

Constructing a Visual Message

Create your own world
inside a small box.



Artists like Betye Saar use objects and images to create their own private universe. They combine ordinary items so the viewer can see them in a completely new way. The messages contained in many of Betye Saar's assembled boxes, such as *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, have a social message. As you create your box, you too may want to develop a political idea. Your message might be based on a real situation. Your theme could be rooted in fantasy. Or the objects in your box could take on symbolic meanings.



Starting out

Several weeks before beginning this assignment, start collecting as many small, low-relief discarded objects and bits of wood as you can. Ask relatives and friends to help. Consider items such as jewelry, buttons, bottle caps, washers, wire, screws, nails, small metal pieces, string, rope, beads, fur, feathers, plastic flowers, dolls, small figures, etc. Will your objects be solid, open, curved, geometric, mechanical, natural, pointed, jagged? File and store objects. The more you have to select from, the better the sculptures will be.

Materials

- Variety of wood scraps
- Old magazines
- Selection of manufactured and natural objects
- Elmer's Glue-All
- Hot glue gun
- Coping saw
- Sandpaper
- X-Acto knife
- School pencil
- Tempera paint—assorted colors
- Newspapers

Step 2.

Look through magazines for visual imagery—especially large areas to use for backgrounds. Come up with themes you wish to explore. Collect images that support or connect to your idea. Think about using photo images, negative space, color, texture. Will your background be plain, rough, smooth, shiny, dull?

Assemblages by (left to right): Chris Paul Reed; Kimberly A. Deets; Damien P. Beveroth.



Step 3.

Once you have determined size of box, select four wood pieces for a frame. Your frame can be horizontal, vertical, or square. All sides can be similar: both sides can match; top can be plain or decorated. The frame can suggest images—a house; a castle; columns; a stage; a figure. Cut wood pieces so they fit together; sand; lightly paint. Hold together temporarily with masking tape. Back to be cut from wood or stiff cardboard. Begin to assemble flat background images. Look through three-dimensional objects; select pieces to use. **DO NOT GLUE ANYTHING DOWN UNTIL COMPOSITION IS FINAL.** Arrange and rearrange. You may weave, overlap or wrap images around frame. Images may extend slightly beyond frame. Glue down objects only when you are satisfied with composition. Use tiny dots of glue to prevent wrinkling.



Some Solutions

Which of these frames are decorative? Which are part of the work's message? How do classical columns, romantic jewelry, and "eye" shapes repeated many times reflect the themes inside these frames? Which of these artists has used a nearly symmetrical (both sides are the same) composition to create a calm, classical feeling? Which scene's asymmetrical (visually equal, with different elements on each side) composition, square format, or curving shapes emphasize its feeling of romance? Are there any pieces here that may question contemporary American values? Is there a piece which might contrast images symbolizing basic values with images that stand for unimportant and trivial pursuits?

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