

**Conservation ID Number: 16-040**

NYU Libraries Barbara Goldsmith Book and Paper Conservation Laboratory

Collection: Fales Library & Special Collections

Collection Name & Collection Number: David Wojnarowicz Papers MSS 092

Title: [Coffin with human remains, textiles and mementos/trinkets]

Artist: Wojnarowicz, David

Date: c. 1990-1992

Dimensions: Exterior: 12 x 11.75 x 38.5 inches

**Documentation Note:**

The painted wooden coffin (without the contents) was conserved by Joy Bloser, IFA –CC graduate student as part of the course: Easel Paintings II: Painted Surfaces / Supervisor: Corey D’Augustine.

Laura McCann, Conservation Librarian, and Lou Di Gennaro, Special Collections Conservator, examined, and documented the objects with the exception of the coffin after it was loaned to the IFA-CC. McCann and Di Gennaro reassemble the work after Bloser completed the conservation treatment of the coffin. No conservators examined the artwork prior to IFA-CC loan.

**Description (Summary):**

Complex artwork composed of a rectangular painted coffin housing a prepared skeleton (human remains) of a female child, approximately 6 years old, wrapped textiles, and various small objects, mementos and trinkets placed by the artist. The human remains are "dressed" in a woven white dress and there are quarters placed in the eye sockets. Description of the textiles: One (1) yellow (possibly wool) woven blanket painted by the artist, stencil (image), in black and red spray applied paint. The image is of a person in chains. There are two (2) pieces of black textile both approximately 1 meter in size. One of the black textiles is polyester that has stray red paint in two places as well as masking tape. The other black textile is matte and woven. There is one (1) woven blue and maroon commercially made scarf. There is one (1) large black textile with white printing in Arabic (possibly a head or neck covering) and one (1) pink commercially made bath towel. Description of small objects, mementos and trinkets: Four (4) paper and toothpick constructed American Flags. Three (3) buttons, One (1) metal lighter, ten (10) small ornaments (between 1-3 inches in height) constructed from plastics and/or metal, Six (6) small rubber animals, One (1) textile flower, two (2) small containers, One (1) metal pin/stick, One (1) drink umbrella, One (1) metal key, one (1) googly eye, and a small amount of dried organic matter that appear to be flowers. (see NYU Libraries Barbara Goldsmith Book and Paper Conservation Lab for images captured in February 2016).

Coffin (without the contents) was loaned to IFA Conservation Center (IFA-CC) in 2015:CC IFA Loan No.: L.16.01.03. The object was disassembled prior to February 2016 with the contents removed from the painted coffin and housed in a secondary box at Fales Library & Special Collections in preparation for the

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loan by an employee of the Fales Library & Special Collection without consultation with the conservators. No documentation, written or photographic was recorded at the time of the loan.

**Examination Report February 2016:**

In February 2016, the human remains, textiles, small objects, mementos and trinkets were stored in a large corrugated archival box with a lip. The box is too small for the object, which resulted in a tooth and arm from the human remains becoming loose. Bloser created new a temporary storage box using corrugated boards in February 2016. McCann, Di Gennaro, and Bloser photographed each component of the work. (See NYU Barbara Goldsmith Book and Paper Lab for images).

McCann, Di Gennaro and Bloser consulted with and Director of the Fales Library & Special Collections Marvin J. Taylor and NYU Anthropologist Dr. Terry Harrison. Dr. Harrison identified the human remains. Marin J. Taylor described the artwork based on his visual memory of inspecting the work at acquisition and processing. [Bloser] The skeleton, according to the artist's personal journals and as told by Marion Scemama (artist's associate,) was purchased in Paris in the early 1980s along with another skeleton. There is a transit stamp on the bottom of the painted coffin referencing the Paris-Orly airport and its dimensions match the length and width of the skeleton, both suggesting that the box was original to the skeleton from the time of purchase in Paris. It is likely that the box was painted after its purchase and was used to store and transport the skeleton when it was not being exhibited. The skeleton was prepared with metal wire and adhesive and is the remains of an approximately 6 year-old girl. The general "clean" and intact state of the bones and the preparation method suggests this was a skeleton prepared for the market or for medical use, likely originating in India. [McCann] The remains were exhibited at the New Museum in 1990 as part of an installation and were also pictured in a number of the artists' photographs in the same attire. The remains were placed into the painted coffin in a burial arrangement sometime between the fall of 1990 and July of 1992. [Bloser] The coffin and its contents were acquired as part of The David Wojnarowicz Papers acquired by NYU Fales Library and Special Collections in September 1997 from Tom Rauffenbart, the executor of the artist's estate. The painted coffin was acquired from a storage unit on the West Seventeenth Street in Manhattan, where it was housed on the bottom shelf of the 7th floor storage unit.

**Condition report on Coffin [Bloser]**

This report describes the coffin without the objects. It was examined at the IFA-CC.

Date: 1990-1992 (?) / Materials: Wood, paint, metal hardware; Dimensions: 19cm (h) x 98.4cm (l) x 31cm (w) / 7 5/8" (h) x 38 3/4" (l) x 12 1/4" (w)

The work is a rectangular painted coffin constructed of mixed plywood; the lid is attached with two braided wire hinges wrapped through metal eye loops screwed in the back wall. Two 5" braided wire strands hang through two holes on the front wall. The top and four sides of the chest are painted white and uncoated; the interior and bottom side are unpainted. The lid is decorated with two painted flowers

- a smaller yellow flower wrapped around the stem of a larger red lily, and a hardware-like design: four Philips head screws painted at each corner on the lid, two decorative hinges with locks on either end painted from the lid to the back wall, and two round hinges on either end are painted from the lid to the front wall. For the purposes of this report, the front of the coffin refers to the long side of the coffin on the side of the lid opening, the back refers to the long sidewall that has the metal eye loop hinges for the lid. The top refers to the upper surface of the lid, interior to the inside of the box, and bottom to the bottom side of the object.

**Method of Manufacture (Coffin):** The coffin is hand-constructed of ½" and ¼" mixed plywood. Both the front and back walls of the coffin are 3-ply thick; the two sidewalls are single ply, with all four walls joined together and to the base with casing nails (fig. 2). The base board is shorter than the side walls, and is extended with a 2 1/2" wood board placed with its wood grain running perpendicular to the longer base board, the two are joined with a single joiner nail at the center. The lid of the box is secured with steel braided wire wrapped through two holes in the lid and two corresponding stainless steel eye loops that are screwed into the back wall. The lid was closed and presumably secured with the two 5" steel braided wires that now hang through the two holes in the front upper wall. It is likely they were threaded through the two corresponding holes on the lid, as evidenced by the surface abrasion around the holes. The box is unprimed and painted with a white house paint as an overall base coat on the outer four walls and top of the lid. The color decoration on the lid, front and back of the box is painted with synthetic paint, in some cases diluted as seen on the painted handles on both the front and back walls. **Markings:** The bottom side of the coffin has one black stamped marking of three lines: 'B-ORY CHADBOURNE', 'STAND', and '[unreadable]'. ORY is the airport code for the Paris – Orly Airport. It is possible this is a transit stamp, indicating the box passed through the Paris-Orly Airport. The lower left corner of the PR wall has painted initials in black: 'LF'.

**Condition:** The object (coffin) is in poor condition and exhibits brittle and cracking structural components, surface issues include cracking and flaking of the paint layer, as well as soiling and discoloration. **Structure:** There are multiple developing cracks along the wood grain direction on the top, front and back faces. Cracks are propagated further by the brittle, nearly dry, state of the wood, causing the paint layer to crack as well. The hinge mechanism for the lid causes misalignment and instability when open. Additionally, the wire has abraded the surface design and resulted in local areas of paint loss. **Surface:** The paint layer has suffered from apparent water damage, causing delamination of the paint layer from the wood substrate, staining and possible mold growth around the lower half of the sidewalls. There appears to be crystalline growth between the paint layer and wood substrate. Paint is delaminating, with localized flaking, cupping, and cracking, particularly around the water damaged areas, lid hinges, and areas used for handling. There are surface dirt, fingerprints, footprints and other various staining and marks on all surfaces.

### **Treatment Proposals**

**Coffin:** [Bloser] As an object in an archive, this work should be stable for frequent moving and handling as required for research. Due to the nature of its historical use, all evidence of use should be retained. Remove surface dust with soft-bristled brush. Consolidate cracks and instability in the wood with an appropriate "reversible" adhesive, tested for solubility, dimensional stability that is sympathetic to the dimensional change inherent in wood, aging properties, viscosity, strength and appearance. Consolidate between the paint layer and wood structure with appropriate reversible adhesive, tested for solubility, appearance, and aging properties. Improve hinge mechanism, if possible, by creating a removable support that allows the lid to be propped open for researchers, which would also help minimize further abrasion caused by the hinge system on the paint layer. If possible, reduce staining and discoloration with gentle dry cleaning system. Local areas of inpainting may also be considered to reduce the appearance of this damage. Loss compensation in the paint layer with reversible paints to match surrounding areas of the painted surface. Time permitting, construct supporting mount for future handling and storage.

**Artwork:** [McCann] - Document components and consult with Fales staff to determine arrangement of components. House the small objects in protective housings if their original arrangement is uncertain. Reattach detached human remain element (tooth and arm) as per recommendation of Dr. Harrison. Reassemble objects into coffin. House reassembled object in protective box that will prevent light damage and protect coffin during handling. Provide access to photo documentation to researchers to limit handling. Limit access to object due to fragility and complex composition.

**Testing (Coffin):** The object was examined under normal illumination, long-wave ultraviolet illumination, and magnification. Microsamples from the paint layer were taken and examined under magnification; they were analyzed using the Alpha FTIR Spectrometer and the Raman spectrometer. Analysis of both the tan and white samples (referred hereafter as tan and white samples) confirmed the presence of calcium carbonate, with peaks identified at 1395 and 1485 cm<sup>-1</sup> respectively and a second peak at 870 cm<sup>-1</sup> in both spectra. Weak sharp peaks at 1737cm<sup>-1</sup> occur in both the tan\_course and white spectra. Peaks in this area are often associated with acrylic, although no library spectra provided sufficient matches. It is possible that a commercial acrylic binder of some kind is still present in the weak and underbound paint. There is a shoulder peak at 1246cm<sup>-1</sup> in both spectra that is unaccounted for however, and further spectral library comparison is suggested. The spectra of the white and tan course sample differed in two areas of the fingerprint region suggesting that a change in either the stratification or composition of the paint occurred after the water damage. Silicates are a common filler in commercial paints that occur in the 1000cm<sup>-1</sup> range. The white sample showed a peak at 1085 cm<sup>-1</sup> consistent with silica and the tancourse sample showed a peak at 1013 cm<sup>-1</sup> consistent with talc, another form of silicate. The white sample showed a single peak at 711 cm<sup>-1</sup> consistent with calcium carbonate, while the Tan course sample showed two distinct twin peaks at 725 cm<sup>-1</sup> and 700 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Spectrum peaks for Talc align with the tan\_course peaks at 1014 cm<sup>-1</sup>, as previously mentioned, and at the second of the twin peaks at 700 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Dolomite, a calcium magnesium carbonate often used as an

extender in commercial paints, has spectral peaks consistent with the tan\_course sample at 1485 cm<sup>-1</sup>, 870 cm<sup>-1</sup>, and at the first of the twin peaks at 725 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Raman Analysis: Raman Analysis was performed using a Raman Spectrometer. Spectra were analyzed using OPUS software and compared with libraries gathered by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See attached images for collected spectra. Analysis with Raman identified calcium carbonate and rutile, a form of titanium dioxide, in the white sample. Peak analysis of the Raman spectra from the white sample is attached. Spectra from the tan\_course and tan\_fine produced a high level of fluorescence with spectral peaks equivalent to the level of noise in the spectrum. Intensity and acquisition time were adjusted but no useable spectra for these two samples were obtained.

[McCann] Bloser tested surface cleaning methods (brush, cotton, vulcanized rubber sponge, PVOH sponge, low suction and soft brush). PVOH was rejected as it was too abrasive. Bloser tested adhesive suitability (Butvar B98 ethanol, 5% Isinglass w/v water, 4 % Ethulose w/v water, 4% Ethulose w/v ethanol/water, ~40 % BEVA 371 VM&P Naptha, Laropal A 81 Petroleum distillate mixture. Butvar B98 ethanol, 5% Isinglass w/v water, 4 % Ethulose w/v water/ethanol were rejects due to unacceptable changes to appearance; 4% Ethulose w/v water was found to have limited application along box edges. Both the Beva and Laropal were found to be acceptable. Laropal did create a shiny surface, acceptable for use as an isolation layer.

More information on testing can be found in Bloser's documentation: 2015:CC IFA Loan No.: L.16.01.03.

### **Treatment Report**

[McCann] Feb. 2016: Photo documentation and re-housing of each individual object originally stored in the coffin. Each small object was rehoused in tissue and polyethylene bags. Loose right front tooth was inserted manually. After conservation of the coffin (see below) the human remains were wrapped in yellow blanket based on Marvin J. Taylor's visual memory of the object. The coffin was lined with the black textiles, as per M.T. The towel and the remaining textiles were placed on top of the remains. The bagged small objects were also placed in the coffin. The coffin was placed into a custom drop front archival box and labeled.

#### **Coffin Treatment [Bloser]:**

- Constructed mount to stabilize the lid during treatment and for future storage.
- Removed surface dirt from top, four side walls, and interior with low suction and a soft bristle brush.
- Removed further surface dirt and detritus from the exterior painted surface with vulcanized natural rubber under light mechanical pressure.
- Consolidated flaking paint occurring along the edges of the object with an adhesive solution of 4% (w/v) ethulose (ethyl hydroxethyl cellulose) in water cut with a solution of 1:1 ethyl alcohol (200 proof) and water. Tidelines were controlled using desiccated blotter paper.

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- Consolidated lifting and flaking paint, and reattached loose fragments with ~40% (v/v) BEVA® 371 in VM&P Naptha applied either by brush or by injection with single use insulin syringes. Excess consolidant was removed with Benzine and a cotton swab. Tidelines were controlled using desiccated blotter paper.
- Areas of loss in the paint surface to be filled were first consolidated with ~20% (v/v) BEVA® 371 in VM&P Naptha and then sealed with an isolation layer of Laropal A 81 applied in multiple coatings. Excess adhesive was removed with Benzine and a cotton swab. Tidelines were controlled using desiccated blotter paper.
- Losses to the paint surface were filled with BEVA® Gesso and textured both mechanically and with heat tools. Excess fill material was mechanically removed after the material had properly set.
- Fills were toned with dry pigment, pastel and 20% (w/v) Aquazol 200 in water

**Access / Reversibility of Treatment**

Access should be limited due to complex and fragile nature. Photographs should be used as surrogates when appropriate. Object should not be handled directly, gloves should be provided. Monitoring: Object should be monitored for continued flaking and lifting of the paint layer. The crystal formation beneath the lifting paint should be monitored and noted for any increase.

Reversal of Repair: Fills can be removed mechanically and by softening with a petroleum spirit.

(Full conservation documentation, including testing data and images can be access by contacting NYU Libraries Barbara Goldsmith Book and Paper Conservation Lab.)