

EXTERNAL COMBUSTION

Four Sacramento Sculptors

Nathan Cordero
Julia Couzens
Chris Daubert
Dave Lane



July 13–September 22, 2013
Guest curated by Renny Pritikin

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Sacramento was little more than a name on a map for me when I began work in 2004 as the director and curator of the Nelson Gallery at UC Davis, just down the road from the state capitol. Over the course of eight years I was educated to the realities of the region's rich and burgeoning art scene. This exhibition presents four of the region's leading mid-career artists working in sculpture: Nathan Cordero, Julia Couzens, Chris Daubert, and Dave Lane. What they have in common might be summarized as an uncompromising embrace of the conceptual tradition. The values that their work therefore reveals include a rough kind of beauty; use of modest, found or industrial materials; and license to refer to and incorporate aspects of art history and the full range of contemporary culture.

External Combustion: Four Sacramento Sculptors

Small metal objects fill the soil all around us at least a foot deep, like nuts in a brownie. It explodes the notion of "time capsule," and makes it redundant. Like our radio and television signals radiating portraits of humanity out into space forever, our topsoil also contains an ongoing image of what we do, make, carry, and lose. Nathan Cordero has carried around a metal detector for the past year proving it; it should not be surprising, because Cordero has been trolling through American culture for more than a decade of art making.

His earliest efforts sifted through mass media language for text that resonated. He would pluck a phrase or entire headline from women's magazine covers and incise it into wood veneer, or paper, jumbled together without spacing or punctuation, and all but unreadable. This was a parallel strategy to that of concrete poetry: taking words as isolated objects, like bricks or lost coins and emphasizing their visuality. For Cordero it was also a form of working in the graffiti tradition, but, ironically, in a private way in the studio. It is also related to the work of such artists as Christopher Wool and Kay Rosen, who paint words and phrases on canvas, and even Ed Ruscha, more distantly.

A second, parallel body of Cordero's work involves combing through the detritus of his studio for the most modest, abject things in the world—pencil stubs, cigarettes, push pins, unrolled condoms, and BIC lighters—and then scratching rebus-like drawings of them into found, painted wood facings. Thus, in the context of both his text and his drawing pieces, we can see Cordero's recent obsession to force the earth to reveal its secret caches as part of the same oeuvre. Cordero grew up in Sacramento where history was made by fanatical men who reduced mountains to mud in search of flakes of gold. His wall installation of metal objects he has found in parks and lots around Sacramento is a lonely echo of that history. Like the forty-niners, Cordero is an optimist and a romantic; he believes that art and history (if not wealth) can be extracted from where it is hidden all around us.

Like Cordero, vintage metal objects fascinate Dave Lane, but unlike Cordero, Lane works at a very large sculptural scale. His found and reconceived farm machinery has the presence that only mass can suggest. We can bang our knuckles against the side of Lane's objects and they are undeniably weighty and *there*. As much gravitas as his sculpture has, for the artist they are actually only half present in this world because they also exist as embodiments of Lane's cosmological narrative. For example, a gigantic tricycle-like cast-iron vehicle is the otherwise invisible means for a planet or star to travel, mounted atop, through space.

The dozens of pieces Lane has fashioned over the decades expand with the universe, taking shape to move the story forward and then changing as the cosmos is formed and its saga evolves. His titles include *Weapon of Mass Construction*, *Machine for Making Stars*, and *Device for Making Twilight*. There is yet another layer as well: autobiography. Many of the pieces are named after family and Lane himself appears in his narrative box sculptures as a tiny figure in an overwhelming environment, often in conversation with an equally small,

hobby shop woman. These are among the few pieces that dare to step into exclusive Joseph Cornell territory and actually more than hold their own. Lane is an autodidact who is among the most original living California artists, yet this is his first exhibition of note outside the Central Valley, offering a significant opportunity for Bay Area residents.

Recycling companies have only recently been able to take on the kind of plastics that make up yogurt containers and strawberry baskets. Once again science trails behind artistic innovation, as Julia Couzens has been using the distinctive green plastic of the berry holders for complex and arresting wall installations for several years. She breaks them down into five flat surfaces and assembles dozens of these into mattes that, when hung on the wall, are reminiscent of the work of such artists as the great Ghanaian artist, El Anatsui, who also assembles discarded trash into 2D wall works of sweeping authority.

Artists crave access to that which is visually denied them. They want to see it if it exists, or want to make it if it does not. That is Nate Cordero wanting to know what is buried in his backyard, and it is the same tension that Julia Couzens plucks at when she makes wrapped and undivulged shapes. Like early Claes Oldenberg or the late Judith Scott, Couzens's mysterious objects with their garish color combinations are visual piñatas of desire.

Chris Daubert is the de facto art mayor of Sacramento, active for more than two decades as a sculptor, educator, and curator, and legendarily generous to younger artists. While he never has settled for a signature style, in the past decade he has an ongoing commitment to electronic work in widely varied light box installations and sound-making sculpture. It is hard for us to grasp the math behind the reality that we never get to see the dark side of the moon. Daubert's installation, *Sonata* whose hulking metallic nature echoes the choices of Dave Lane, is a wall with a two-sided personality.

One side has sensors that detect the visitor's presence, and the other side has devices that make small rattling noises at the same point in the wall at which one stands. Our behavior has a real but unobtainable reaction in the world. But if we walk around to the other side, no sound ensues, unless another visitor triggers the device on the other side. We can never exactly know the ramifications of our own actions, but we can see the results of those of other people.

In addition, Daubert installs *The Wind* on the gallery ceiling—a flock of silhouetted birds in light boxes. Birds inhabit a universe that we only glimpse in our peripheral vision and hearing, yet is invisibly all around us every day. Daubert parodies this human fallibility with his all-but-unseen flight of birds high above our heads, and in effect as distant and unseen as the back of the moon. Even if seen, they are symbols or cultural artifacts—not the real thing—which sit on the roof of the gallery, undetected.

As residents of a regional art economy, these artists are not as familiar to an audience outside of that area as they might otherwise be. Artists who find themselves in such a situation must invent a kind of internal bellows to generate the sense of urgency that wider sustained attention might engender; an internal forge. This exhibition is an external manifestation of that burning interiority.

Renny Pritikin
Guest Curator

RENNY PRITIKIN has been director of New Langton Arts, and chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, both in San Francisco, and was most recently the director of the Nelson Gallery and Fine Arts Collection at UC Davis. He is a senior adjunct professor in the Curatorial Practice graduate program at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and writes frequently for Art Practical, the online critical journal.

Exhibition Checklist

Height precedes width precedes depth. All works courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

NATHAN CORDERO

Fifty pieces to fall in love with, 2012
Paper
24 x 30 in.

Headlines, 2013
Wood and paper
54 x 82 in.

*It has been so long since someone
has touched you like I have*, 2013
Metal relics and scrap unearthed by
metal detector
108 x 144 in.

*I will not write on other peoples
property, I will . . .*, 2008
Chalkboard and paint
48 x 48 in.

Puberty, 2012
Mixed media
42 x 51 in.

Think pink, 2013
Paper and wood
45 x 7 in.

Traditional herbal pills add length, 2008
Wood and paint
46 x 72 in.

Untitled, 2012
Found wood, photos, and other found
mixed media
48 x 120 in.

Untitled, 2013
Razors and broken door
36 x 72 in.

Untitled, 2013
Mixed media
24 x 84 in.

JULIA COUZENS

Fading fast, but slowly . . ., 2011
Plastic fruit baskets
192 x 240 in.
Courtesy of JayJay Gallery, Sacramento

Heavy Sacrifice, 2011
Mixed threads, wire, rope, yarn, and
found textiles
32 x 25 x 21 in.
Courtesy of JayJay Gallery, Sacramento

Insy-Outsy, 2013
Mixed threads, wire, rope, yarn, and
found textiles
33 x 31 x 21 in.
Courtesy of JayJay Gallery, Sacramento

Sweet, 2011
Mixed threads, plastic, wire, rope, and
yarn
34 x 28 x 23 in.
Courtesy of JayJay Gallery, Sacramento

Weakest Link, 2013
Mixed threads, wire, rope, yarn, and
found textiles
38 x 29 x 26 in.
Courtesy of JayJay Gallery, Sacramento

CHRIS DAUBERT

Sonata, 2013
Motion detectors, solenoids,
Tuned metal ringers, electric
circuitry, and painted wood frame
84 x 14 x 240 in.

The Wind, 2013
Formed acrylic, LED panels,
electrical wiring, and paint
24 x 36 x 400 in.

DAVE LANE

Device for Creating Stars, Model A.,
2010–2012
Steel and antique parts
162 x 72 x 108 in.

Fifty Naked Ladies, 2007–2010
10 units, approximately 8 x 6 x 3
inches each

Milo's Birthday, 2013
Steel and antique parts
132 x 108 x 60 in.

Preparation, 2009
Little people, wax, antique box, twigs,
branches, and metal table
42 x 15 x 12 in.

Prescription for an Errant Empire,
2013
Steel and antique parts
54 x 12 x 12 in.

Public Program

Wednesday, August 14, 7:00 pm

Artists' Panel Discussion moderated by guest curator Renny Pritikin

Gatehouse Gallery

\$10 General Public / \$5 Members. Please RSVP to meagan@dirosaart.org or 707.226.5991, ext. 27.

Acknowledgments

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Cover image: Dave Lane, *Device for Creating Stars, Model A.*, 2010-2012. Courtesy of the artist.