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Nathan Cordero @ Verge

JUNE 24, 2019

by [Julia Couzens](#)



Stay Awhile, date unknown, paint on canvas, 4x5 feet

The elegantly artless carvings, assemblages and collections of the late Sacramento artist Nathan Cordero (1975-2018) are sincere, yet frequently droll odes to transient, fragile life. Cordero was a scavenger and harvester of the quotidian. His works ranged from pocket-sized to sprawling. His sorted and arranged aluminum pull-tabs, cigarette lighters, razor blades, wooden crutches, tennis rackets, bottle caps, keys, drop cloths, wood scraps and words serve like repertory actors, speaking in the rich street patois of everyday life.

Cordero was a self-taught artist. But he viewed his friendships and his affiliations with artist residency programs at Djerassi and Verge Center for the Arts as akin to the art school experience. Though not formally schooled, he was conceptually informed, and like Mission School artists Barry McGee, Alicia McCarthy and Chris Johanson, Cordero drew inspiration



from the detritus and vernacular of urban life. He shopped the sidewalk, collecting castoff scraps of wood to craft his text-based paintings, and used found and abandoned fragments of culture as yearning tokens of memory.

Cordero's friends and colleagues — noted Bay Area curator Renny Pritikin, artist and Sacramento City College professor Gioia Fonda and Verge Executive Director, Liv Moe — organized this memorial exhibition, with a particular emphasis on Cordero's prodigious use of text and language, the twin hubs of his practice. He would seize upon words and phrases, especially advertisements from popular magazines, and without spacing, punctuation or rank, carve them onto random pieces of plywood or door skin panels. Standing before such visually immediate and graphic works as

bubblegumtwopacks ... or imaginechristinaaguilera

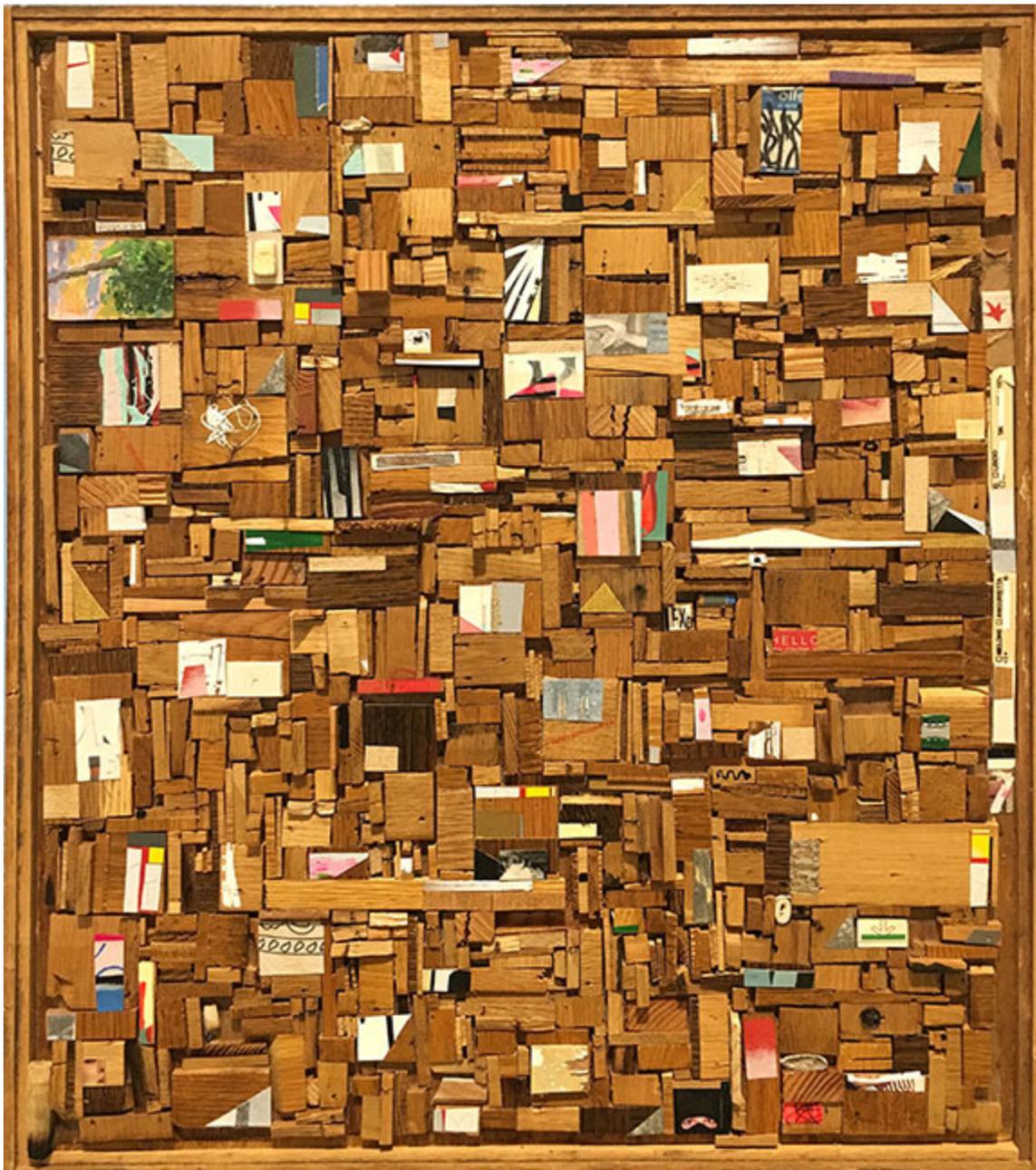
**Untitled (bubblegum...), date unknown, paint
and carved plywood, 2*3 feet**

... one becomes both viewer and searching reader bobbing in a sea of text. Precisely carved with razor blades, Cordero's deliberately imperfect letters toggle

back and forth between positive and negative space, causing legibility to take its own sweet time in coming. But once deciphered, the struggle often rewards with subtle, witty, even profound comments on popular culture and social mores.

Cordero was a poet. He rapped with wood, and like George Herms and Bruce Connor, Beat artist-poets before him, Cordero constantly sifted through the stuff of leftover lives. Such prosaic things as paper scraps, cigarette boxes and leaves circulated through his hands. He individually incised these tender, delicate tablets, cunningly arranging them into words or fragments of phrases. But what could be precious and twee in other hands, Cordero often made sharp or biting. Two small photos of a stone-faced man, like mug shots or employee IDs, are set beneath a framed collection of leaves arranged to read "fuck you."

Metal detecting became a passion in the last five years of his life, expanding the scope of his scavenging and recycling practices. Grazing empty fields and forgotten neighborhoods,



Untitled collage, date unknown, mixed media, 28 x 24 inches

Cordero culled and sorted bucket loads of collected metal bits, working in the gap between art and life. Videos document his process. It's moving to watch his distant figure scan across spare landscapes, the metal detector a prosthetic for his hand, reading history in the earth.

A suite of works presents framed collections of aluminum pull-tabs, bottle caps, and punched label tags mounted under glass like souvenirs or precious relics and remembrances of things past. Cordero found

value in the cast-off. To him, rusty nails, coins, old and useless keys were valued commodities to be rescued. *Memento mori*, archived and encased, they oddly return to life — tiny actors breaking the illusion of permanence, to be revered for their resonance of time.

Cordero endured a chronic health problem that compromised his life. But his compulsion to

work enabled him to find energy and time in the miscellaneous details and spaces of life. The accumulation of small things moved his work forward, and to see it beautifully and movingly organized is no small thing.

#

"*Stay Awhile: a Nathan Cordero Show*" @ [Verge Center for the Arts](#) through August 18, 2019.

Panel Discussion: June 26 @ 6 pm: **Renny Pritikin**, retired chief curator, Contemporary Jewish Museum; **Glen Helfand**, independent writer, curator, critic and educator and **Liv Moe**, founding director, Verge Center for the Arts, will discuss Cordero's life and work.

About the Author:

Julia Couzens is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown. Her hybrid objects, which were most recently on view at **Patricia Sweetow Gallery**, are held 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.



**Untitled (racket & crutches), date unknown,
wood, 60x16 inches**

Photos: David M. Roth

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