

KIDSPACE AT MASS MoCA PRESENTS

boxed sets

assembling images,
objects, and people

featuring: *laura christensen*
debora coombs
lisa nilsson

MARCH 29—SEPTEMBER 3, 2007

Boxed Sets features assemblage and stained glass artwork of three artists—Lisa Nilsson and Laura Christensen of North Adams, Massachusetts, and Debora Coombs of Readsboro, Vermont—alongside new work they created with local students. The three artists' work relies on boxes and grid-like containers, which are used to form compelling, intricate and colorful designs, as well as narratives and metaphors.

Lisa Nilsson creates wooden box assemblages, grids that are densely filled with interesting artifacts found in town dumps, flea markets, and hardware stores, alongside miniature paintings and drawings to create humorous, strange, and exciting combinations. Laura Christensen makes assemblages uniting handcrafted wooden boxes, old photographic portraits, oil paint, and unusual found objects that together illustrate memories and mysteries. Debora Coombs paints images of people and symbols onto pieces of colored glass that are assembled to create curious new relationships and narratives in the form of stained glass windows.

Boxed Sets also examines influences on artistic processes and how individuals impact others through mentoring. During the winter, the three artists completed artist residencies in Florida, Savoy, and Clarksburg, Massachusetts, and Stamford, Vermont, schools, mentoring children in grades K-8. These students were invited to create art, some of which has been included in the exhibition, using similar processes and themes to the artists' work. In addition, visitors may view the artists' "Brain Boxes"—display cases with objects and images reflecting their personal influences, such as books, photographs, letters from their mentors, and images of other artists' work.



My work consists of small assemblages constructed with handcrafted wooden boxes, old photographic portraits, and unusual found objects that suggest memories, relics, and mystery. Hand-painted illusions of passenger pigeons, bright thrushes, and a soaring hawk, calving glaciers and stars, land and sea blend with images of 19th-century men, women, and children. In one sculpture, a copy of a 16th-century portrait appears to hang behind the head of an early 20th-century baby. On the reverse, a copy of that collaged image seems to rest behind a distinguished and thoughtful-looking 19th-century woman. In some assemblages, altered photographs or other objects are treated as precious. At other times, an antique snapshot, painted image, chain, or cricket cage suggests old secrets to be unlocked and riddles to be solved.

Lately I've been reading books, like Richard Dawkin's *Unweaving the Rainbow*, about evolution and genetics. I've been trying to understand what scientists know about shifting tectonic plates, ice ages, and extinction. Learning how scientists understand history offers new perspectives on our current brief and fortunate existences. Change, in personal, cultural, and geologic timelines, and how individuals comprehend and respond to change, are the moving forces behind my newest work.

LAURA CHRISTENSEN
NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS
2007



LEFT: Student tries Still, 2007. Mixed media.

THIS PAGE: One side of Five Pictures, Four Feet, Three Faces, Two Squirrels & Starlings at One Time, 2007. Mixed Media.

Laura
Christensen

I explore the world in a wordless way, using drawing and collage to get a closer look. Rum-maging around in the spaces behind language I find images of people and objects that have curious relationships to one another. I fix these assembled images into real time by making them into hand-painted stained glass. It's a curious process: translating non-verbal browsing into a medieval medium originally developed for religious education and worship.

The real world substance of glass, lead and paint is part of the allure. The sensual and tactile aspects are technically absorbing and help shut down my mental chatter. Craft provides a perfect counterpoint to the intellectual, scholarly side of making art.

I am fascinated by what it means to be consciously human and how this changes when we put our feelings into words. Using the written word to communicate various states of mind is particularly mysterious; combinations of abstract symbols and ciphers come to represent different sequences of neurons firing in our brains. Perhaps, as Sue Savage Rumbaugh says in her book *Apes, Language, and the Human Mind*, "Language permits us to think that we know things that indeed we do not know."

In my work I am trying to explore the world that lies behind the threshold of language. The five panels on display in Kidspace are part of a series called 'Menfolk' that explores the emotional complexity of 'maleness' from youth to old age, across cultural divides.

DEBORA COOMBS
READSBORO, VERMONT
2006



LEFT: Debora shows Stamford students her new stained glass series.

THIS PAGE: Students investigate *Brothers & Sisters*, 98.4%, 2006

Debora
Coombs

Adopting and adapting Robert Rauschenberg's theme of "multiplicity, variation and inclusion" in my life and in my work, I make monumentally small assemblages composed of hundreds of found and made objects, placed in niches carved into a plywood support, then sealed under glass.

I'm attracted to sites of great material density and diversity: town dumps, flea markets, hardware stores, natural history museums and New York City. Being immersed in the ongoing pulse of collecting and dispersing and re-collecting and re-dispersing has an energizing effect that makes me want to make stuff.

I am especially moved by small eclectic museums that seek to represent in one compact place a sampling of what the whole world has to offer. Their collections show life as interconnected and complex, taking many forms. The *Wall of Biodiversity* at the American Museum of Natural History is an especial favorite.

I revere people who make things—all kinds of things. And I enjoy making unwitting collaborators of the people who have made the "found" elements in my work. I think about them: Who made this tennis ball? Where? How old is that person?

I consider the fabrication, or making-of, an integral part of the soul of a piece. During the time I spend communing with my materials (typically over the course of several months), new ideas and elements have time to come and go. I take delight in placing new finds in ongoing works. The more integrated my art and life, the happier I am.

I believe in an economy of attention. Things are as important as the amount of attention paid them. I favor a macro-lensed view of the world, foregoing long looks at the forest for an intense study of the veins on the leaves on the trees.

I try to spend my days in a way conducive to a state of mind Joseph Cornell once described in a journal entry: "So far uneventful but rest of day picked up that kind of richness in which a reveling in detail becomes such a feast of experience..."

I think of these works as reliquaries, following the medieval tradition of making materially

rich, glorifying, permanent houses for the preservation and display of such humble remains and scrappy little things as finger bones, hair, and fraying fragments of cloth from venerated people known for their humility. I carve out and prepare spaces for dead bugs, wisdom teeth, chewed pieces of gum, turtle bones, balloon ends, the spines and skins of books. I install them, then seal them away behind glass forever and ever.

Mixing the humble and the high, my pieces are reliquaries of the remains of many different lives.

LISA NILSSON
NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS
2006



OPPOSITE: Students check out Lisa's work alongside their own in *Boxed Sets*.

THIS PAGE: (detail) *The Strand*, 2007. Mixed media.

Lisa Nilsson



In February 2007, **Laura Christensen** completed an artist residency with students at the Abbott Memorial School in Florida, Massachusetts (K-8th grade). Each student had the opportunity to learn more about Laura's art by creating his or her own sculptures using wood and photographs. In addition, a group of seven 5th and 6th grade students worked with Laura to complete a new sculpture for the *Boxed Sets* exhibition. The group met for six after-school sessions. These students studied trees through collecting samples of bark and branches, and sketching from observation. They altered antique photographs by including imagery that relates to trees and outdoor settings. They learned to hand-plane and cut wood with a pull saw to help create boxes for their photographs. The sculpture looks like a tree trunk embedded with unusual old photographs.

TREE'S COMPANY...

WHAT THE TREES SEE IN YOU, 2007

WOOD, PLYWOOD, PHOTOGRAPHS, PENCIL,
SONOTUBE, GLUE, ACRYLIC PAINT
ABBOTT MEMORIAL SCHOOL

AFTER-SCHOOL ARTIST RESIDENCY STUDENTS:

- BRADLEY JANOVSKY
- LEAH BOHL
- KYLE CROSIER
- TESS BURDICK
- ERYNN GLEASON
- TORI GREEN
- STACIA POIROT



In March 2007, **Laura Christensen** completed an artist residency with students at the Savoy Elementary School (K-5th grade). Each student had the opportunity to learn more about Laura's art by assembling images in his or her own sculptures using wood and photographs. After school, six 4th and 5th grade students met with Laura for six sessions to make a new sculpture for the *Boxed Sets* exhibition. They imagined, and found ways to represent, homes of different eras—past, present, and future. Each student was responsible for one room of the house—from living room to utility closet. This sculpture looks like a small wooden house. The design was inspired by the book *The Kids' Building Workshop* written by local authors J. Craig and Barbara Robertson.

HOUSE OF TIME, 2007

CHERRY, MAPLE, PLYWOOD,
PHOTOGRAPHS, ACRYLIC PAINT,
PENCIL, GLUE, FOUND OBJECTS
SAVOY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

AFTER-SCHOOL ARTIST RESIDENCY STUDENTS:

- SERGEI V. VITTORE
- JAMIE V. KACZOWSKI
- CJ SCHLEICH
- BRIANNA MARY HAYDEN
- ELIZABETH M. FLORENCE
- DESARAI L. GAZAILLE



Debora Coombs completed an artist residency with kindergarten through eighth grade students in the Stamford Elementary School, Vermont, in January 2007. Debora explained the role of symbolism in art and asked each student to paint a symbol for winter on a square of colored glass. Also, in six after-school sessions held at the artist's studio, she guided six 3rd through 8th grade students in painting their portraits onto glass. Students worked from photographs and used the same processes and materials that Debora uses in her own work, allowing them a special insight into the art and craft of stained glass. The after-school group then assembled almost 300 pieces of glass, all painted by Stamford schoolchildren and fired in a kiln, to create the stained glass window shown in *Boxed Sets*. Following the exhibition, the stained glass will be installed in the front entrance of the Stamford Elementary School.

STAMFORD SNOW SCENES, 2007

HAND-PAINTED STAINED GLASS
STAMFORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

AFTER-SCHOOL ARTIST RESIDENCY STUDENTS:

- EVAN SCHUEKLER
- KATIE PLOTTS
- LEVI GRANT
- CHRISTINA BUTCHER
- TIA BROWN
- JACOB KEPLINGER



Lisa Nilsson completed an artist residency with the kindergarten through 8th grade students at Clarksburg Elementary School in March 2007. Prior to the workshops, Lisa made over 200 painted wooden boxes. In the classroom, each student was presented with an array of art supplies and found objects and the opportunity to create an intricate assemblage within a box of his or her choice. Many students used the found objects to invent elaborate narratives, while others made unusual abstract patterns within their boxes. Lisa then grouped individual boxes to compose the "boxed sets" on view. She also worked with a group of six students in 4th through 6th grades in her studio at the Eclipse Mill artist lofts in North Adams. Over six sessions, these students made larger individual boxes, drew on the paper-covered walls of the Eclipse Gallery and toured other artist/resident studios.

EACH AND EVERY, 2007

WOOD BOXES, FOUND OBJECTS
CLARKSBURG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

AFTER-SCHOOL ARTIST RESIDENCY STUDENTS:

- COURTNEY ROLNICK
- JOSH GIRON
- NATALIE HOWE
- JUSTIN CAMERON
- LAURA NETTI
- AMELIA SLEP-PATTERSON

**School
Projects**

Kidspace opened in January 2000 as a collaborative project of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art, and MASS MoCA. A contemporary art gallery/studio and educational program, Kidspace promotes the understanding and teaching of art through experiential learning opportunities. School programs and educational materials are designed for elementary schools in North Adams, Florida, Clarksburg, and Savoy, Massachusetts, as well as Stamford, Vermont. Kidspace organizes an after-school artist mentor program for local students in grades 6-10. Working with Kidspace staff and artists, students and teachers learn new ways to connect contemporary art to their classroom activities and to their everyday lives.

The public is welcome at Kidspace to view exhibitions and to create their own art. During the school year, public hours are Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 4:00 p.m., plus holiday and summer hours. The rest of the week is reserved for school groups. Admission to Kidspace is free. Public art classes and special workshops are offered during school breaks, and arrangements can be made to hold birthday parties in Kidspace.

Please call Kidspace at (413) 664-4481, ext. 8131, for more details on hours, programs and program fees, and exhibitions. And check out the Kidspace web site at www.massmoca.org/kidspace.

Kidspace is funded in part by the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art, and MASS MoCA. Additional funding has been provided by grants from the Nimoy Visual Artist Residencies Program; The Artists' Resource Trust, a fund of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation; Ruth E. Proud Charitable Trust; and the Brownrigg Charitable Trust and Alice Shaver Foundation in memory of Lynn Laitman.

Boxed Sets was organized by Laura Thompson, Kidspace Director of Exhibitions and Education, with artists Laura Christensen, Lisa Nilsson, and Debora Coombs, and interns Regina Leyva and Nicole Pelletier. Special thanks to Diane Rousseau, stained glass conservator, North Adams, for glazing the Stamford student-made piece. And eternal gratitude to the staff of the three museums for your consistent support of Kidspace, and especially to the staff of MASS MoCA for promoting, designing, and installing the exhibition.

Summer Hours

July 2-September 3
noon-4:00 p.m.
Every day



Kidspace
at MASS MoCA

1040 MASS MoCA WAY
NORTH ADAMS, MA 01247
413.664.4481 x8131
WWW.MASSMoca.ORG/KIDSPACE

MASS MoCA
THANKS CITIGROUP
FOR ITS SUPPORT,
INCLUDING THE
PRINTING OF THIS
BROCHURE.

