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The Dream Boxes of Gloria Vanderbilt

JOYCE CAROL OATES

The first inspiration for the Dream Boxes probably started when, as a child, I became fascinated by those glass balls which, when shaken, cause snow to swirl, drawing me into a world that had order, one that wouldn't change or disappoint, shutting out and obliterating the world around me, the world I was in.

—Gloria Vanderbilt

WITHIN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, Gloria Vanderbilt has constructed a number of remarkable works of art to which she has given the designation "Dream Boxes." These are striking creations inside plexiglass boxes that merit close, sympathetic scrutiny in the way that the most subtle of poems and dreams merit our scrupulous attention. Gloria Vanderbilt is by her own description an intuitive artist, building upon "found" images and artifacts, but her Dream Boxes tell a complexly linked narrative of our time. She has said that the strength of her work is female and that, if that fits into a statement of historical significance, she would be pleased that "it might have added to women's belief in themselves."

The first artwork of Gloria Vanderbilt I saw is "Untitled #1," a wittily stark, unsentimental presentation, as in a biology text, of dissected doll-like female figures framing the skeleton of what appears to be a frog. Because the human figures are reduced in proportion to the frog, the amphibian seems to loom over them, eerily dominant. Yet the beauty of the composition draws the viewer's eye, as well as a sense of unnerving identification: both frog and doll figures lift their forelegs, arms in mute appeal. Executed in minimalist shades of gray, black, and faded beige, "Untitled #1" suggests both the fact of our common evolutionary ancestry and our common mortality. It's disconcerting for Homo sapiens to acknowledge either. Vanderbilt's

ironic statement is not a consoling one, but its formal expression as art is immensely satisfying.

More typical of Vanderbilt's recent work is "Mirror, Mirror." In this phantasmagoric piece, which, like the other Dream Boxes, is far more striking in three dimensions than in two, the head of a blank-faced mannequin stares not at, but toward, the viewer; the mannequin is woman-as-artifact, woman-as-Beauty; but she is partly obscured by floating shards of broken mirrors which, when the viewer draws closer to peer inside, offer a fractured vision of the viewer's face. (This effect is brilliantly achieved, and rather upsetting.) In this way, the interior of "Mirror, Mirror" becomes our interior as well: we are not merely gazing into an artwork, but into our own shattered reflection. The title alludes to the most famous of Grimm's fairy tales, "Snow White"; it's a query put to a truth-telling mirror by Snow White's cruel stepmother: "Mirror, Mirror on the wall: who is fairest of them all?" (The answer is, bluntly, "not you." The effect upon the stepmother is devastating.) The work is visually coherent at the mannequin's eye level, and descends into a sort of primal disintegration at its base. Again, the minimalist colors contribute to the artwork's curious, cool authority. *This is how it is, "Mirror, Mirror" declares. This is not what we would wish.* For the classic fairy tales end as often in confusion and tragedy as happily, though the designation "fairy tale" routinely suggests the happy, facile, unrealistic "female" ending.

Vanderbilt's Dream Boxes are subtle re-examinations of the fairy-tale, or feminine sensibility, an art created ingeniously out of miniatures, most of them *objets trouvés* discovered by the artist in New York flea markets, second-hand shops, and on the street. ("...Walking on the street and coming across a postcard torn in half [with] a message on it from 'Marianne.' In Venice a crystal heart as if seen through water piled in a bowl under glass beads... I will see something and like a magnet it draws me I know not why.")

Without the plexiglass panels that protect these private dreams from the viewer, they would be too starkly exposed, vulnerable, and immediate; they would appear to be sculptures of a kind, and not reliquaries. They hold in suspension, like magic, wildy disparate images that knit together into dreamlike (sometimes nightmare-like) logic. This is not an art of serene, untroubled or even clear-cut surfaces. If the translucent cubes with their "found" objects and paper cut-outs suggest the boxes of Joseph Cornell, the effect of

Vanderbilt's art is very different. Where Cornell's images are lucid, sharp-edged, and formally arranged to be viewed from the front like popular *trompe-l'oeil* art of the 19th century, Vanderbilt's are more textured, complex, and have been constructed to be seen from every angle. (In "East of the Sun," for instance, the artwork's crystalline beauty is qualified by an enormous black spider in one corner of the box, not visible from the other angles of perspective; in "West of the Moon," a companion piece, the revelation of an innocent child-self hidden behind a blizzard of mirror shards and a grimly adult, disfigured and discolored black mesh mask, is only available if one sees the work from all sides.) Where Cornell's images exude an air of melancholy yet impersonal irony, as if an entire culture were being displayed by way of its discarded artifacts, Vanderbilt's images are intensely personal, in the sense in which the "personal" is archetypal and emotionally immediate.

When Vanderbilt declares that hers is a "female" art, she means that contemporary female experience is being examined closely, by way of a distinctly female sensibility; but this "female" experience—passive, self-displaying, coerced and haunted by social expectations of physical attractiveness and spiritual conformity—is emotionally accessible to any number of men as well. Indeed, the "female" within the male, the Jungian "Anima," is so subtly evoked here, that most of the Dream Boxes as potently mirror contemporary male experience as female experience. It can't be a coincidence that the bold, heart-rending images of Vanderbilt's most ambitious Dream Box to date, "JonBenet R.I.P.," are both grotesquely "feminine" (see the preening blond kewpie doll surrounded by flowers and tinsel barbed wire) and grotesquely "sexless" (see the broken-headed big-eyed yearning doll casting a covetous glance at her remote mother, armless, nearly breastless, and incapable of nurturing); and that the doll-babies crammed into a glass jar in this Dream Box, and standing naked and vulnerable before a bizarre adult (father?) contraption in "Remember?," are as likely to be male as female, and as helpless before their fate. Vanderbilt's relatively infrequent use of boy-dolls (as in the powerfully symbolic "West of the Moon") points up the denial in our fiercely competitive culture that boy-dolls can be helpless victims, enthralled and intimidated by their (adult) captors.

"Memory" and the more recent "Destiny" are strikingly beautiful constructions that suggest earlier, more romantic Dream Boxes in the series, like "Golden Light": encrusted by repeating fugitive

shapes, organic forms that might as readily be shells as buttons. Though the viewer is drawn into its interior as into memory itself, neither "Memory" nor "Destiny Bliss" will yield their secrets. In the former, the tantalizing promise of an old family or ancestral portrait will remain just that: a promise.

* * *

Some of us are born with a sense of loss. It is not acquired as we grow. It is already there from the beginning, and it pervades us throughout our lives. Loss, defined as deprivation, can be interpreted as being born into a world that does not include a nurturing mother and father. We are captured in an unbreakable glass bubble, undetected by others, and are forever seeking ways to break out, for if we can, surely we will find and touch that which we are missing.

—Gloria Vanderbilt, *A Mother's Story* (1996)

Haunted by imperfect memories of her long-deceased father whom she scarcely knew, and her elusive, frequently absent, socialite mother, Gloria Vanderbilt published, in 1985, a remarkably candid and elegantly written memoir with the apt title *Once Upon a Time*; a decade later she published the slender, elegiac *A Mother's Story*, a meditation upon the abrupt, unexpected, and inexplicable death of her twenty-three-year-old son Carter Cooper. Certainly, much of Vanderbilt's art is personally encoded. (Written on a side of "Destiny," not visible in the photograph printed here, is the gnomic "Much Was Decided Before You Were Born.") Yet the images of the Dream Boxes are transpersonal, like figures in fairy tales and legends, shorn of historic identity. It may be that the Dream Boxes represent an elliptical, subversive reclaiming of identity by one who has, unlike most of us, been over-defined—"over-determined," in psychoanalytic terms—by the exterior world. Born not "G.V.," nor even "Gloria," but "Gloria Laura Vanderbilt," a 20th-century princess whose private life has been relentlessly scrutinized by the press over the decades, the artist has had to struggle to be seen, and be heard, on her own individual (and idiosyncratic) terms, and not those projected upon her by history.

The "unbreakable glass bubble" of which Vanderbilt speaks suggests the plexiglass confines of the Dream Boxes: a perfect

fusion of form and content. The Dream is set off, restricted, protected and displayed and defined by the Box. The Box suggests airlessness, captivity, exhibitionism: but also survival. The “unbreakable glass bubble” is the deeply wounded yet indomitable child-self, the origin of the artistic impulse. So the doll-faces, struck in blank wonder, or dread, appear and disappear among the shifting fragments of Vanderbilt’s art. Sometimes, ominously, the doll-figure has vanished, and only her beautiful, sensuous hair remains, as in the multi-layered “Marilyn and a Few Others,” one of the most ambitious of the Dream Boxes, and the relatively spare “Untitled #5.” In the atypically garish, seemingly festive “Prizes I Won at Coney Island,” the inclusion of oversized dice beside the doll’s shiny red shoes (on her unnaturally tiny feet) suggests the vagaries of sheer chance. In this most colorful of Dream Boxes, raw emotions seem highly charged, held in suspension; the box is a rare vertical, difficult to “read” with its surface blizzard of brightly colored pseudo-organic red and purple shapes.

Vanderbilt’s is essentially a miniaturist’s art, expressing massive emotions and paradoxes. The Dream Boxes are elliptical, irresolute, teasing; their wit is difficult to suggest by way of photography, a notoriously two-dimensional medium. If the Dream Boxes embalm their subjects, the Dream Boxes also exalt and memorialize those subjects. We gaze into them as into subtly distorting mirrors.