



**Cigar Box Series**

<< "Lion"

< "Best Bug Woman"

Mixed media

2000

# Key 12

Visitors to the home of American artists Ross Coates and his wife, Marilyn Lysohir, in Moscow, Idaho are likely to be surprised. One arrives there having passed through down-town Moscow to find a suburban home with, heavens, plastic pink flamingos teetering over a dry pond in the front yard. Then the dawning that you have been fooled.

Coates has been and continues to be many things: installation artist, exquisite box maker, oil painter, draftsman, bagpipe player, sprinter, basketball player, an art professor in Uganda, innovative cook, amateur magician, teacher, scholar of African and native American arts and customs – with more than a passing interest in the occult, college professor, magazine publisher, ardent supporter of the work of Marilyn Lysohir, a father, brother, grandfather, seer, mystic, communicator.

Looking at the mesmerising objects in Coates' studio and around the walls of their home it is easy to think of Jewish Kabbalists, Celtic bards and the Swedish Protestant mystic, Swedenborg. We are symbols and ciphers in a disturbing, divine cryptography. Kafka is there. All around one there is evidence of K surveying the Castle he can never enter or of Josef K never learning the crime for which he is to

be executed nor seeing the tribunal that is judging him.

As a youngster I was taken by my mother to an exhibition which included James Ensor's "Christ's Entry into Brussels". That huge mural (it isn't but consider it from an eight year-old's view point) with all its pageant, carnival, masks, and skeletons made such an impression on me that I have been ever since addicted to resurrection themes. I love the Breughels, Stanley Spencer's Mesopotamian War art and, all his Cookham series, especially, "Christ's entry into Cookham" and Francis Bacon's and Lucian Freud's disgusting images and, strangely, and more recently, Ida Branson's much more wholesome images. All these have the dead rising, wriggling and writhing, and this is the voodoo Coates' art explores. He probes ancestor worship in Asia and North West America as well as the West African experience of women who can turn into birds and men who can turn into trees.

His art is the string upon which he hangs anecdote, reflection, historical episodes, the clashing cultures of native American and colonising Europeans, the impact of African slaves on the American experience. These two

groups of Americans who had no say in becoming American, the black African and native Americans, have at least one aspect of their respective cultures in common – art as life.

I am most fortunate, recently, to have become owner of one of his boxes – a book in fact – written when Marilyn was in Montana. It has on the cover the title: "12 Stories by a man at home alone" and around the text, the legs of Key 12 of the Tarot, "The Hanged Man". Inside is a series of 12 immaculately constructed collages; drawings, he calls them. Each one is numbered, of course, – that ever-present and disturbing divine cryptography.

Coates has come pretty close to defining himself with this little gem. The divinatory meaning of Key 12 is: "In spiritual matters, wisdom, prophetic power. A pause in one's life, suspended decisions. Self-surrender leads to the transformation of the personality. Material temptation is conquered".

The exhibition which this book illuminates will in turn edify, and puzzle, excite admiration and exasperation. Ross Coates must be delighted with such a result.

**Jeremy Caddy**  
London/Vancouver