



# Circumstantial Evidence

✎ Jody Williams ✎

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Christensen Center Gallery

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*Work by Jody Williams*

*i*

It is tempting, when looking at the work of Jody Williams, to get lost in her attentiveness to detail and see her sense of precision and exactness as an end in itself. Believing, as some do, that to observe and present with such attentiveness is the primary function of the artist. This is an understandable reaction. Williams employs an astonishing precision in her work, an attention to observation and craft that is deeply satisfying. To overemphasize this quality, however, is to miss the more spirited themes at play, ideas that guide us away from such reductive conclusions.

This intense sense of the craft in Williams' work emerges from an embodied understanding about the materials she handles. It is the "sense of the hand," a phrase that artists often use, that is developed through the investment of a lifetime of *caring* about the materials and specimens she handles. You can see this exactingness in the fabrication of a museum board box, its dimensions measured down to half the thickness of a sheet of paper, and the way the artifacts fit within their niches with the intuitive resonance of a string of Japanese calligraphy on an expanse of rice paper. There is never a false fold, a cramped form, or a material combination that feels contrived.

This sense of precision is a framing device, a method of separating objects and materials from the casualness of the larger world and into a space that demands that we consider them anew, rendering each as precious as a jewel. In her hands, a trio of seaworn *Littorina compressa* shells, barely unique among similar millions, is transformed into a demonstration of curved space. The off white shells evoke not only their lives in the sea and the soft erosion of the waves, but also the foundational mathematics that governs the creatures' growth. Their finely cast bronze counterparts make associative connections to human decoration and machine culture as well.

Williams uses this precision with tremendous artistry, assembling her cabinets, boxes, and books with a deep respect for the voice and identity of all her materials. Her process is frequently one of selecting rather than fabricating her elements. This is an activity that compounds complexity in the making of the works instead of diminishing it. Those who create in this manner spend their time in chess matches, always on the search for interactions and combinations that speak into larger ideas. They also rely on enormous stockpiles of materials in their studios. The mastery of Williams' work lies in the way she applies this sense of craft to this process, a method in which she sees her found and appropriated materials as both fully formed and yet full of possibility, viable

and freestanding in the world and yet capable of working together within new expressive modes.

## ii

One cannot fully understand the box works of Jody Williams without looking back historically to one of their chief organizing principles: the *Wunderkammer*, or *Cabinet of Curiosities*. Wunderkammers were rooms or cabinets that were filled with artworks, strange objects, and natural specimens that emerged in Europe in about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A byproduct of international empires and the wealth they generated, the cabinets were most typically created (curated?) by nobility and the gentry class, individuals of sufficient means with connections to the products of the newly established trade routes.

The motivations for amassing and displaying these collections were as varied as the individuals, but their owners were certainly not above seeing them, at least in some respects, as expressions of power. Showing off the likes of narwhal horns and carved miniature ivories while guests enjoyed after-dinner sherris is an unequivocal statement in itself, speaking not only of financial means and connections to political power, but hinting of military power as well.

The majority of the Wunderkammers, however, were more concerned with the study of the wonders of the physical world. They were, of course, the forerunners of both contemporary laboratories and museums, and like these institutional descendants, each had distinct personalities. Some were focused strictly on cultural artifacts while others on biological specimens, but the majority were not overly concerned with our contemporary boundaries between art, science, and human culture. They were riots of displays, with painted Madonnas and exotic taxidermied creatures literally cheek by jowl in rooms seen as microcosms of the world itself: a vast planet laid bare by global exploration and establishment of trade routes, for which the cabinets became a sorting of the Great Chain of Being.<sup>1</sup> One wishes to return for an evening to listen to the conjectures and theories flying as patrons sought to reconcile the newest findings with the static ideals of royalty, empire, and religion. The fresh mysteries acting as disruptive immigrants into a tidy world view, upending all manner of propriety as they inconveniently refused to fit neatly into existing paradigms.

Jody Williams' boxes quote these cabinets in a directly physical way, as seen in the work *Cistellula Numero Quinta*, a small box containing shelves and drawers with a scientific-like

arrangement of test tubes and specimen jars that hold a variety of natural objects and creatures. Her boxes, while diminutive, are collections in which objects are not merely assembled, but *exhibited*. The specimens are nestled within their carefully crafted niches, the work intermixing the known and unknown objects, found and created forms. The objects are mingled together, creating associations and evoking speculations about their meanings.

Williams' works do not simply borrow the physical attributes of the Cabinets, but embody their spirits as well. For the Wunderkammer is first about *wonders* and *curiosities*, objects to be sorted, meanings to be deciphered, taxonomies to be argued over. One might think wonder a rare commodity in a time where a free app can instantly identify any plant or constellation with a simple screen grab. Williams reminds us in these works, however, that wonder is enhanced by forms of knowledge, not destroyed by them: that to wonder is an intentional choice, a way of standing in relation to the world in which we see ourselves not at the center, but as a participant in a larger experience. Williams draws us out from a diminished world-view that would reduce our understanding of our world to classifications and taxonomies, and into one defined by relationship.<sup>2</sup>

### *iii*

Not all silences are the same.

The late Joseph Cornell's oeuvre, a body of work preoccupied with mystery, is an obvious connection to Williams. The two share a love of large spaces writ small and the poetic possibilities found in the interactions of transient objects. Both are masters of texture and find organizational energy within the interactions between rectilinear and spherical forms. Both frequently find the materials for their work within arms reach.

While they take us to different places, both of these artists are in the business of transforming the common into moments of silence that interrupt an unconsidered involvement in the world. Cornell's silence is like that which one experiences in the first seconds after the rise of the curtain at the theater, when we suddenly see actors, props in hands, scattered across the stage. It is a silence in which we transition from one reality into another, creating such moments to take us deeper into our own consciousness – playing a surrealist's game of crafting opportunities for our subconscious to emerge and to fill in the blanks with our own narratives. Tricking us into revealing ourselves to ourselves.

Williams works in a different form of silence. One clue to her intent lies in the title of her

series “Not Empty Boxes,” a tantalizing phrase suggesting a physical state neither filled or unfilled. It is an apt description, as objects of indeterminate worth occupy the boxes: molted feathers, stones, cancelled stamps, and images of common sunsets and unregarded spaces. Most carry little inherent worth or expressive capability. In this sense, the boxes are indeed “unfilled.” What is the value of a glass bottle of sand scooped from among millions of tons of such sand on a remote foreign beach?

However, in Williams’ hands these become objects transformed. Her intense methodology, a process that upends our Western expectations of commodity value, reframes and reorients the objects according to relationships, layers of natural and human history, and poetic possibilities. This reorientation renders them important not because they have commodity or even sentimental value, but because they are seen and considered first as representatives of the natural world and also as participants in a co-creative enterprise that Williams has orchestrated. Hers is a deeply human perspective. As a result, we see the boxes in their “filled” sense, offering an experience far more valuable than any commodity, asking for a reexamination of our way of looking and relating to the world.

After viewing a series of her works, we become

surprised by the recollection that most of the objects employed in her boxes exist in states too numerous to count, lying unconsidered on distant shores or anonymous on a mound of prairie turf. It is an experience that follows us as we leave the gallery. We find ourselves noticing, in a way we had not before, a lipstick mark on a paper coffee cup, or an oak branch framed in a window against the winter sky. These perceptual shifts are the silences of Williams’ work, pauses that recalibrate more than just a moment of observation. The works’ compelling powers work on recalibrating our values as well.

#### *iv*

*Nature* is an idea we lay upon the physical world. Without it, there is simply physical matter, unregarded and unspoken. As the Western world has laid down its own ideas, one of the more destructive is the notion that while humans dwell within nature, they are apart from it in the most fundamental ways.

Jody Williams’ work stands as an alternative to this schism, seeking not to hold nature at arms length and simply value its beauty (or exploit it for our own ends) but to reintegrate human and natural spheres into an interconnectedness, one that affirms the unique qualities of each. We see this

in the seamless interaction between the natural objects and their containers, and the deep respect afforded the forms she employs. We see it in the autobiographical nature of the works themselves. Williams treats her life, her relationships, and travels with the same sense of study that she uses to consider the thighbone of a seabird.

We also see it in more lighthearted ways. The toy mini-stapler, penguin, and hammer that show up in a previous box work (*Observing, Thinking, Breathing: The Nancy Gast Riss '77 Carleton Cabinet of Wonders*) are indicators of this attempt at reconciliation. Acting symbolically as forces that one can use to observe and transform their environment, they remind us of the potential for both healing and destruction. As much as we might be apprehensive of such equivalencies, these toys, set within an environment of hundreds of organic forms, remind the viewer that they too are products of living creatures. As created forms, they are also, in some measure, part of the natural history of humans.

In her book *Some Specimens*, Williams speaks against this Western sense of disunity, hauntingly expressing it in poetic form on a page that faces a drawing of a green sea urchin:

Tangible evidence  
of two presences  
in time and place.  
Beholder and  
beholden, bound,  
each holding  
different histories.  
The meeting,  
a departure,  
The object,  
a silent witness;  
The future,  
a beginning,  
The presences,  
past.

There are two presences represented here, the *beholder and beholden*. The poem defines a relationship that stands in stark contrast to what we frequently see. The proximity of the poem to the image of the urchin causes us to wonder at the possibility of a relationship with this creature. What would that look like? Is the urchin a representative for all of nature? Who is departing, and why?

*Beholder and beholden*. The poem does not tell us, however, which of these we are.

*Essay by Kenneth Steinbach*

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1           The Great Chain of Being is a concept derived from early Greek philosophers that continued into the Middle Ages. Based on a religious understanding of the universe, it posited a fixed, ordered hierarchy of structure in which everything known and unknown fit within an ordered cosmos.

2           See *I and Thou* by Martin Buber.

### ***About the author***

Kenneth Steinbach is Professor of Art at Bethel University in St. Paul. Exhibiting throughout the United States, he is the recipient of numerous grants in direct support of his work and research and was awarded the 2014 Arlin G. Meyer prize in Visual Arts from the Lilly Fellows Foundation. Recently, he has been researching the habits and strategies of mid-career artists that support long-term, creative viability with the goal of providing resources for developing artists. He lives in the Twin Cities with his wife Kari, a theatrical director.

