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Cigar Box Series
 Mixed media
 1999

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4 Dreams of the Artist
 Mixed media
 1997

I think of Ross Coates as the quintessential post-modern parodic ex-centric bricoleur. Each of these terms “postmodern,” “parodic,” “ex-centric,” and “bricoleur” carries a unique meaning and valence, and in this short essay I explore them briefly in relation to his creative work. Although my language and approach are somewhat theoretical, my understanding of his recent work is also based in great affection, for I have known Ross for nine years. I have seen his work in various settings; and I have shared much with him, both in the Northwest and in the Russian Far East.

postmodern
 By now, some critics and theorists have ceased using the term postmodern, but I still find it a useful descriptor for a variety of characteristics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Within popular culture, postmodernism in architecture, music, literature and art is evident in the appropriation of elements of past traditions for new purposes. Within academic culture, postmodernism tends to mean an incredulity toward master-narratives (from Lyotard), the procession of simulacra (from Baudrillard), or the decentered subject (from Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida). Ross’ installations replace obvious narratives with his own quirky stories. Themes are often repeated using minor variations, but they are not developed into meta-themes or master-narratives. In his work we also see other postmodern characteristics such as fragmentation and hybridization of artistic forms,

as when he mixes painting and assemblage, writing and sculpture.

parodic
 How do contemporary artists enter into dialogue with artists of the past? Parody is a strategy employed by many artists working today. Some, like Sherrie Levine, have practiced blank parody, simply copying the images of other artists. Levine’s well-known “stealing” of Edward Weston’s photographs of his son Neil and her appropriation of art by Kasimir Malevich and Egon Schiele are but a few of many possible examples. As Linda Hutcheon has observed, parody’s para means not only counter or against, but also near and beside. In its most positive definition, parody does not simply mean repeating or ridiculing images and ideas from the past, but it is a special form of dialogue with the past. Parody can be a form of critical awareness and love of history — dialogical relationship between identification and continuity with the past, on the one hand, and distance from it and transgression against it, on the other. I see this kind of parodic sensibility in nearly all of Ross’ work.

ex-centric
 Ross’ work is ex-centric in several senses. First, it is ex-centric in the sense that it does not occupy a place in the center of the art world and the gallery/museum system. Second, his work is also ex-centric in the sense that it reflects meanings that are “out-of-self,” not based on personal forms of expressionism that characterized much modern art.

In yet a third sense, the term ex-centric plays with the meaning of its near homonym eccentric. We might say that his work is eccentric in terms of its cultural values, or that Ross himself is eccentric!

bricoleur
 Ross’ process is that of a bricoleur, a “tinkerer” or “handy person” who uses what has been created by others in new combinations. (In fact, Ross has published his own interpretation of his work as a bricoleur in Universe magazine, in Spring 1995.) When Claude Levi-Strauss used the term in structural anthropology, he was describing the way some cultures recycle and recombine both old and new elements for new uses. Artistic techniques developed in the twentieth century — such as collage, montage, and assemblage — all can be described as forms of bricolage. In contrast to a modern western model of planned obsolescence with a “throw-it-away” mentality, the bricoleur continually reinvents with what is around. We see that practice in Ross Coates’ cigar boxes, in his drawings, and in his room size installations.

In the end, my interpretation of Ross Coates’ work as that of a postmodern parodic ex-centric bricoleur cannot adequately describe his installations or his individual pieces. For a deeper understanding, one needs to enter into the intimate dialogue that happens in front of the work.

Deborah J. Haynes
 Professor of Art
 Jamestown, Colorado

Reflections