

Metal Boxes: A Hermetic Side of Thomas Chimes

By A.M. Weaver | Sunday, April 5, 2015



Thomas Chimes, *Yes*, 1965. Mixed media metal box, 13 5/8 x 16 inches. Courtesy of Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

Thomas Chimes, long heralded for grand landscape paintings and canvases laden with Greek and Christian symbols, was shown to different effect in a focused exhibition at Lock Gallery late last year of mid-career, predominantly sculptural works. Alluding to an interior world of secrets, irony and obsession, these fastidiously constructed boxes, dating from 1965 to 1973, articulate the literary impulses and ontological states that animate his better-known later works.

After a decade of working in New York, in the 1950s and '60s, in a scene still bearing the imprint of Abstract Expressionism, Chimes retreated to his hometown of Phila-



delphia, slowly embracing a hermetic existence. It was in 1965 that Chimes decided to abandon his explorations as a colorist and began to craft work informed by his deep love of modernist and symbolist literature, his evolving affinity for Surrealism and the enigmatic philosophies and practices of Marcel Duchamp. And yet, the work in the exhibition reveals how much he also felt the need to remain relevant in a technologically driven world. An influential lecture by Marshall McLuhan at the University of Pennsylvania impacted his shift from painting to sculpture, according to art historian Michael Taylor, as well as his deepening personal association with Antonin Artaud, Alfred Jarry, and Duchamp.

Bouts with depression may also have encouraged him to shun the limelight of New York. He found in the confines of Philadelphia a sense of familiarity and the isolation needed to discover who he was. In doing so he was following the edict of Duchamp, who advised young artists to go underground.

The metal boxes are an amalgam of divergent sources: Art Deco, Pop Art and Minimalism. In some instances, they look like mechanical devices that have specific functions: too large to be hand held they nonetheless feel intimate. At the forefront of modern design directives, Chimes's boxes infused with sexual, electronic and mathematical motifs, are evidence of his "desire for structure and structuring desire." In tune with the "Sexual Revolution" of his time, Chimes liberally laces his imagery with female and male genitalia, incorporating an eroticized sense of play into his symbolic lexicon. In elegantly structured works like *Cathedra* (1970) and *Untitled* (1969), the viewer can get lost in the fluidity of cut and collaged aluminum forms.



Thomas Chimes, *Exhibition Calculator*, 1969. Mixed media metal box, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.
Photo: Joseph Hu

It is curious that Chimes segued so effortlessly from painting to metal construction. *Yes* (1965), a work that marks this transition, contains vestiges of earlier painterly impulses as well as Matisse-like cutout forms, and a configuration of Artaud's alter ego, *Mômo* as a bird, are neatly contained within a composition of rectangular and square forms. This is a work that marked Chimes's transition to constructions. Also during this year, he was commissioned to design the jacket cover for two books by Bettina L. Knapp on the work of Artaud. It is telling that his esteem of Artaud's life and work predated his decision to



move toward making mixed media metal boxes. Possibly Chimes felt that the box form itself served as a vessel/vehicle to sort through new symbols of mysticism and playfulness that emulated Artaud's aesthetic.



Thomas Chimes, *Untitled*, 1965. Mixed media metal box, 18 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Locks Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Joseph Hu

Some of Chimes boxes open, while many are sealed shut with cut away areas, exposing layers of different materials and markings. Engaging in Pataphysics, the anti-theoretical philosophy coined by Alfred Jarry, Chimes throws together fragments of quasi-scientific elements and mathematical diagrams into a jumble that give mere hints to their origin in meaning. Chimes orders these chaotic insignia with humor and aplomb. Works like *Exhibition Calculator* (1969) evidence an ironic tone, one that pokes fun at the art world itself.

Chimes's evolving aesthetic was certainly less than linear and not completely sequential. He appears to be driven by ideas and less by the tendency of the time to stick with a signature style. Maybe he was marking time and secretly coding his life traumas and inner secrets. This show ends with a selection

of white paintings of moderate size, some of which were like palimpsests of unintelligible script. The hint of landscape behind the vast whiteness of *Untitled Rose Landscape* (1980), for instance, is indicative of the type of investigations that consumed Chimes until the end of his marriage in 1984 when he expressed his forlorn state in a poem "Winter is white/ Everything is cold/ Mutterings are distant now."

In addition to landscapes, he revisits the visage of Albert Jarry, a reoccurring portrait within a whitened vapor, as well as the embossed helmeted head of Artaud. It is notable that between his construction series and white paintings from 1979 to the 1990s, Chimes spent nearly a decade devoted to his obsession with literary figures, by painting portraits of such literary illuminati as Jarry, Artaud, André Breton, James Joyce and Robert Lewis Stevenson.

The overarching themes in the esoteric works presented at Locks may sometimes seem to outweigh their delicate and precise execution. In spite of the rigid materials used, however, it is perhaps the appearance of fragility that Chimes intended to portray, alluding to the vulnerability of the human mind and the ephemeral quality of thoughts translated into plastic form.