographical element. His father was a shoemaker and, as a child, Samaras often played in his aunt's dress shop. "The pin is to an extent a part of the family", he once said, referring to the frequent use of pins in his work (Tate Gallery). So you can view the use of pins as threatening and painful, or a comforting symbol of family and childhood memories.

Inside *Box #61* is a photograph of the artist's face with pins stuck at regular intervals along the contours of his cheek, moustache and mouth. The photo of the moustache immediately creates a link in the viewer's mind with Salvador Dali and the Surrealists of the 1940s.

For Samaras, the box represents an equivalent to the human body. He sees making one of his boxes as a series of 'erotic gestures. In Greece, where I was born, the words for lick and sculpt are the same.' (Tate Gallery web site)

Cornell’s work, on the other hand, was never overtly about himself and his personal life – and certainly not about messy things like licking! Instead, it seems to be more of a collection of various subjects that fascinated him: birds, constellations, spiders, famous ballet dancers, places that he had never had the opportunity to visit and people he would never get to meet in his solitary, eccentric life. His box is more an insight into his imaginings. It is beautiful and orderly, pleasing to the eye and calming.

In contrast, Samaras often uses brightly coloured stones in his boxes – the sorts of things that one might typically find in a fish tank or in children's craft activities. They give his boxes a heavily encrusted feel and a richness which is both sensuous and tacky, all at the same time.

So where to next?

Initially, I was drawn to Cornell's work because it is so magical and beautiful to look at. However, after comparing and contrasting it with Samaras's box, I prefer the latter because of the strong emotions it evokes with so few materials and symbols. I would like to explore the use of pins in artwork more. It reminds me of a beautiful sculpture I saw by a Finnish artist at the Venice Biennale – a tree
branch covered entirely in iron nails, so it formed a kind of ‘armour’ around the wood. It has a similar duality to Samaras and his pins, as nails could be seen as destroying the branch just as much as protecting it. It’s this duality I’d like to explore further.

Antti Laitinen, *Untitled (Nails and Wood)*, 2013

Sources
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/samaras-box-t07186
http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/