

Man is above all the plaything of his memory.

~French Surrealist poet Andre Breton

Dwora Fried's remarkable tableaux address two primary issues: the bodily experience of scale and the fragmentary nature of memory. Much like her artistic precursors New York Surrealist Joseph Cornell and Los Angeles assemblage virtuoso Betye Saar, Fried arranges miniature objects inside small, stage-like boxes. Viewers are invited to approach, look slowly and attentively, and identify the various objects arrayed in the dollhouse-like rooms. Only by careful consideration and creative contemplation can viewers construct meaning from the fragments of cultural detritus that Fried presents.

Marching across a horizontal shelf, her boxes offer hints and clues about the artist's personal past and how it both intersects with and diverges from common culture. Superheroes raise protective arms over white-clad children. A visionary crucifixion hovers over an otherwise "normal" interior. Hansel and Gretel levitate in a green forest of bright red mushrooms.



Fried also creates large, room-scaled boxes that invite viewers to enter and become part of the narrative. A 2015 example employs the same black-

and-white tiled floor found in the artist's studio. A wooden chair invites viewers to sit on the far left. Facing the chair is a three-foot tall doll whose total nudity--and blatant vulnerability--may discomfort some. Circles of vintage plastic punctuate the surrounding walls, splashes of color that underscore the historical perspective of Fried's creative gaze.



The artist grew up in Vienna, Austria, the child of Holocaust survivors. She writes that she "learned to see everything through the prism of loss, danger and secrecy," adding, "I inherited a sense of isolation, displacement and an appreciation for the surreal." The surreal is adamantly present in Fried's boxes. It is seen in their poetic and unexpected juxtapositions, as well as their childlike playfulness.

Childhood is not always playful, however. Many of Fried's works are haunted by dark, ominous figures and incongruous, sometimes troubling, interactions. Youth is remembered in fits and spurts, in visual remnants and auditory scraps. Marcel Proust recalled years of his life as he ate a long cherished kind of cookie. Others grapple with the past upon hearing familiar songs or smelling favorite flowers. Combining photographs and actual mementos, as well as miniatures of larger objects and images, Fried's boxes function as objective correlatives of her personal past. The artist scatters

significant symbols throughout her oeuvre, giving concrete physical form to often chaotic emotions like fear, loss, and sorrow.

To spend time with Dwora Fried's artworks is to gain insight into the process and content of memory. Accessing memory is often a fraught with difficulty (due to the landmines of repression and denial.) But because most of Fried's boxes are miniatures, we seem to have power over their content. French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss wrote extensively about the aesthetic response to objects and images of small scale. He argued that while we can only take in and "know" the actual world in parts, we can know miniatures as a whole. He wrote:

In the case of miniatures, in contrast to what happens when we try to understand an object or living creature of real dimensions, knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts. And even if this is an illusion, the point of the procedure is to create or sustain the illusion, which gratifies the intelligence and gives rise to a sense of pleasure, which can already be called aesthetic on these grounds alone.

We not only receive great aesthetic pleasure from viewing Dwora Fried's memory boxes. We also learn about this remarkable woman's joyous and tragic childhood, as she negotiated the wounds of war and the nature of Jewish identity in the modern world.

Betty Ann Brown - December 2015

