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Tête à tête with David Elliott

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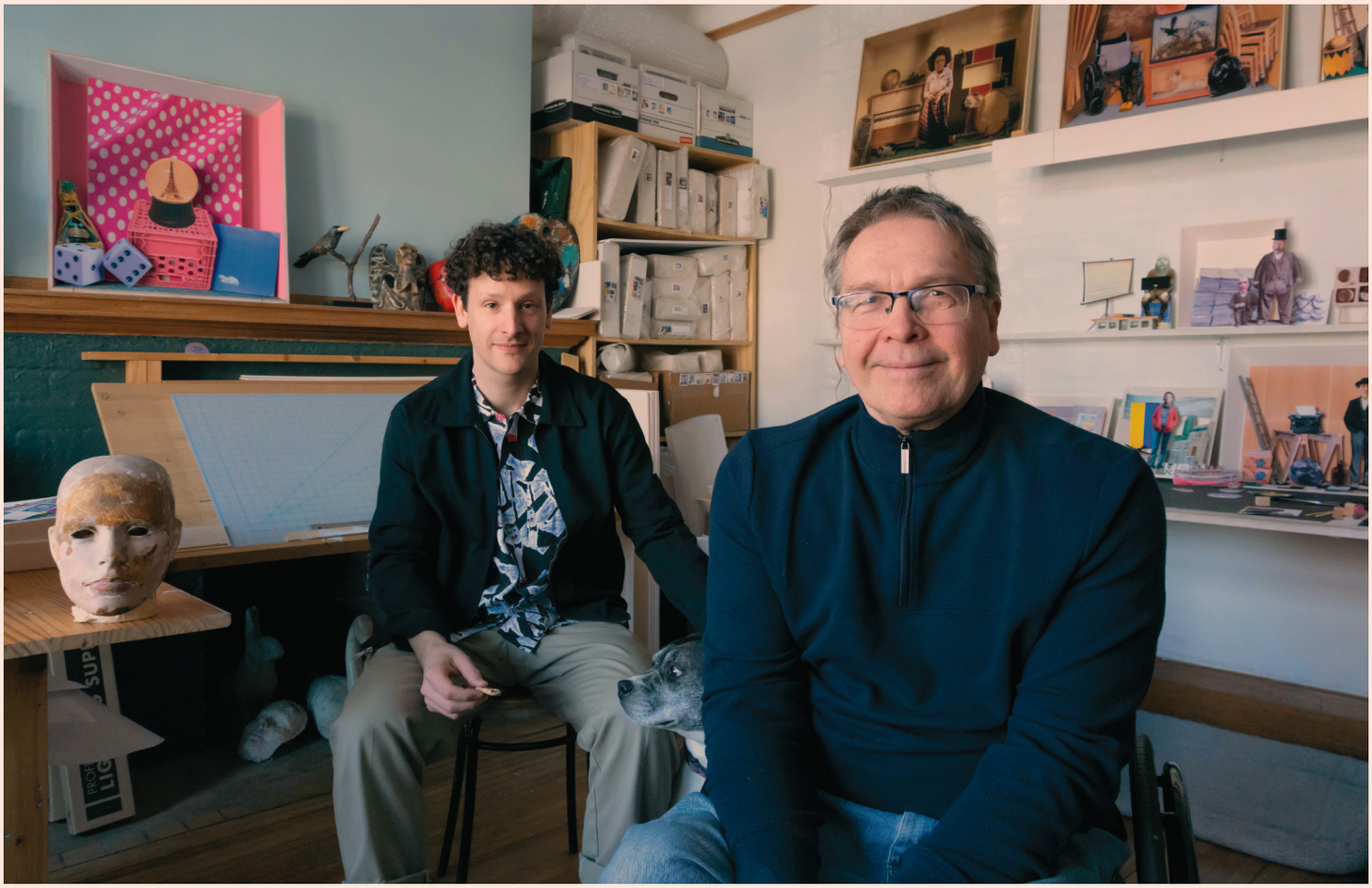


In 2002, I went to the Saidye Bronfman Arts Centre to see David Elliott's exhibition *Instant Karma*. As a twenty-year-old art student, I was too young to truly appreciate the title—that would come later—but the paintings, the paintings! They were huge, loud, and mysterious, but also friendly, and impossible to ignore. The next semester, I forced my way into David's overbooked Painting and Pop Culture class at Concordia University. Just like his paintings, his teaching made you feel that you could grab the stuff the world is made of. Whatever subject or style you were into, photorealist portraits or doodles, video games or graffiti, love songs or phone books, it was okay, you could, and probably should, turn it into a painting. This kind of street-corner magic came as a revelation to generations of students. Twenty years later, it remains the central force in David's work. During that time, I have been, in turn, his student, his studio assistant, his studio mate, and his colleague; I witnessed his transition from gigantic paintings—the making of which his body no longer allows—to intimate 3D collages in wooden boxes. In his recent exhibition at Galerie Nicolas Robert, *Sweet Spot*, twenty-five small to miniature-size recent works offered a striking demonstration of how emotionally powerful his intricate theatrics have become. The following interview has been edited from a conversation conducted by email and by phone.

↑ Nicolas Grenier, David Elliott, and Daisy, the family dog, in Elliott's Montréal studio, 2022.
Photo : Nicolas Grenier

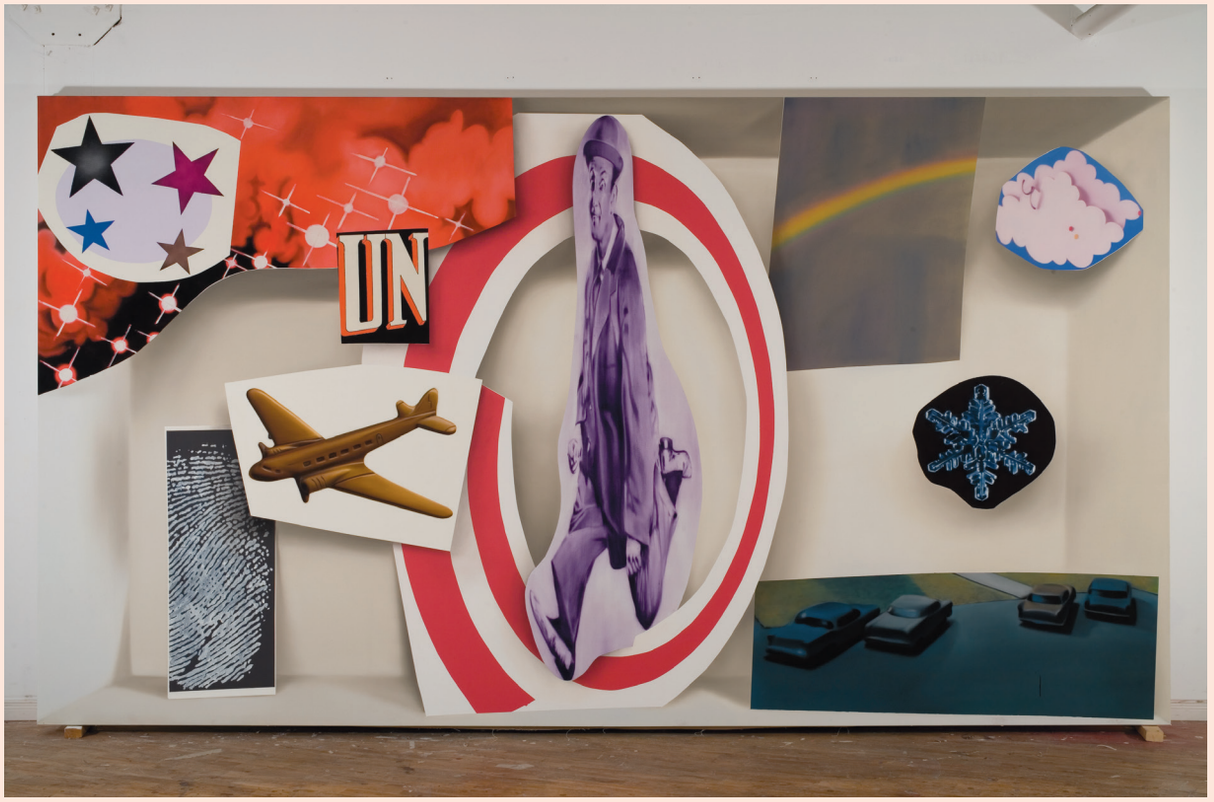
David Elliott
→ *Chutes*, 2007.
Photo : Richard-Max Tremblay, collection Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, courtesy of the artist

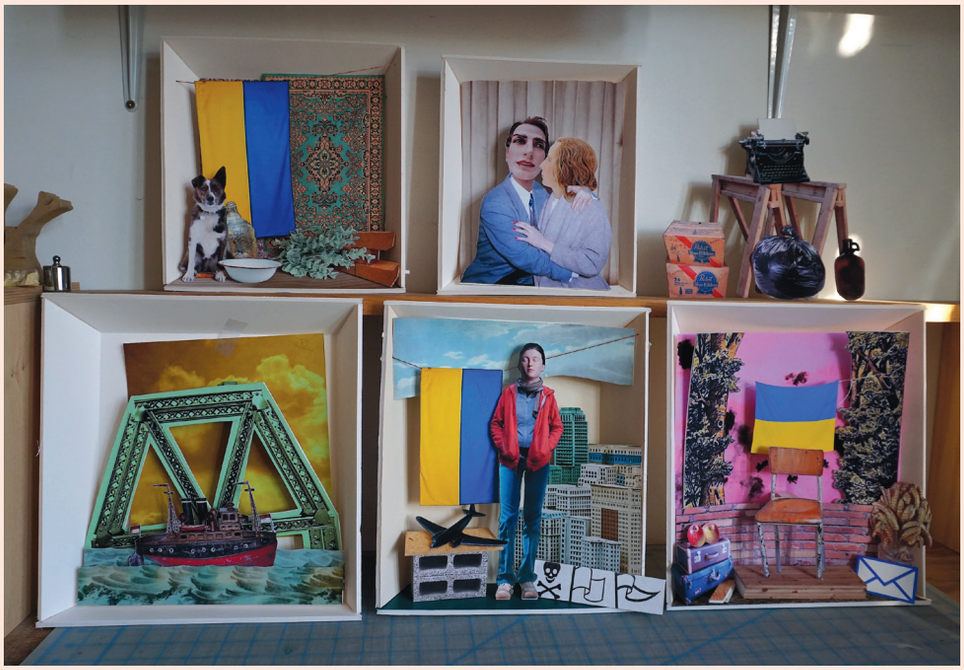
NG When I walked into the gallery and began to absorb your latest works, my first impression was wonder and fascination with the attractive visual stimuli, from the forms of life that have emerged in these new boxes. However, as the pictures and symbols began to sink in, I was struck by an impression of precarity. Some scenes are rawer than what I'm used to seeing in your work. The spaces, many of them inhabited by a single character, feel very existential. The vernacular of the artist studio is present throughout the exhibition, but here and there we also find signs that suggest survival, poverty, and loneliness, such as a bare mattress and unfinished walls. Is it just my interpretation or was this a deliberate choice?

DE In one sense, the exhibition title *Sweet Spot* is sincere. Like most artists, I'm always looking for that state of grace where everything falls into place, but more specifically I was trying to create spaces for meditation. In troubling times, we often seek out solace and renewal in small private spaces. I'm not sure I see the pieces as being as dark as you do, but you're right, there is probably a greater sense of hard times and entrapment in them and there is certainly a lot of debris. Partly, it's the two years of COVID, and as you know, I was forced out of the studio where I had been for over twenty years. I'm sure these things affected the work. It's interesting that you're asking about social or political issues. There probably is a growing aspect of social realism in my practice. I had a pair of figures related to Bill 21 that weren't included in the show. And lately, I have been responding to the war in Ukraine in as immediate a way as possible. With photo-based collage, I can work quickly and get more detailed and specific about the world.

NG The collage boxes depict tight, isolated spaces. But all of them contain cultural objects that imply a much bigger world. Culture seems to appear as "the way out," no?

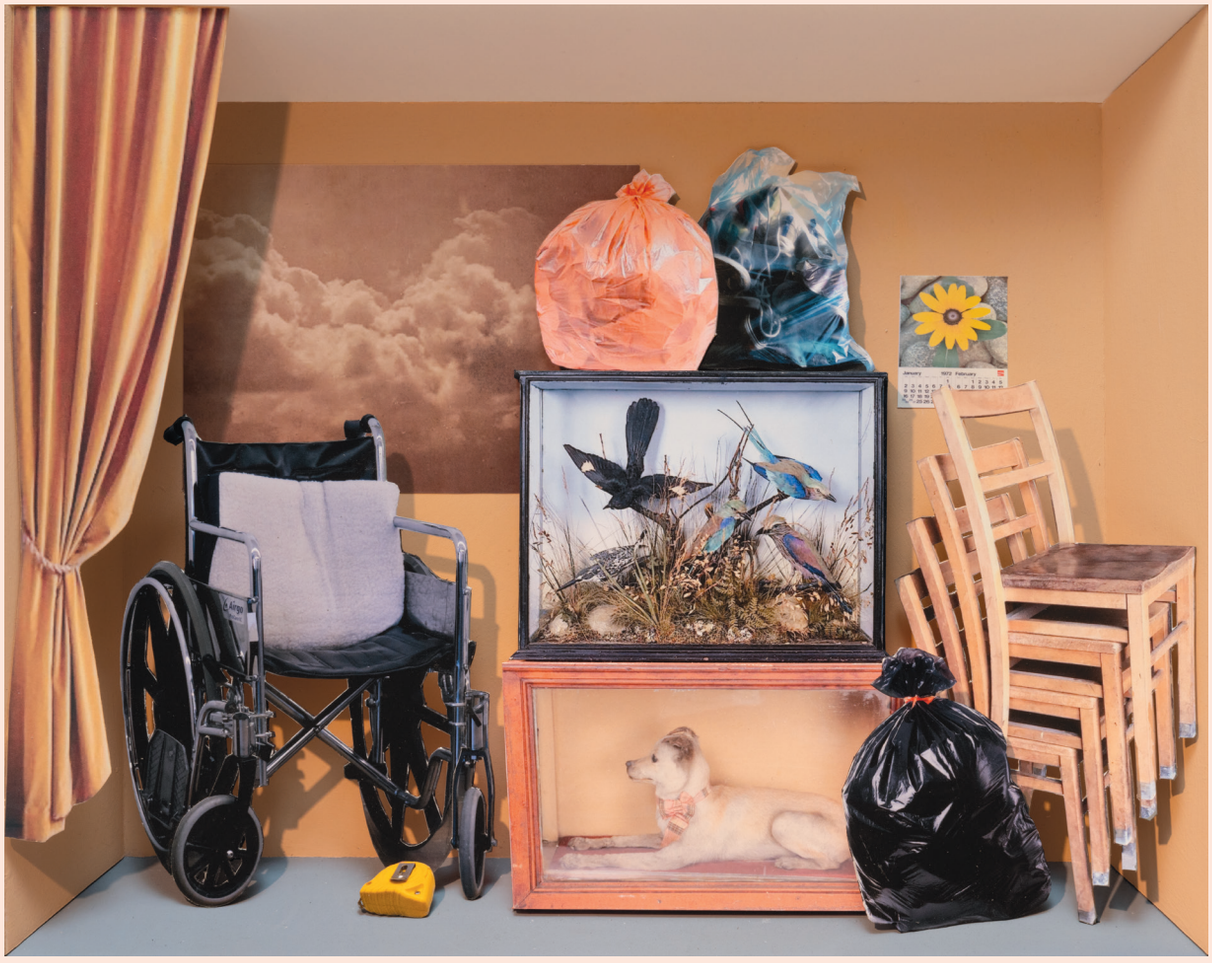
DE The tiny off-square collage boxes function a bit like shrines or time capsules for me. My first studio and hideaway was in my parents' basement. As a teenager, it was where I drew, painted, read, watched movies on TV, listened to music, and contemplated the world. Some of the new boxes try to recreate the intimacy and thrill of this.





← **David Elliott**
Ukraine, installation of collage-boxes, 2022.
Photo : courtesy of the artist

↓ **David Elliott**
Salle d'attente, 2021.
Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of the artist



NG *Salle d'attente* (2021), for those who know that you're in a wheelchair, seems like a self-portrait. It's a beautiful scene, but the chairs have been stacked, refuse is piling up, the calendar has been there for fifty years, and the animals are stuffed. I know you like to play games that touch on metaphysics. What's happening with time and space here?

DE All the wheelchair ones are self-portraits in a way. This one was prompted by the idea of limbo. Living in an in-between state. The idea of a waiting room. I suppose that's metaphysical. Where are we? What is this world made of? In terms of *pittura metafisica*, it's always less to do with subject matter and more to do with the construction of the image and the spatial games and paradoxes put into play, like the placement of Giorgio Morandi's bottles and tin boxes. Are they overlapping or tangential? Flat or modelled? Lately, to enlarge the perspectival games in my collage boxes, I have been introducing more actual 3D elements. So, in *Salle d'attente,* there is an interplay between the literal three-dimensionality of the vitrines and the other elements, which have strong volumetric character but are simply flat cut-outs.

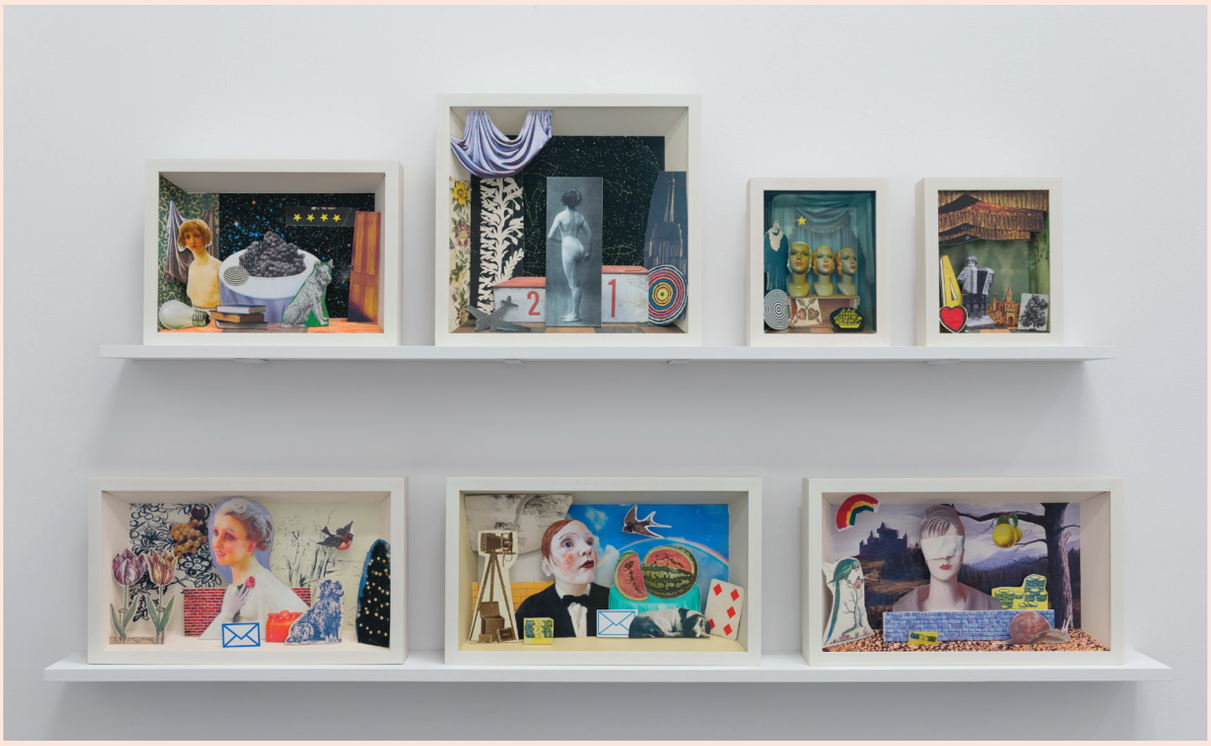
NG Let's talk more about that. That interplay between 2D and 3D was a big part of your work as a painter, but of course, with paintings we knew that we were looking at a flat surface and that any volume was an illusion. With your collages the scale is much smaller, but they're boxes with actual volume, usually about three inches deep. The smaller the collage, the deeper they feel. Within their respective pictorial spaces, how did the change in scale and materiality affect your sense of proportion, of what feels real, what feels small or big, minor or major?

DE I've always been fascinated by the 2D/3D interplay in pictures—the impossibility of portraying our experience of a 360-degree world on a flat surface or trying to encapsulate it in a little box. Painters saw the humour in this and often played games with this dichotomy. I love David Hockney's *Play Within a Play* (1963), in which the figure pushes up against the surface of the canvas, trying to get out, and James Rosenquist's image of a thick pat of butter melting in a frying pan, sliding down the picture plane. I suppose it's easier to create space with atmospheric effects, as Turner, Rothko, and Frankenthaler did, but I've always been drawn to hard plastic forms (Léger's cylinders, fedora hats, and fat fingers, or de Chirico's piles of stretchers) and how they can combine to create weird sorts of complicity. I try to do something similar with my own repertoire of invented figures, garbage bags, milk crates, stacked chairs, and sheets of plywood.

It may sound strange, but I think my understanding of how space works in art came from hearing the Beatles' *A Day in the Life* (1967) as a teenager. I suppose I recognized in the song the opening and closing of forms, an orchestration of fragments to create an inspiring whole. I don't think I'd ever thought in those terms before. Over time, I would come to understand how important this rupture and reconfiguring of space was to artmaking. In my own collages and paintings, I purposely combine various languages in a single work to create different pockets of meaning.

Scale is an ongoing question for me. I spent so many years working on enormous canvases, some as large as ten by eighteen feet, and now I work on little collage boxes, no bigger than twenty-four inches. Coming of age when I did, it seemed like "the bigger the better." It was exciting to work on a gigantic scale. My imagery was fanciful, cosmic. I imagined my shows as circuses. In retrospect, not all of the paintings were great—I have destroyed many of them—but it was always the event that I found important. The making of them, which was a kind of athletic performance for me, and then the exhibitions with big spaces and lots of people. I confess I miss the "wow factor" of it all. In the art world, scale often connotes value, a major work versus a minor work.

I have come to appreciate the different way that the smaller collage boxes enter people's lives. A collector who bought two of my very smallest collage boxes told me that she took one of them with her when she travelled, placing it on her night table like an alarm clock. I found that very touching. Lately I've been thinking about scale in



psychological terms, human terms. Some days we feel big (confident, successful) and other days small (useless, ineffectual). How do you get these subjective states into an artwork? Perhaps art is simply the record of human neurosis. Kurt Vonnegut used to say that art's function is simply to make us feel less lonely. There is certainly some truth to that.

NG This brings us back to the subject matter in these recent works. Earlier I asked you about loneliness and solitude, and how the darker aspects of these works are transcended by culture. Their richness and specificity seem to come less from the face value of a subject and more from the distinctive mix of objects that you've collaged together. Can you talk about the different provenances of the elements you chose, the significance that the source material carries into the works, and how it shapes the subject matter?

DE In essence, artists take the stuff of the world and rearrange it to create an alternate universe. The provenance of the elements I use is various. I have a trove of old encyclopedias and textbooks that I still draw upon, but now I mostly use the internet a lot or grab film stills. Lately I've been employing relatively neutral imagery, single standing figures, basic material goods and situations. My days in the studio revolve around sifting through images and seeing if I can put something together. Sometimes, I'll begin with a head (normally a wax or silicone mannequin head) and then try to construct a body that has personality. The figure will then require some sort of setting. Using a simple foam-core construction of a room, I can paint or wallpaper the walls, put linoleum or hardwood on the floors, add windows, furniture, and so on. Of course, it's all printed digital imagery. For instance, a recent collage box, *Yellow Room* (2021), which is a relatively simple scene of a man sitting on a radiator near a window, is constructed from twenty-five separate image sources. My goal is to make these various strands come together into something believable and compelling, while at the same time maintaining its artificiality, the strangeness of it being pieced together. The term *magic realism* is overused but, through all my little fakeries, I am after a heightened sense of reality.

When I was using collage as a prelude to painting, I often chose elements that I really wanted to paint, either something that was going to be fun to do or something that would pose an interesting technical challenge. Without the demands of having to paint them, the new

David Elliott
↑ Installation of collage-boxes in the exhibition *Million Dollar Bash*, Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran, 2017.
Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of the artist

David Elliott
→ *Yellow Room*, 2021.
Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of the artist

collage boxes can be more complicated. Whereas the older work compressed and combined various sources to create a mobile, unknowable sense of time and place, I'm now more consciously playing with specific time frames. During the Trump presidency I used aspects of the Gilded Age for the body of work *Million Dollar Bash* (2017), in which men and women appear as early venture capitalists or cabaret performers. More recently, I have been exploring my student years in the late sixties and early seventies with Hare Krishna musicians, record and book collectors, bohemian apartments. It's interesting that so many artists have chosen to address contemporary issues through the lens of another era, adopting outmoded or retro iconography (Neo Rauch, Marcel Dzama, Paula Rego, William Kentridge, Kerry James Marshall). I'm not in the same league as them, but, in my own modest way, I am trying to create invented visual worlds that are rich enough for people to believe in and crawl into.