YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN I’LL SHOW YOU THE NEVER

2012 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition
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June 8 – 29, 2012

Daniel Brickman
Kyle Dunn
Dani Galietti
Katherine Nulicek
Terry Peterson
Erika Romero
Jared Theis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Material Culture by Hearne Pardee ......................................................... 5
MFA THESIS CANDIDATES with essays by Renny Pritikin
Daniel Brickman ................................................................. 6
Kyle Dunn ................................................................. 10
Dani Galietti .............................................................. 14
Katherine Nulicek .......................................................... 18
Terry Peterson ............................................................. 22
Erika Romero .............................................................. 26
Jared Theis ................................................................. 30

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................... 34
Here at Davis we think a lot about basic needs – agriculture, food and wine. We’re rooted in material production. Materials provide a sense of security; they provide shelter as well as sustenance. It’s an institutional frame that lends its particular context to the production and study of art.

Graduate study inspires a focus on basic needs, on thoughts about origins, about the security to be found in concrete essentials. But even when artists use common materials directly, expressive and symbolic associations arise, for once materials are brought into the studio they are engaged in culture: their nature and origin are relevant in new ways, as are their physical texture and appearance. They’re already charged with expressive potential.

The studio is above all a place where materials get worked on. Art deals not so much with materials in themselves, as with the magic of materials, their transformation. Objects are fired or polished, personalized. Some processes bring in materials and objects associated with other times - with industry, domestic life, or consumerism, while other art forms are based in highly refined materials like oil paint and ceramic clay. These materials have become “media”, and media are traditionally a vehicle for some other content, most often an image. Digital technology has further diffused the directness of art processes based in materials. As content is dematerialized, there’s a new distance. Art seems more internalized, as what’s personal seems harder to locate; gone is the immediate contact with things.

Yet new technology also brings new insight into the making of art. During their study at Davis, this group of graduate students has witnessed two particularly striking applications of new technology: the Google Art Project, which establishes an online intimacy with paintings, and Werner Herzog’s Cave of Dreams, a 3-D film in which the most advanced cinematography engages in dialogue with the oldest art known. The sophistication of images worked on the irregular surface of cave walls sheds an ironic light on our own culture of materials, in which ideas of purity, returning to essentials and clearing the ground seem themselves a highly refined product of advanced civilization, and our most advanced technology a means to get at our most primitive impulses.

As art becomes accessible in new ways, it’s obvious that the material level is only one of many layers that combine to generate meanings. Like food, art is a material deeply processed and ritualized by culture. Materials convey embedded memories, subconscious associations. At Davis, where students aren’t categorized by medium, materials are constantly put into play and their meaning recalibrated. If there’s no pure, essential meaning in materials, then it’s up to our most informed judgment, developed in shared experience, to establish priorities. Graduate school and the research university bring people together to renegotiate these meanings and to establish common commitments to what’s important.

Today these graduating students share the results of their material investigations, as they prepare to extend that process beyond the UC Davis community.

Hearne Pardee
Chair, Art Studio
Daniel Brickman’s MFA exhibition will consist of several large, roughly circular objects, whose complex interactions—and stark black and white coloration—will amount to a lecture on the possible spatial relationships of similar but distinct forms. Such a set of works is more commonly executed in outdoor art: Brickman’s installation will be the more unusual for including the surrounding architecture of the gallery in the conversation.

One of Brickman’s objects, a human-scale object containing both converse and convex sides, might remind the viewer of such artists as Anish Kapoor, who is known to explore saturated color in three dimensions (and in which the depth is obfuscated by darkness). Brickman is less of a painter and more a sculptor: he’s as interested in the stuff he’s invented for his surfaces as anything else. That stuff is an amalgam of sawdust, sumi ink and other proprietary secrets, that comes out kind of like black cottage cheese. This goop will also be used to create a Serra-like delineation of the walls, ceiling and floor of the Nelson Gallery in a kind of squared-up circle.

Brickman’s central work for his MFA exhibition is an enormous black perfect circle that has a diameter (and thus height) of some 15 feet. Its crisp black line in space focuses the eye on the whiteness beyond; we’re forced to be a shrunken Alice looking through a keyhole at a gigantic world beyond, an art that we look through as much as at. Together his black objects are, like a murder of crows, both ominous and malleable in space.
lens (detail), 2012
multi-purpose glue-all, sawdust, and sumi-ink
81" x 81" x 11"
(other images inspiration for this piece)
Kyle Dunn is a painter and sculptor whose sculptures look like they’ve tumbled out of the paintings, like ladders off the back of a pickup truck. That is, he seems to resolve shapes and colors reciprocally, or ambidextrously, in two or three dimensions. It’s a neat trick, like being Bob Hoskins in *Roger Rabbit*, able to negotiate effortlessly between toon and real world representations of reality.

There’s a smattering of modernist references at play. The very notion of trying to be—separately—both a sculptor and painter is moored to the careers of Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp and Degas of one hundred years ago. Furthermore, the paintings are suggestive of many works by Joan Miro, in the way eccentric objects or painted events take place isolated from each other in a flattened picture plane. The relationship of his figures to their ground is complex and everchanging, playful. Finally, the twentieth century is invoked by Dunn’s three-dimensional work: if a metal scavenger/vandal were caught halfway through the act of yanking a section off of a larger John Chamberlain, the resulting evidence would resemble Dunn’s metal and colored-plastic sculptures.

We can certainly hypothesize a parallel fin de siècle psychology for artists in both 1912 and 2012. New electronic technologies both then and now speed up the sloughing of inherited artistic form and practice. Kyle Dunn and so many others rummage through modernists’ closets for something spiffy to try on for size today. It’s the epitome of their generation’s attitude toward the uses to which the recent past can be put: as a place to start, a dense blank canvas, a noisy silence.

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Decoy, 2012
acrylic and spray paint on PVC panel
68" x 24" x 16"

Pipes, 2012
acrylic on PVC pipe
110" x 58" x 34"
First wave feminism, one hundred years ago, sought to establish full legal rights for women. Second wave feminism of the 70s sought to overcome sexism within culture itself. Third wave feminism of the 80s and 90s sought to widen feminist thinking to include the concerns of women who were not white and middle class. It is often also associated with sex-positive thinking and the freedom of women and girls to adopt any persona they choose. Dani Galietti is a young woman deeply invested in understanding the social roles women still have imposed upon them well into the 21st century.

She traces the lineage of her work back to such figures as Louise Bourgeois, a strong woman who brooked no nonsense from men. Hannah Wilke, Karen Finley, and younger artists like Liz Ester and Laurel Nakaoka who use or used their nude or nearly nude body in performance, video, and photography, are her inspirations. All intend or intended to problematize the complex options available to women to surrender to, or play with, mock or contradict the still-omnipresent commercial and psychosexual uses of images of the female body to control behavior.

Galietti is willing to bring great courage, wit and dogged intellectual consistency to her practice. For example, she considers her studio a theater, and dresses accordingly, particularly appropriate as she both documents what goes on there in “private,” and participates in chat roulette encounters from there that are raunchy, silly and pathetic. For her MFA show, Galietti will document her performances of recent months with video and props both abject and provocative.

Pretty Little Fuck Hole, 2012 / digital scanner + body, performance
Brains So Good Coulda Sworn You Went To College, 2012 / digital scanner + body, performance
Sinotaur, 2012 / 8gb photo shoot performance with wireless remote + camera
Images (left to right):
You'll Never Know When To Leave You, 2012 / skype performance/video still
CakeWalk, 2012 / performance
Katherine Nulicek has made a three-part exhibition for her MFA project, whose various elements reflect her past work as a painter as well as her current interest in installation, sculpture, papermaking, and even suggestions of performance-based set design.

Using small, found branches that she has skinned to reveal their soft, vulnerable white flesh, the artist has built an entry-less hut in the shape of a waist-high mound. It suggests a place of retreat, a refuge, a safe haven. In addition she is showing a pair of looming tree trunk-like objects, covered with white hand-made paper circles painted with black ink to resemble leaves, feathers, or scales. It’s left to the viewer’s imagination whether these are protecting or threatening the unseen figure dreaming inside the shelter. The final elements are some half dozen large white paper globes suspended over the cabin, like thoughts, dreams or falling stars.

Nulicek invokes fairytales and children’s theater in her stage-set like work. A visitor might well find herself inventing a narrative to take place in the open-ended, suggestive but neutral installation. This simple and inviting set of prop-like objects is a generous invitation to speculate.

KATHERINE NULICEK

Images of Imposter Syndrome, 2012
Installation consisting of:
- two paper sculptures (mixed media / 90” x 25” x 25” & 90” x 30” x 30”)
- hut made from branches (mixed media / 59” x 84” x 84”)

18 19
In 1999 the film American Beauty was praised for the way it used the image of a plastic bag blowing in the wind to symbolize a certain wan American rootlessness; the director, Alan Ball, was inspired by contemporary sculpture. Terry Peterson partakes in this longstanding if small-scale tradition of kinetic sculpture made from the most modest of scavenged materials, including commercial plastic tarps and bags.

On the East Coast, the artist Johnston Foster has made a career out of a similarly post-Povera approach; Foster has made a rhinoceros out of orange traffic cones, and a paper-mâché raccoon tugging on his kite, which is tangled in a wooden chandelier. Among many objects, Peterson, for his MFA exhibition, offers a pair of upside down pants inflated by a fan as an homage to a former teacher, and a work made up of sections of a birch tree, one of which is turning on a treadmill kind of gizmo. As it revolves it completes circuits, which light up a set of lights among an adjacent pile of logs: a touching, deadpan sculptural shaggy dog story.

This kind of found object assemblage sculpture of attic-robbing junk has a rich history at UC Davis; the 1960s and 1970s faculty members Robert Hudson and William T. Wiley, among others, were early American practitioners. It is highly appropriate to see Peterson adding a distinctive, 21st century spin to a longstanding local form.
Pink Elephant, 2012 / birch, shovel head, surveyor's tape, fluorescent lights, electronics / 60" x 60" x 60"
William Harnett and John Haberle are the two 19th century American painters most associated with trompe l'oeil painting. With consummate skill, they made works depicting bulletin boards and objects hung on doors, for example, that one must look at close-up, from an angle, in order to believe that they are in fact two-dimensional.

Erika Romero is working in that tradition, updated to nod toward contemporary forms such as installation, and conceptual, multidisciplinary approaches. She makes small, minimalist-inspired (think Lewitt) white sculpture, which she shows both on the floor and on the wall. However, half of the works reveal themselves, on close inspection, to in fact be two-dimensional, painted reproductions of the three-dimensional objects. Romero has pared her palette and approach down to whites and grays, primarily for the purpose of investigating, as she says, the nature and “psychology of shadows.”

Several contemporary artists, most particularly Robert Ryman, have overlapped a minimalist, color field approach with a conceptual practice, in his case, a lifelong investigation of the different colors that we call white. Romero is following in this tradition, with her interest focused, in her MFA exhibition, particularly on the many shades and colors that we might call shadows. Such a concentration reveals nuances of dancing silhouettes both lovely to study and amazing to discover in all their complex precision: Romero is unafraid to bring wonder into her art.
Note I... Note II... Note III

2012 / wood & cardboard tubes / 23" x 18" x 5"

Outer Cylinder
2012 / wood & cardboard tubes / 17" x 9" x 13"
There is a particular form of heavily costumed performance art that has had a home in Northern California for decades. Sha Sha Higby, for one, has for decades been making non-narrative, one-woman shows in outfits heavily influenced by Balinese culture. Jared Theis, in relocating from his home in Texas, has embraced UC Davis’s longstanding ceramics tradition and conflated it with the shamanistic tradition of some regional NorCal performance to come up with his own distinctive style of live event.

Much of his work is made for video in which he wears a cape of netted ceramic trinkets and headdress helmet, and quietly sings or clomps about outdoors. He was raised in a religious family with lots of churchgoing and hymn singing, so these performances can be read as simultaneous homecoming and exorcism. His MFA installation will consist of video documentation of such performances, plus two of his “costume” pieces. These are kind of the Monitor and the Merrimac of his work: one oval and low to the ground, for crawling around under, and one vertical and mini-skirted, to be shuffled about in. In performance, the erect piece is tethered to the ceiling, and the actor in the lower piece is free to nuzzle, sniff around at and flirt with it. The viewer is given access to a private reverie, a drug-free opium dream, an otherwise private playground of the artist’s memory.
Concealment, 2012 / artist in a suit made from ceramics, fabric, wire, paint, tarpaper, nails / suit: 75” x 28” x 22”, backdrop: 120” x 316”

Images (clockwise from left):
- Untitled Performance (video still), 2012 / video
- Softly and Tenderly (video still), 2012 / video
- Farther Along (video still), 2012 / video
- Farther Along (video still), 2012 / video
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