

# *BOMB*

## Derek Franklin Interviewed by Lyndon Barrois Jr.

*Painting everyday objects of love and survival.*



Derek Franklin, *TOS #3*, 2023, oil on canvas, 50 × 62 inches. Photo by Simone Fischer. Courtesy of the artist.

Derek Franklin and I met through a series of recent, condensed coincidences. The lure of the 2022 Carnegie International and a number of valued mutual friendships allowed for us to connect in Pittsburgh initially; this was soon followed by an already planned trip I had to Portland, Oregon—where Derek is based—for an exhibition at Melanie Flood Projects. He not only opened his home to host a post-opening reception, but also—acknowledging a particular research interest of mine—arranged a trip to the Oregon

Donkey Sanctuary with my nephew. It became a clear example of how turning chance encounters into deliberate gestures can foster something lasting and meaningful. This sentiment is true in both navigating life and the studio, and is an apt framework to enter a conversation about Derek's practice. He is an artist, curator and director of SE Cooper Contemporary, and Artistic Director of Converge 45—a Portland-based citywide biennial program set to open this August. In connection with his solo exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, we thought it would be nice to reflect on some core values that scaffold his latest work.

—Lyndon Barrois Jr.

**Lyndon Barrois Jr.**

The term I keep landing on as an entry to our conversation is *absorption*: How one can absorb aspects of the everyday toward an artistic context? I had a moment some time ago when I realized I needed to dissolve the barriers between my concerns in life and the ones in the studio. I held them in two separate boxes: there was “research” and then the other things I found pleasure in obsessing about. Once I stopped compartmentalizing, it really unlocked things for me sculpturally, image-wise, and eventually pedagogically. Is it appropriate to say that this dissolution feels core to your practice?

**Derek Franklin**

This idea and experience resonates for both me and my practice. The feeling of separation seems uniquely located in artistic practices, compared to food, film, or literature. I had very little exposure to a great deal of culture until deep into my twenties, especially art. I grew up in the meth belt of Oregon in an atmosphere where most people expected little more than to survive; the lottery, which few had the means to play, was the model for folks to visualize a different life outside of that poverty. This life is one of desperation, poverty, alienation, resentment, fear, addiction, hate, violence, and lack of access. You are cursed by being smart enough to know life is totally fucked while simultaneously knowing you are not smart enough or don't have the resources to build the conduit to change anything. This is a site I was lucky enough to escape but also a site the state takes advantage of, indoctrinating the poor against the poor. As my trajectory shifted, I became an interloper in many worlds including the one I came from. Having this always-outsider perspective helped me develop an idiosyncratic vantage point that allowed me to think about the way life is performed or coded by people and how they construct their truth. This is fundamental to my practice and thinking around education and creating new models for living.



Derek Franklin, *TOS #7*, 2023, oil on canvas, 50 × 62 inches. Photo by Simone Fischer. Courtesy of the artist.

**LBJ**

If we are talking about survival, it can become hard to articulate the precarity of art bringing one out of a precarious situation. This is increasingly a challenge in conversations with art students.

**DF**

I bring this up because everyone's life is shades of gray, and pedagogy felt like it was so black and white at the time. This polemic quality is actually not unique to art, and from my perspective has something to do with providing "proof," or trust, or believability and satisfying a fascination with difference. Maybe this is a thing that has been imported from the more concrete practices of math and science where things for the most part can be proven or disproven. In this pursuit of proof, one erases or sacrifices a great deal of oneself in pursuit of a kind of universality. It is hard to prove through academic modes the importance of working from vulnerability, transparency, and inadequacy toward a type of humanistic hope that is meaningful, radical, or has the potential to be a kind of slow revolution.



Derek Franklin, *TOS #2*, 2023, oil on canvas, 46 × 64 inches. Photo by Simone Fischer. Courtesy of the artist.

**LBJ**

Yes, independent of the political or structural violence that surrounds or separates people, there are the base-level things that connect us and offer opportunities to relate. Anyone can understand a concern for safety, a sense of care that might involve food and shelter, a recognition of the spaces and objects that might be present in those situations. Are these the sort of questions of humanness that helped to develop your visual language? There is a humility, or quotidian nature, to the objects and motifs that recur in the work.

**DF**

I started to look toward the acts we all do for safety, survival, and coping with life. I say acts because I think this is both tied to our fight-or-flight response and to the ways that humans tend to perform acts or rituals. Living is theatrical to me in this way. We build models or scenes in which to survive, which I would call the theater of survival. Of course, historical and inherent power structures lay the groundwork for this theater, structures that were at some point maybe ideologically conceived of as collective forms of safety and care. This would include the state, politics, economies, and so on. These tend to eventually only serve a few because even the most radical and compassionate revolutionary is a conservative the day after the revolution.

I think my paintings are a visualization of dissolving the barrier between what is being performed and what happens behind the scenes to maintain the performance. These images of care generally feature quotidian objects such as food and drink or the flowers people plant to make a space their own and the ways they present them to others. The act of presenting these labors of love are important to me. In some ways they mimic corporate and state propaganda, and for me this nods to the fickle relationship between common people and global capitalism that in my work is deeply rooted in the uniquely “American” experience where all the violence of consumption is veiled.

**LBJ**

It’s interesting to think of the building and shaping of one’s life as making a kind of set for one’s survival. Of course, the system of consuming and accumulating objects fuels the capitalist engine; the individual malleability that choice provides allows capitalism to survive. But a byproduct of this ability to choose creates a sentimentality to things; aside from their form or function, they often have meaning via the stories attached to them as they were chosen, given away, inherited, or even changed human behavior as a technology. These stories become a shorthand for communicating across time, history, or cultural context.

**DF**

If we were to look back toward ancient humans and throw every artifact into two categories, there are the artifacts of human survival and artifacts of power and the state. The vernacular objects in our homes and other sites are used to heal together, build community, create family, and to perform the rituals, care, and love we need to keep going and survive the external forces of the state and other forms of collective violence. I believe these everyday sites and objects are witness to our struggles, awkwardness, achievements, and failure as humans. I believe these objects are imbued with all of this and thus will allow future peoples to understand us the way we understand our ancestors through the objects they used. Essentially, I am interested in how the interior and domestic spaces of our lives are communally used as a site of resistance to external forces.



Installation view of *Derek Franklin: Grief is on my calendar every day at 2:00 p.m.*, 2023. Photo by Mario Gallucci. Courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

### **LBJ**

Circling back to the topic of separation or rather this commingling of the domestic and the professional lives. SE Cooper Contemporary is situated at your home, which to me beautifully models the hope of what we are speaking about. As an artistic program within a domestic environment, the acts of care and survival are mirrored in both your roles as a curator and family member. Curation is likened to stewardship; considering our comments around building a living environment through accumulation, there is also the idea that one—in the collecting sense—might gravitate toward art they want to live with. Does the gallery itself then become an explicit theater for survival in your mind?

### **DF**

SE Cooper Contemporary is very specific in this way and is designed to be a restorative and generative experience for artists. This goal is difficult and ever shifting, but I am also finding it takes a kind of willingness of an artist to embed oneself into the model. Stewardship is a perfect term. It's about saying that art experiences can be human, "professional," good, and give you meaningful discourse and experience, then actualizing a model that delivers that for both the artists and people coming to see the work. There is some collecting of objects that happens from SE Cooper Contemporary; but I think the collection of experiences, memories, and possibilities are the most valuable thing being generated there, and I hope that is what is found by people in the future. In that sense it is a theater of survival.

*Derek Franklin: Grief is on my calendar every day at 2:00 pm is on view at Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon, until July 29.*

*Lyndon Barrois Jr. is a Pittsburgh-based artist and Assistant Professor at Carnegie Mellon University. His exhibition Rosette is on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh until August 27.*



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

CULTURE DANCE FILM LANGUAGE MUSIC NEWS OREGON / NW THEATER VISUAL ART STAGE & STUDIO

## Derek Franklin: An artist in three acts

With his own small gallery in a shed, a show at Elizabeth Leach, and a key role in the Converge 45 biennial, the artist juggles “three ways I get to make magic out of dust.”

**JUNE 15, 2023 | DAVID SLADER**

**VISUAL ART**

My phone told me to turn right, then left. I drove down a quiet east-county street that couldn't decide if it was rural or suburban. I glanced around, hoping to see something that looked like an art gallery. Confused, I pulled over on the gravel shoulder. Exploring on foot, I saw a man in a baseball cap walking toward me who was either about to order me off his property or welcome me to visit SE Cooper Contemporary. That is how I met **Derek Franklin**, artist, curator, and community arts organizer. This is a look at those three sides of a generous and creative spirit who, far more than most of us, is self-invented.



*Adrián S. Bará's "two-walled, tangerine-supported finger painting" at SE Cooper Contemporary.*



My timing was better than I could have hoped. As Franklin welcomed me into the gallery—and I found myself surrounded by a two-walled, tangerine-supported finger painting by Mexican artist Adrián S. Bará—he shared that he was getting ready for the opening on June 8 of his debut show, *Grief is on my calendar every day at 2:00 p.m.*, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery. While finishing and crating his paintings and sculptures, he has also been juggling his responsibilities as artistic director of *Converge 45*, the Portland arts nonprofit whose citywide *biennial* kicks off in late August.

A couple of weeks later, as we sat down to chat over seltzers and a bowl of almonds, Franklin repeatedly used “theater” to define his “framework for looking at the world.” The metaphor helps explain his life-long juggling act. Making art is an exercise of self-expression: The playwright. Curating creatively channels the artistic vision of others: The director. Organizing city-wide art events melds the two, birthing a personal vision of an organic art world through a community of complementary creations: The impresario. For Franklin, the roles he plays—artist, curator, community arts organizer—share a common denominator: “Three ways I get to make magic out of dust.”

All three can also be seen as acts in what Franklin calls his “theater of survival.” The drama, beginning with his rough-hewed childhood in Scappoose, follows a winding path through dead-end jobs, a bogus felony conviction, a degree from PNCA, an MFA from Rutgers, a sojourn deeply immersed in the New York City art world, and a career teaching.

## **ACT I: FLORAL MOONS AND EVERYDAY ARTIFACTS**

As Franklin welcomed me into his studio *TOS #12*, a massive painting on the back wall, jumped my senses. I saw moons or, perhaps, sister planets with shared moons. One clearly barren globe, death on a celestial scale, was balanced by an equal mass, molten and inflamed, while a third, much smaller world, was a verdant Eden bouquet. I was both pulled in and off-balanced by the work’s orbital momentum and gravitational—and compositional—energy.



Derek Franklin's "TOS #12" (2023).

But that was my imagination—and a quite literal impression at that (I may have been influenced by too many recent images from the James Webb Space Telescope). When I asked Franklin about it, he circled back to the theater metaphor. I began to see the spheres as characters on the stage of his life, the dark and the light in their respective roles, loaded with the vivid dramatic tension of his climb from a world of closed-in barriers to one of imagined possibilities at least partially realized. As we talked, the parallels between the painting and Franklin's life became more and more obvious. Where I had, at first, seen other worlds, I now saw an artist's world.

The other paintings I was able to see (some had already been crated up) were similarly autobiographical, sharing much of the dark/light dichotomy of *TOS #12* while continuing its theme, often subtly, of orbiting spheres. Many of Franklin's paintings have an interloper, an image from some another world, much as he may have felt navigating college and grad school. Likewise, a sense of

precariousness is often present; delicately balanced survival in an alien environment, as in *TOS # 14* (below).



Quotidian objects frequently make an appearance in Franklin’s work, items from everyday life like garden flora, household utensils . . . and baguettes. These are the things, Franklin said, that we take for granted “that silently witness us.”

Franklin emphasized the healing properties of these concrete symbols of domestic sanctuary, community, and love. The ordinary and the extraordinary, the expected and the unexpected, coexisting alongside the can't be and the if-only. This is art as metaphor for life—one artist's life in particular—all done with compelling composition and meticulous craft.



I failed to pay much attention to Franklin's sculptures, several of which were standing around his studio waiting for transport. I had no sense then of the smiles that a whimsical grove of his convoluted sticks could generate. That changed as soon as I entered Leach's gallery for the opening night reception of *Grief is on my Calendar*. It was magical forest time. My favorite moment of the evening was watching a small boy peer intently through a fisheye lens that Franklin had playfully placed in one of the sculptures at a child's eye level. It was one of those moments when it is hard to imagine the art without the audience, much as Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* transforms into "crowd gate" in a downtown Chicago park. This is art to be part of, theater that gives hope.



Franklin's exhibit at [Elizabeth Leach Gallery](#) opened June 8 and runs through July 29, 2023.

## ACT II: MIRAGE IN A SHED



**SE Cooper Contemporary** is in an old shed; actually, two old sheds tied together. The property had been a biker hangout with a violent history before Franklin and his wife purchased it to build their home and restore what could be saved. The gallery is a rare asset in Portland's art world, neither wholly commercial nor academic, where Franklin can fulfill his goal of "making space for others." The only place I know in town with a similar mission is the Lumber Room on the floor above Leach's gallery. But Franklin adds another dimension:

*It is a place for artists that don't totally fit in the marketplace, but are critically recognized, to not just exhibit but to form two-way connections with the Portland art community. I want to get to know the artists I am showing, ask what I can do for them, and share that connection with*

*others. They stay a week or two so I can introduce them to local art writers, educators, curators, and other artists.*

On the day I visited SE Cooper, the gallery was showing work by Mexican/New York artist Adrián S. Bará. The title of the show, *Fata Morgana*, refers to a complex mirage of stacked images, an inverted continent, an Atlantis. More to the point, it suggests the illusion of our human-centric, inverted view of reality, our false sense of importance. Bará created the work on-site, installing two adjoining walls of a cochineal dyed finger painting.



*Adrián S. Bará, “Fata Morgana” (detail).*

The encompassing effect is both unsettling and calming at the same time. It is like being surrounded by the surface of a puddle without its context. It is hard not to touch, not to test whether it is real or illusionary. Don't try to make sense out of it. Sense is not the point any more than it is with a Beckett play. This is

existential theater: Theater of the absurd, theater without a plot, theater of illusion.

### ACT III: CONVERGING MESSAGES



One more ball in the air. As Franklin readies his show at Elizabeth Leach, his attention is also on his responsibilities as artistic director of **Converge 45**, whose **2023 biennial** opens this summer. Over several months, the biennial will feature more than fifteen exhibits, screenings, and events in venues (including SE Cooper) across the Portland area. This will be public art with an explicitly political message. Titled *Social Forms: Art as Global Citizenship*, the biennial aims to “examine themes of ecological degradation, indigeneity, displacement, race and representation, migration, and intergenerational dialogues.”



Among the featured artists is Portland-based, Seneca Nation artist **Marie Watt**, who will be showing a monumental neon sculpture at the **Center for Native Arts and Culture**. Known for her textile wall hangings, Watt is a storyteller, integrating in her work history, biography, and indigenous teachings.

Another high-profile participant will be Guggenheim Fellow **Richard Mosse**, who will debut a new film, *Broken Spectre*. Filmed in remote parts of the Brazilian Amazon, the work charts the ongoing degradation of “the world’s lungs.”

Mosse’s films and photos promise controversy. Almost always conveying a political and deeply personal message, Mosse’s artistry has sometimes been accused of overwhelming the narrative and transforming profound ugliness into beauty. As I read of that criticism, I could only wonder if Picasso’s *Guernica* was similarly disparaged as the Western world of the 1930s was dragged into war. As far as I can tell, the commentary and the drama have both survived well.

The Converge 45 biennial program opens August 24 and will run through mid-October. This is just the stimulus Portland needs as it digs out from its post-COVID rut.

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*This essay is also published by Portland artist **David Slader** as part of his **art letter** series to subscribers, and is published here with permission.*



Derek Franklin, *Hanging Around (Healing Sausages for Communal Gatherings)* (detail), 2017, steel, clamps, sausage casing, fennel, lard, 92 x 44 x 6".

## Derek Franklin

WILLIAMSON | KNIGHT

PORTLAND, US

August 24–September 29

Like the body, Derek Franklin's newest sculptures have a shelf life, combining food and inorganic materials in arrangements that feel simultaneously solemn and funny. In *Being Mediocre Is a Virtue of Survival* (all works 2017), for instance, shiny new crayfish traps rise in a modernist stack with occasional slices of bacon inserted into their mesh exteriors. Catching crayfish with bacon is a common childhood activity in the Northwest, but dry-docked in the gallery and emitting the acrid scent of pork, the work feels forlorn: We've got traps and bait but no ecology, no quarry.

In another sculpture, *Hanging Around (Healing Sausages for Communal Gatherings)*, a section of metal scaffolding sits before us. Curled around its bars are several of the titular foodstuffs—handmade by Franklin—composed of lard and fennel seeds. The sausages emit a subtle perfume as they warm in the room. As strange as it sounds,

there's lyricism within these links. They're "artisanal" sculptures, handcrafted and spiced, slowly melding with the round bars, acting as a kind of poultice. Franklin references their curative powers in a poem that accompanies the exhibition: "Some leave a trace that rejoices in the space in which we heal, build, love and experience each other and the world around us." At their core, Franklin's gently deteriorating sculptures are humble, contemplative, and unsettling—the rotting meats do not feed us literally, yet they sustain the heart and mind extraordinarily well.

— Stephanie Snyder

# Weekend Edition: 7 Things To Do in New York's Art World Before May 30

By [Ryan Steadman](#) • 05/26/16 5:25pm

SUNDAY, MAY 29



Installation view of “Divagation,” currently on view at Y Gallery. Photo: Courtesy of Y Gallery

## Party: “Divagation” at Y Gallery

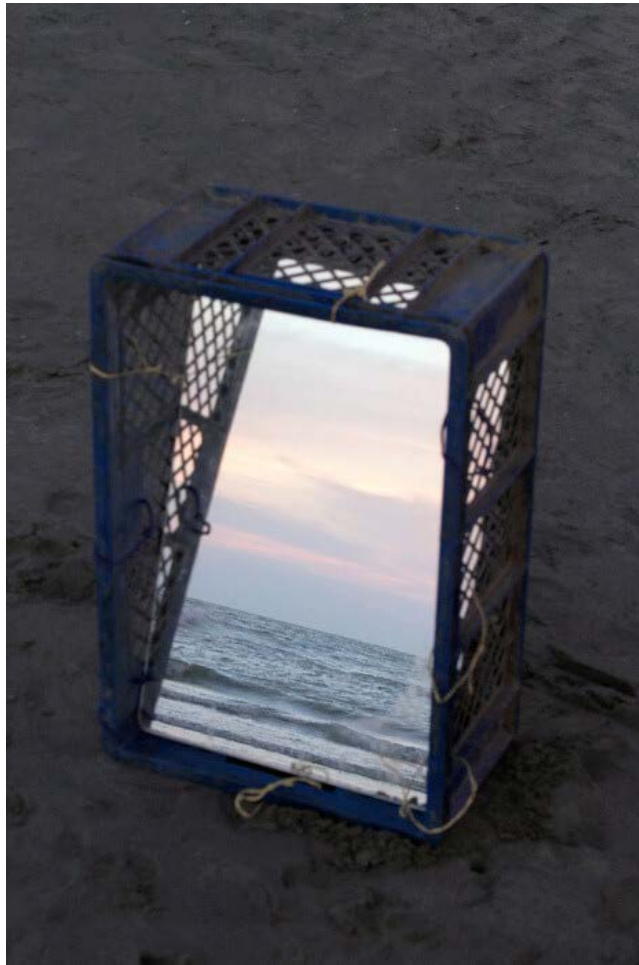
Meyken Barreto, Carlos Garcia-Montero and Cecilia Jurado, a.k.a. the wonderful owners and operators of Y Gallery, are throwing a party in honor of their current group exhibition “Divagation,” which was curated by the very same owners/operators—as well as a mysterious “ghost writer.” The Y team, which is known for having a strong focus on contemporary Latin American art, has included a range of physical artworks in this show by artists Felipe Arturo, Adrian S. Bara, Alberto Borea, Radamés “Juni” Figueroa, Derek Franklin, Ximena Garrido-Lecca, Leor Grady, José Carlos Martinat, PS3\* and Slobodan Stosic. Oh and the exhibition has been extended to June 5, so even if you miss the party, you can see the show if you hustle.

[Y Gallery, 319 Grand Street, New York, 5-8 p.m.](#)





Abstraction in Action Felipe Arturo, Adrián S. Bará, Ximena Garrido-Lecca: DIVAGATION



Artists: [Felipe Arturo](#), [Adrián S. Bará](#), Alberto Borea, Radamés “Juni” Figueroa, Derek Franklin, [Ximena Garrido- Lecca](#), Leor Grady, José Carlos Martinat, PS3\* and Slobodan Stosic

DIVAGATION

Curated by Meyken Barreto, Carlos Garcia-Montero, Cecilia Jurado and ghostwriter.

May 6, 2016- May 30, 2016

[Y Gallery](#)

New York, NY

The show brings together a group of international artists whose practice is characterized by a special sensitivity towards the aesthetic and symbolic potential of everyday materials and objects. Their approach to artistic creation is strongly informed by the context in which their work is produced and by the background from which they come. With different points of departure, from performative to space- based concepts, they investigate and generate narratives about contemporaneity. From Mexico, Peru, USA, Israel, Spain and Serbia, the artists gathered here address different topics from social or politics to contemplative or physics, but they are all joined by a peculiar way to transform their reality in poetic ways.

# Art Viewer

## Derek Franklin at Carl & Sloan Contemporary

July 23, 2015



**Artist:** Derek Franklin

**Exhibition title:** Gray Minstrel

**Venue:** Carl & Sloan Contemporary, Portland, US

**Date:** June 18 – August 2, 2015

**Photography:** images courtesy of the artist and Carl & Sloan Contemporary, Portland

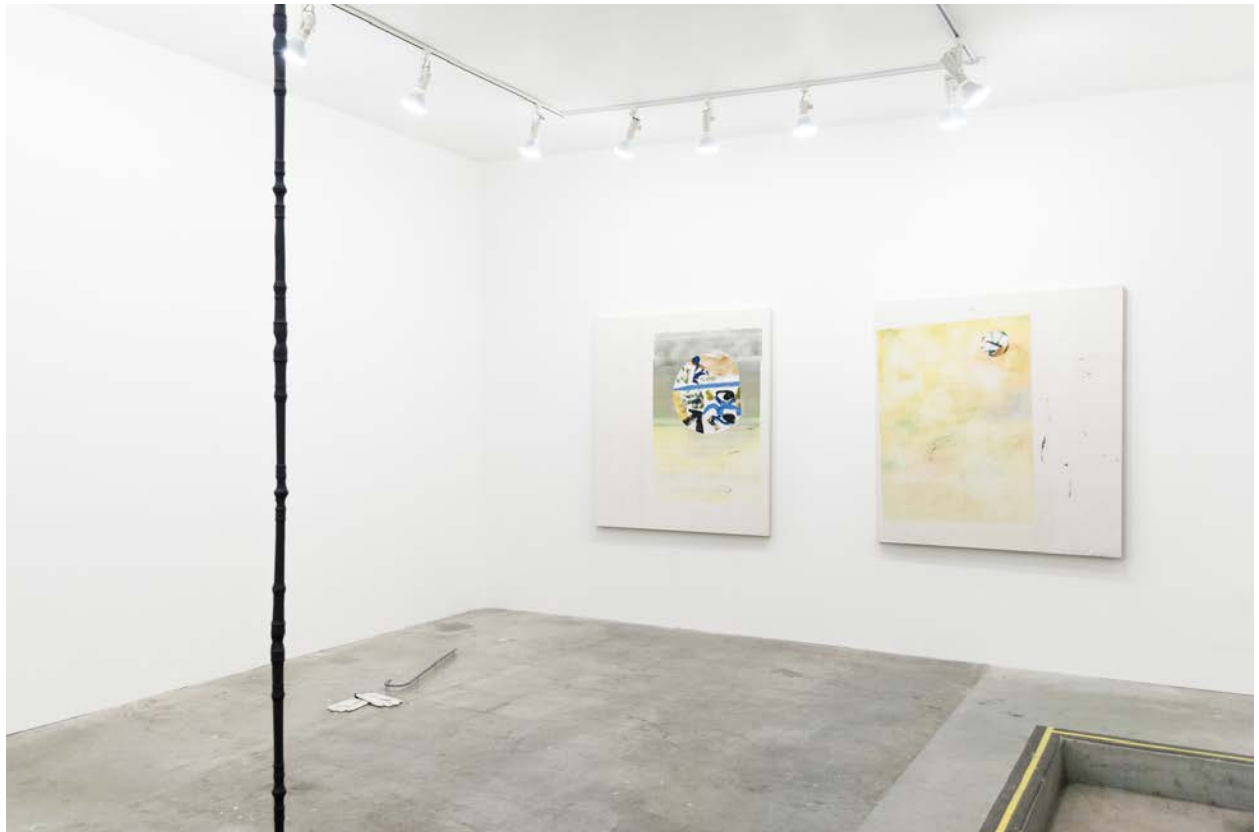
Carl & Sloan Contemporary is pleased to present Gray Minstrel, New York artist Derek Franklin's first solo exhibition in Portland, Oregon in eight years. Gray Minstrel includes new paintings and sculptures and opens Thursday, June 18, 2015, 6-10pm and will run until August 2.

Let us be intimate with our ancestral ghosts  
Sing the songs that old women used to sing  
And blow a communal wind that unites a germ traveling to communion  
There was a partition where our dominance pulled the gems  
From your ground imbued with witness  
This partition, identical to the screen created by water  
Between the crayfish and me, exists all of my love for you  
Joined only by the yarn, cast to procure desire  
Like the soft violence of the piper  
The odd stillness of the bodies wrenched out  
Excite in ways that feel anointed  
Like the cinematic I eat from the feed  
Our arms were given to us to carry the impressions  
Which swing to imitations  
For current MINSTRELS  
That Turkey Trot Abhorrence into our lives  
without a trace











*Gumbo C and XXII Slaps, 2015*



*Rocky XXXVII: Cleaners III, 2015*



*Rocky XXXV: Cleaners II, 2015*



*Lawrence IV: Vaudeville Slap, 2015*







*Communal Wind, 2015*





*The Straw That Fractured Our Back, 2015*



*Gumbo C and XXII Slaps, 2015*



*Asger IV, 2014*



*Lawrence II: Street Orator, 2015*

## *Sculpture as Model*

### *John Haber in New York City*

**Grace Knowlton and Erin Shirreff**

**Anya Gallaccio and Derek Franklin**

If you want attention, consider filling a gallery with truckloads of dirt. But if you want to have a lasting impact, consider importing geology memory by memory and bit by bit. **Grace Knowlton** has been doing just that for more than forty years. It has kept her just under the radar, but deep within the consciousness of practicing artists.

It has also made her the subject of repeated rediscoveries. Review after review over the years has marveled at her neglect as if for the very first and last time. With luck, a survey of work since 1975 will serve as a prelude to a fuller retrospective. Like her art, it is comprehensive but not at all large, and it depends on juxtapositions across time and space as if they occurred just the other day. Her sculpture has the look of weathered timber and raw earth, but with patience it takes on associations of craft and home. One can see a similar practice emerging in younger artists as well, including **Erin Shirreff**, **Anya Gallaccio** and **Derek Franklin**.

#### *Down to earth*

Knowlton's show does not run chronologically, but then her art has not so much evolved as continued to find new expression. Born in 1932, she studied with Kenneth Noland, the **color-field painter**, but found herself sculpting spheres. They suggest both formal perfection and an evolving earth. She says that she relished her early ceramics as a "secret space closed off forever," but spheres also look outward to the universe. Six pieces from as recently as 2013 orbit a larger one from 1991 in polished steel. They range from closed spheres to one peeled back against the floor like *Woman with Her Throat Cut* by **Alberto Giacometti**, as if bursting apart.



Knowlton says that she first thought of sculpture as a surface for painting, much as for another woman in Minimalism, **Rosemarie Castoro**. In fact, she is still painting, in crossing arcs of black and white. Still smaller spheres have a surface of pinned white paper. All have visible imperfections attesting to time and the artist's hand. Their materials include bronze, iron, plaster, Styrofoam, glazing, and clay. Any one of them, though, could stand as well for fragments of planet earth.

Knowlton started getting her hands dirty as early as 1975, with what she calls *Dirt Piles*. They take the shape of volcanoes or lava flows, much like Robin Peck's weighty sculpture, and a painting from that

same year appears in the process of erupting. The show's oldest *Dirt Piles*, a set of eight, rest just off the floor. One can treat them as distinct ceramics or a single work. Still others amount to loops of graphite on paper. They could be documenting the making of art or its instability.

Knowlton shares the gallery with a group show nurturing and savaging "Domestic Ideals." It, too, sets aside the big gestures, but not without a struggle. Joan Linder finds life at once small in scale and out of control, in a collage of bills and reminders or the unwashed crowding, meticulously drawn, of a kitchen sink. Marcie Revens has way too many possessions as well, in suitcases unready for her to unpack or to carry away. Katya Grokhovsky's clothing has taken on a comic life of its own, like the proverbial empty suit but for an independent woman, while **Paul Loughney** with paper collage weaves between closed spaces and an unmade bed. Ryan Sarah Murphy photographs suburban and New York neighborhoods as sites for looming dark silhouettes, but A-CHAN still cannot bring to an end the search for a "vibrant home."

**Walter de Maria** drew attention in Soho in 1977 with a literal roomful of dirt. It marked the shift from earthworks as subject to entropy and decay, like *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake, to today's **childish displays** and **trashy installations**. *New York Earth Room* led directly to *The New York Dirty Room* by **Mike Bouchet** and *A Psychic Vacuum* by **Mike Nelson**. The latter excavated beneath a gentrifying Lower East Side to reveal a hidden New York of his own making. **Agnes Denes** could still claim a connection between feminism and land art in 1982, with her wheat field in Battery Park City. Yet it gets harder and harder to reclaim public and private land for regeneration and growth.

Knowlton refuses nostalgia, but in order to reclaim space for everyday change. She has photographed sawhorses and chairs, added paint in response to the shapes and texture of wood, and rephotographed the results. She looks up close and corner-on, because the joints holding things together matter as much as what they support. Is she calling attention to her studio worktable as a construction all its own or as a place for art? Surely both, much as bronze floor pieces from 1986 redouble corners of the gallery. Either way, displacement and dirt need not preclude home.

### **Model building**

**Erin Shirreff** infuses Minimalism with the elegance of Modernism, the strangeness of Surrealism, the coarseness of earth, and the fragility of flesh. **Past work** alludes directly to **Post-Minimalism** or **Neo-Minimalism**, with off-white, off-kilter sculptures resting against the wall, as in the Guggenheim's "**Photo-Poetics**." One might never know how firmly they balance, just as one might never know that their weight and hard-edged geometry derive from ashes. Her latest takes her beyond sculpture, to prints, photography, and video as well. It nurtures the texture of her materials while disguising their origins. She is model building, but with a greater and greater range of models.

One can assign them to five bodies of work. To call them mixed media would miss their plainness, but to call them plain would miss how much they keep one guessing. She titles the show "Arm's Length," in accord with their apparent detachment—in emotion, style, and even in time. Almost anything here could be left over from early Modernism, if only you could pin down where or when. Yet it all attests to contact between materials and the artist's hand. With surfaces like these, you may find yourself wanting to stretch out your arm, too.

The most allusive look like metal, in dark gray of more or less regular geometry. Thick rods and cylinders balance on one another and an equally dark tabletop, while other planes balance on them. They recall

early **modern still life**, as for **Isamu Noguchi** or **Constantin Brancusi**, with their refusal of a pedestal. They could be architectural models on the artist's very own worktable. They are actually the show's sole mixed media, in fine, durable plaster mixed with graphite and assisted by an armature of steel.



Larger works really are metal, in much the same grays. Rather than piling up, they drop down like curtains, balanced on rods from above. They could be the heaviest and most jagged sheets that one will ever see. Shirreff patterns them, though, after cut paper, and some fold upward like paper as they reach the floor. Their elements also serve as points of departure for the remaining three bodies of work. Those works leave sculpture more and more behind as they introduce color.

Photograms on stretched canvas juxtapose rectangular fields of a ghostly blue. They are the direct impression of sculptural elements, but in two dimensions. They are also cyanotypes, a medium commonly used in architectural plans. Actual photographs of completed sculpture look like etchings in their rich, grainy brown but roll outward from the wall. Finally, a video slide show fills a large room with a compendium of shapes and colors. They conform to the actual architecture while recalling an earlier Czech Modernism.

Once **Rosalind E. Krauss** wrote of "Line as Language" and Yve-Alain Bois of *Painting as Model*, to give painterly gesture then largely in eclipse the requisite formal and conceptual detachment. Shirreff is still model building, while further downtown Pam Lins positively shouts "Model Model Model." Her three-word title notwithstanding, the show includes two series based on models some fifty years apart. One consists of Princess phones in MDF smeared loosely with old automobile colors, the other of ceramics modeled after **Russian Constructivism**. They make explicit the tug in Shirreff as well toward both art history and pop culture. The tug makes sculpture's languages both more gorgeous and unstable.

### **Reviving Minimalism**

Anya Gallaccio might be acting only as curator, for a series by **Sol LeWitt**, but what then is that coarse black stone on the wall? Derek Franklin might be compiling an entire lexicon of Minimalism, for your edification and enjoyment. He has more seeming stone, too, strewn across the gallery floor like earth or flung lead. He has his own sculptural geometry, in open frameworks of galvanized steel. He has abstractions as well, somewhere between a studied monochrome and a rock face. So what then are the rusted bolts amid the rocks, and what lies within the glass jars on his dark metal shelves?

In truth, as Minimalists go, both artists are something of new-agers. Franklin's stark materials stand, he says, for "healing, abandonment, and revitalization." His show's title, "Mending Capers," sounds like a thankfully forgotten dance craze, salad dressing, or alternative medicine. Gallaccio has made a near fetish of natural materials, from flowers and chocolate to a **tree in Long Island City**. Both see their materials as

the locus of a journey across continents and geologic ages, and they want it to become a viewer's personal journey as well. It just happens to unfold in the time and space of the gallery.

Gallaccio's floor pieces recreate LeWitt's 1974 *Incomplete Open Cubes*, each nearly four feet tall. Their edges pass through half a dozen permutations, in varying degrees of completion. Yet while LeWitt built his geometries from aluminum painted white, she starts with such native American materials as limestone, sandstone, and granite—their porous surfaces like particle board or ceramic. The wall pieces are fragments of obsidian, their volcanic glass polished like black mirrors. The contrast between black and white looks back to Minimalism, while the mirrors look forward to *you*. She thinks of them all as a **natural history** of America.

Franklin's floor piece, *Charnel Ground*, refers, he says, to "a Tibetan funerary practice in which the bodies of the dead are left on a mountaintop to naturally decompose." Fortunately, they are not going anywhere fast. They adapt admirably to the architecture, spilling out from the connecting corridor into the broader back room. They also introduce the human element of their making, in a way that **Richard Serra** would understand. Serra called his flung lead *Castings*, although no pun intended. Franklin, in turn, has cast these gray stones from concrete, in shapes like tear drops and with a nod to **Jean Arp**.

Other work continues the ambiguity between **industry and nature**. Steel functions as shelving, and jars hold gin-soaked raisins that could themselves pass for stone. The abstractions are inkjet prints, based on scans of Norman Rockwell, with asymmetric white borders that defy formalism. Never mind that golden raisins, too, are a purported natural remedy—or that a second steel sculpture supposedly recalls a "therapeutic tub."



Installation art and Minimalism dissolved the boundaries between the sculptural object and the gallery, while **conceptual art** and earthworks dissolved the boundaries between the gallery and the world. Now, retreads can be yet another symptom of today's **Neo-Mannerism** and "**zombie formalism**," much as in painting. Gallaccio really could just be trotting out an expensive private collection. And, yes, others have already excavated the Lower East Side. Yet all these artists know when to leave behind the formalism. They talk big, but the art still sticks to the nuts and bolts.

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Grace Knowlton ran at *Lesley Heller* through March 8, 2015, Robin Peck at *Canada* through March 29, Erin Shirreff at *Sikkema Jenkins* through May 22, Pam Lins at *Rachel Uffner* through May 31, Anya Gallaccio at *Lehmann Maupin* downtown through February 15, and Derek Franklin at *Thierry Goldberg* through February 22.