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# Cyrus Tilton @ Crocker Art Museum

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by [Julia Couzens](#)

If ever an artist's work embodied the paradox of attraction and repulsion, it is Cyrus Tilton's accomplished and disturbing three-part installation, *The Cycle*. It possesses the appeal of art and the revulsion we feel toward invasive insects, evoking indeterminate feelings of the sublime. Even if it doesn't do so in the manner of, say, sweeping panoramas, the work nevertheless triggers feelings of Kantian terror in its depiction of a small, insidious thing capable of wreaking havoc on humanity: the locust.

Tilton was awarded the Crocker Art Museum's inaugural John S. Knudsen prize in 2017 shortly before his untimely death at the age of 39 of esophageal cancer. The prize supports emerging and mid-career California artists who have not had a solo museum show. According to Crocker Associate Director and Chief Curator, Scott Shields, the award was given in recognition of the scope and excellence of Tilton's entire body of work, which, luckily, the artist was able to organize for this exhibition.

Tilton was born in Palmer, Alaska, in 1977 and grew up near the Matanuska River in proximity to relatively undisturbed wilderness. Despite changes wrought by rising sea levels, drought, warmer winters and the



**Lovers, 2011, steel, muslin, beeswax, resin, 12 x 6 1/2 x 6 ft.**

**Photo: Vessel Gallery**

possibility of diverse ecological outcomes, Tilton's upbringing fostered an abiding respect for nature's measured balance. His background also instilled in him a deeply felt ethical anxiety about the consequences of civilization's unbridled consumerism and unchecked growth. *The Cycle* was his response, a metaphor and cautionary tale for our acquisitive and greed-infused culture.

Tilton moved to Oakland in the late 1990s to work as lead sculptor and eventually art director at Scientific Art Studio in Richmond. The studio is noted for the fabrication of props, architectural models and special effects used in motion pictures, television and museum dioramas. The science-based

practices and technical experience of SAS cross-pollinated Tilton's studio

methodologies and informed his ideological concerns. So seamless was the marriage of both studios it was probably difficult to say where his day job left off and his personal work began.

The centerpiece of the installation is *The Lovers*, a larger-than-human scaled sculpture of two locusts mating. Constructed of beeswax infused muslin stretched over steel tubing, the locusts are perfectly articulated from the labial palp to the hindleg tarsus. It's a paradoxical irony to realize that Tilton's use of beeswax employs a byproduct of one of earth's most productive creatures, to create one of earth's most destructive. The light-infused delicacy of the semi-translucent muslin barely mitigates the macabre, Sci-Fi-laden horror of gross copulation diminishing human experience to Lilliputian levels. It isn't possible to

contemplate the insects without reflecting on the disintegration of consensus in our wider society. How can nature teach us, and how can we protect it and ourselves, if we can't figure out what it stands for?

Locusts are a species of grasshopper that mutates in response to overpopulation and the depletion of their food source. *The Potentials* is the second component of the installation, and is composed of a nine wall sculptures depicting cross-sections or core samples of earth embedded with grasshopper eggs, known as pods. At first glance, and from a distance, the minimal, texturally dense chunks appear to be a handsome, if decorative series of wall sculptures. But close examination reveals sensitively observed work of precision and beauty. Constructed of concrete, wire, polymer clay, rocks, sand and found objects, the



**Potentials (1 of 9), 2012, concrete, stone, found object, polymer clay, 13 x 11 x 4.5 inches**



**Swarm, 2012, installation with kinetic elements, wire, lath, muslin, tulle, wood glue, motor, bamboo, plywood, aluminum screen, pulleys**

sculptures possess the same visionary intensity as Frederick Sommer's horizonless photographs of Arizona's gritty desert landscape. So much more than geological depiction, *The Potentials* are visual odes, packed edge-to-edge, inviting speculative viewing about nature's food factories, species coexistence, abandoned futures and the well being of ecological order.

The third and final iteration of *The Cycle*, is *The Swarm*, a kinetic sculpture of more than 400 handmade locusts suspended by monofilament from an undulating overhead scrim of bamboo poles. Powered by an invisible crankshaft, the suspension device causes the locusts to snap, lift, float, and appear to fly in a dizzying swarm. While not as anatomically precise as *The Lovers*, the locust swarm causes the same bizarre recalibration of one's sense of scale. Tilton relied on the support of friends and colleagues to fabricate the insects. For him the process of collaboration modeled the potential for societal good — if we can act cooperatively to realize it.

# # #

"Cyrus Tilton and the Cycle" @ the [Crocker Art Museum](#) through July 15, 2018.

**About the Author:**

**Julia Couzens** is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at [Transmitter](#) in Brooklyn. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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