An Exhibition, Postpartum
External Combustion

By A. Will Brown *September 18, 2013*

An Exhibition, Postpartum is a series that examines the components of making contemporary art exhibitions in order to encourage readers and art practitioners to evaluate an exhibition as a process rather than simply as a finished product. Each installment includes an interview with the curator(s) and/or the artist(s) behind an exhibition, preceded by a review for context and critical analysis. Accompanying these texts is a slideshow of images of the exhibition, from installation to de-installation, as a way of diagramming its true lifespan.

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External Combustion: Four Sacramento Sculptors, in the Gatehouse Gallery at di Rosa in Napa, is refreshingly unpretentious and simple in its presentation of four Sacramento artists, each of whose work follows the lineage of California Conceptual art. In the past, the exhibition's guest curator Renny Pritikin has brought alternative forms of artistic production and visual display—tattoo art, street art, boxing, stage magic—into exhibition spaces traditionally devoted to fine art. *External Combustion* has a markedly less ambitious agenda, made more intriguing by its host venue, the di Rosa art foundation.

At nearly fourteen feet tall, Dave Lane's futuristic steel sculpture, *Device for Creating Stars, Model A* (2010–12), is the exhibition's most attention-grabbing piece. Opposite it hangs Julia Couzens's delicate sculpture, *Fading fast, but slowly…* (2011). Composed solely of semi-transparent, green-plastic fruit baskets woven together like a climbing net and draped from the ceiling, it is the highlight of the exhibition. Set against a dark grey wall, the delicate baskets vary ever-so-slightly in hue, appearing as an array of deeply saturated greys, blues, and greens as the afternoon sun shines through them. To the right of Couzens's piece is Nathan Cordero's, *It has been so long since someone has touched you like I have* (2013), a three-dimensional collage of hundreds of small scraps of metal—tiny relics the artist unearthed via metal detector—mounted away from the wall on pins and nails. It's hard not to take in the piece's immensity while being drawn close to examine its minutia. Overhead, hanging from the rafters, is Chris Daubert's *The Wind* (2013), a series of black acrylic boxes, each containing an LED that illuminates a brilliant red outline of a bird.

The Gatehouse Gallery is not particularly suited for such large-scale pieces. The ceiling slopes downward, and the

space's tallest wall is actually a glass window that looks out to the foundation's lakeside grounds. To say the installation is snug, given the number of pieces in the show, is generous. However, Pritikin has used the tight quarters to his advantage by selecting works that range from the expansive to the diminutive. His placement of each artwork draws attention to the tremendous differences in scale—first, between the viewer and each piece, and second, between the pieces themselves—forcing a close evaluation of the artworks within the gallery.

While the four artists in *External Combustion* are from Northern California, their works aren't part of di Rosa's permanent collection. This exhibition is essentially about validating four Sacramento artists. Located between San Francisco and Sacramento, di Rosa seems a smart venue for this straightforward goal. While some may ask for more complex subject matter, it doesn't seem necessary, as the impetus for this exhibition is well suited to the mission of di Rosa: to collect and exhibit important Northern California art. Furthermore *External Combustion* offers important reminders: that simplicity can lead to a pleasurable and evocative viewing experience, that subversion is sometimes about things left unsaid, and that inspiring and educated art is made on the periphery, in a place such as Sacramento.

Curator Interview

A. Will Brown: Can you briefly describe the exhibition? Who are the artists; what kind of work is in the show?

Renny Pritikin: It's not a heavily thematic show, just four sculptors from Sacramento, mostly of an older generation. Three of the four are in their late fifties and sixties; one is in his late thirties. All are artists with whom I worked at UC Davis, whom I thought were quite extraordinary and yet almost unknown in the Bay Area, though they'd shown extensively in Sacramento.

Though Sacramento is known as a conservative scene, none of these artists are traditional artists; they are all rooted in the conceptual tradition. Dave Lane didn't go to art school; he's self-taught but not naïve and has a thorough knowledge of contemporary and modern art. Dave works with abandoned farm equipment that he shapes into these incredible, formally perfect sculptures. He has created an entire cosmology of how the universe works, and the sculptures represent different parts of that cosmology. At the same time, they are oddly autobiographical and narrative.

Chris Daubert is a central figure in the Sacramento arts community. He is an artist, educator, and curator; he ran the Nelson Gallery at UC Davis for a time as well as the Sacramento City College Gallery. Chris doesn't have a signature style but is known recently for his light boxes and related installations. For this exhibition, he has made more than one hundred light boxes, each with a red outline of a bird. But the main work he is making for the show is a V-shape wall that is activated by heat. The wall allows a person to walk on one side of it and unknowingly set off a series of heat sensors that ring metallic flaps on the other side—allowing one to hear but not see one's impact upon an environment and allowing one to see someone else's impact but not that person's body.

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Julia Couzens is also from Sacramento; I met her through UC Davis. At that time she was making drawings on vellum; she would cut painter's tape or archival tape into thin, jagged strips and make abstract drawings from the strips. Now she is making wrapped sculptures of yarn or cloth. We will have the wrapped objects hanging from the ceiling, three or four of them. She will also have this great installation composed of the green plastic baskets that strawberries come in.

Nathan Cordero grew up in Sacramento. He's a self-taught artist who identifies with the Bay Area Mission School. Nathan is aware of figures like Barry McGee and Chris Johanson but has never worked with or met them. He is mostly known for his work with abject found objects—plywood door skins, for example—that he paints and then scratches imagery into. Nathan has a repertoire of images and objects he uses over and over again—cigarettes, razor blades, pushpins, unused condoms—and there is something incredible and hauntingly beautiful about them. About a year and a half ago he became obsessed with metal detectors, and he has been going to parks in Sacramento to find objects in the ground. For External Combustion, he is going to attach these objects onto the wall in a large, elaborate arrangement that is about history on the human scale.

AWB:

What are some of the key differences for you between a group show and a solo show?

RP:

Pragmatically, in a group show you have to keep artists from stepping on each other's toes. If you have video or sound work, you have to keep it from infringing on everything else. In a way, one-person shows are easy. I believe that a one-person show is an artist's show and a group show is a curator's show. In a group show you have to find a way to not impose an inapt curatorial interpretation upon the work. This can be difficult at times. I think of [External Combustion] as four one-person shows, carefully juxtaposed.

AWB:

What are some exhibitions that have changed how you think about art and your exhibitions?

RP:

I think it's more that certain people's voices echo in my head. My biggest influence was Jock Reynolds, whom I worked with closely in graduate school. He's now the director of the Yale Art Gallery. He taught me about demanding the most from oneself: the highest possible level of rigor one is capable of. I picked up a lot of his

attitude about art, from being at UC Davis, and his dislike for pretension and academic art. I got the flip side of that from Nayland Blake, who was a colleague at New Langton Arts and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for a decade, as his work was informed by theory and a contradictory, simultaneous desire to make new work that was narrative, personal, and often funny. And [I'm influenced by] my wife, Judy Moran, who doesn't buy much art world rhetoric; for her, [the meaning has] got to be in the work. After a lifetime of looking at art, she can still be deeply moved by it. I respect that so much.

Of my shows, the ones that have meant the most were brought to me by non-curators, ones that involved popular culture repositioned in the fine art context: Don Ed Hardy's tattoo show; the boxing history show brought to me by Cameron Woo, a journalist; a bicycle-culture idea that Slimm Buick, a bicycle activist and artist, initiated with his wife, Sunny; and the international painted-photo-backdrop show brought to me by a collector named Berticevich. I loved these because they were great shows that anyone could appreciate but were also rigorous at the highest levels. And they were, I have always thought, the epitome of a new approach for museology, where the museum is the facilitator of grassroots cultural expression rather than the imposer of a canon.

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