

GHEBALY

JOEL KYACK



Review Joel Kyack's kinetic sculptures: The cycles of life in water bottles, buckets and a record player

Sharon Mizota | April 29, 2016



Joel Kyack's exhibition is at Francois Ghebaly Gallery through May 14. (Jeff McLane / Joel Kyack and Francois Ghebaly Gallery)

You might want to use the restroom before visiting Joel Kyack's exhibition at François Ghebaly Gallery.

The artist, known for his endurance performances and examinations of bodily processes, has turned his attention to the fountain as an aesthetic and mechanical form. The sound of running water permeates the show, uniting dark, intertwining notions of physicality, modernity and consumerism.

"The Body Is a Glass House" is a baker's rack threaded with a zigzagging network of plastic bottles through which water flows in a continuous loop. Here, the body is an absurd machine — really just a network of tubes — as seen via the modernist aesthetic of transparency and supported by our wasteful obsession with bottled water.

"Anatomy of an Empire" makes an even more pointed critique. The white Melamine structure evokes the clean lines of a modernist house. But it is stained by a black liquid that flows continually from a "head" composed of a blue pinstriped shirtsleeve — standard stockbroker issue — and sunglasses. The rest of the fountain is dotted with objects suggestive of body parts: a lumpy pink spine, a pale chunk of hairy leg, muddy egg-shaped masses. Despite its aspirations to total mastery, empire is a spewing, fleshy, dismembered mess.

Yet the show isn't entirely pessimistic. In the second room is a beautiful kinetic sculpture: a spiral of wire wrapped around a balloon. The wire is affixed at the bottom to a spinning record player, and as it turns, the balloon appears to fall and be cradled in the spiral. Titled "Father Time," it includes a thrift store photo of a sleeping baby and is a lovely evocation of the cycle of life, defying the many dehumanizing factors that conspire against it.

Francois Ghebaly Gallery, 2245 W. Washington Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 282-5187, through May 14.
Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.ghebaly.com

ArtReview

Joel Kyack: Old Sailors Never Die

18 January – 8 March 2014, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles
By Jonathan Griffin



Joel Kyack is an artist not naturally given to subtlety. His last, maniacally overhung exhibition at François Ghebaly Gallery, in 2011, was titled *Escape to Shit Mountain*, and it included a large banner painted with the words 'Kill all endings'. *Old Sailors Never Die*, his latest outing and only the second exhibition to take on Ghebaly's new and enormous gallery space, reveals some remarkable and uncharacteristic moments of restraint.

For those partial to Kyack's trademark blend of brash, cartoon aesthetics and salt-of-the-earth allegory, however, there is still plenty to behold. *Megalodon* (all works 2014) is a ten-foot-high set of shark jaws, cut from wooden planks and bristling with teeth fashioned from kitchen knife blades. Kyack might not welcome a comparison with Damien Hirst (who would?), but with *Megalodon* he seems, like Hirst, to prioritise impact over complexity.

A shark represents, for most of us, a rather hyperbolic signifier of death; more than being eaten, what keeps me awake in the small hours is a dread of floating into oblivion, helpless and alone. Which, as it happens, is the allegorical fate that Kyack describes in the exhibition's central and eponymous work. In the

installation *Old Sailors Never Die*, a video plays inside a rudimentary shack. A man is seemingly adrift on a flat-topped boat with no evident means of propulsion. Planted in the deck beside him is a small palm tree, under which he shades himself from the sun. Then, without explanation, he lashes the tree to a rock and pushes it off the side of the boat into the green abyss.

**KYACK STRUCTURES THE
SHOW AROUND A MYSTERY,
A FAILURE OF SENSE,
RATHER THAN CHEAP
SIDESHOW WISDOM**

Alright, so the tree is not very big, and there is little sense in the short video of any real peril, or even that the man is alone (the camera crew were surely following his every movement). However, with this simple surrealist gesture, Kyack structures the show around a mystery, a failure of sense, rather than cheap sideshow wisdom.

A highpoint of the exhibition is the press release, which consists of ten multiple-choice questions. Number five, 'What do you feel in destroying something that provides you comfort and companionship? (a) freedom (b) remorse (c) indifference', gets close to the heart of the conundrum that is *Old Sailors Never Die*. Stepping out of the shack, you see that the roof is formed from the boat in the video, and a giant pair of cutoff denim shorts turns its twin prows into legs. The prone sailor and the grounded ship are one and the same.

NUMBER FIVE, 'WHAT DO YOU FEEL IN DESTROYING SOMETHING THAT PROVIDES YOU COMFORT AND COMPANIONSHIP? (A) FREEDOM (B) REMORSE (C) INDIFFERENCE'

Kyack is at his most restrained with *Water Level*, a clear hose containing dyed blue water and pinned to the wall at each end. The device is a makeshift spirit level, and a demonstration of empirical fact. It contrasts with a nearby tableau contriving a ship's table with a seesawing horizon out the window and a motorised swinging lamp. NIGHT – INT. SHIP – DINING TABLE, though an elaborate construction, is a simple fiction. It offers, like the best parts of this show, a space for viewers to fill with their own answers.

This article was first published in the April 2014 issue.

Los Angeles Times

Review: Joel Kyack's sea-related works sink

February 13, 2014 | By Leah Ollman

Like many artists based in L.A. and weaned on the tropes of cinema, Joel Kyack makes work about artifice and the potential humor and poignancy of its seductions.

Like many artists engaging a meaty theme by invoking but not penetrating it, his work elicits a yawning “So what?”

“Old Sailors Never Die,” Kyack’s show at François Ghebaly, features a stripped-down jet ski mounted vertically on a wooden scaffold. A giant nose carved in foam protrudes from the seat cavity and a pink towel flops, tongue-like, from a storage slot below. “Decapitated Head” resembles a cartoonish Easter Island monolith, a large gesture with a small punchline.

Another installation evokes a film-set-version of a shipboard dining booth, complete with a mechanically activated painted backdrop to conjure the boat’s wave-tossed sway.



“Decapitated Head” by Joel Kyack at François Ghebaly.
(Robert Wedemeyer / François Ghebaly)

Wires and pulleys are bare to see; edges of the seating area are raw. The illusion comes into focus only at its center, within the camera’s presumed delimiting frame.

Yes, that is roughly how it’s done. But so what? Repeating an interesting phenomenon or familiar cliché -- without any kind of transformation, interpretation or critique -- does not necessarily keep it interesting.

Kyack riffs on the stranded seafarer in the exhibition’s title piece, which features a video of a desert island that never disguises itself as anything other than a sand-strewn floating barge. The video, screened in a ludicrous bunker with a portico decked out in giant denim cut-offs, feels exceedingly slight, especially within such an oversized, overwrought frame.

Kyack has exercised his finely honed wit in performative pieces in the past, but the work in this show is simply not seaworthy.

François Ghebaly Gallery, 2245 E. Washington Blvd., (323) 282-5187, through March 8. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.ghebaly.com

Every Rough Edge Is Gone



Joel Kyack talks about how to translate energy into art and go from desire to action

by LAURA OWENS



Joel Kyack: The red light is on.

Laura Owens: *Do you think we can just ask each other questions?*

JK: Sure.

LO: *Do you like to look at art?*

JK: Yes.

LO: *Some artists don't like to look at art.*

JK: I don't find a whole lot that really turns me on but I like seeking it out. Even the stuff I'm not digging is somehow formulating an argument in my own work. Or sometimes when I see something I'm really puzzled by it excites me and shakes me into action.

LO: *Has that ever happened to you with a painting?*

JK: Just recently actually, with your show "12 Paintings" at 356 S. Mission Rd. and Llyn Foulkes's show at the Hammer Museum. There was this one piece in Foulkes's show in particular called *Flanders* (1961–62), where he'd taken a framed painting and just put it in the larger painting. So this reference that he was making to something that he had seen in the world wasn't really a reference, it was just the actual thing stuck into the painting. And because the framed painting felt so

finished on its own, simply by being in a frame, there became this silent conversation between the piece it was and the piece it had now become. All the information I needed was right there.

LO: *I also really liked the Llyn Foulkes show, but was looking more at his use of trompe l'oeil. How it creates these telescoping versions of reality. There's a painted reality, and then there's a painting within that and a painting within that. His use of shadow and three-dimensional collage: "Oh, that's a table..." "No, that really is a table because it's sticking off the painting." In your new work, you're putting these found framed paintings, posters, photographs on the actual painting. It highlights an awareness of the fact that you're constructing this thing. It makes the body of the viewer active. They have to engage with it, and it's a kind of awakening to the process of thought involved in its making. As opposed to a painting that's transporting you to another world, where the body in the gallery or even the physical space in front of the art is much less important.*

JK: Maybe this awareness you're describing serves to get around the linear experience of being transported to another world. Maybe by compounding levels of awareness you allow the work to be this singular, non-linear thing.

Previous page:
Wild Kingdom, 2013.
Courtesy of the Artist and
Praz-Delavallade, Paris

Above:
Self-Portrait as a Cave, 2013.
Photo by Mike Egan
Courtesy the Artist and
Ramiken Crucible,
New York

LO: *I think what you're bringing up with Llyn Foulkes — which happens in a lot of really good art — is that the collage has this element of demonstrating the process, and that is just laid bare. It's like saying: "It's permissible to see how I made this thing. I cut this out of here and I glued it on."*

JK: This revealing of process, or having it be very direct and unrefined, seems radical to me given that the things we generally interact with in our daily lives are so insanely refined. Like a cell phone — every rough edge is gone. It is a thing that is solely about its end use. And when these types of objects fail, even slightly, there's nothing that looks worse. Forget function — it has failed its *intention*. Its like Donald Judd's early sculptures at Marfa, they look like shit because, if just the corner is a tiny bit off, I'm like: "The whole thing's bullshit now." I'd argue that the tiny flaw — which is inherent over time — ruins it because its intention is exactitude. Even getting into a new car feels like a human never even touched it, like some giant robot pooped out this other robot.

LO: *Do you think that means that art has to allow its flaws or have its own self-evidence built into it in order for it to be authentic?*

JK: I think there's other ways of doing it, and I think that depends on how savvy you are. You did it in your last show. I went back to see it several times because I think I was just pissed about why I liked it so much. It was like when I first started playing in bands... We would go to some show and be so excited by the band that we would go and immediately practice at like 1:30 in the morning. What I liked was that it just felt so confident and just all the way, no apologies, all guts.

LO: *It's funny because our artist colleague Michael Decker said to me about that show: "Your art comes across like you were the kid who someone on the playground picked on a couple times and you took it. And then you went home and you came back with some kind of machine that just laid everyone flat." I think he was trying to say it looked like I had something to prove and I over-proved it. But when I was making it I was thinking more like, I'm fucking sick of seeing all this work that is aestheticizing the idea of not trying, this aesthetic encapsulation of something that says, "I didn't try and that's really cool." I just came to the conclusion that it was really embarrassing to try, and I was like, "Oh, now I'm going to try really hard to do it."*

JK: Those paintings have these giant exaggerated gestural marks that seem to have come from smaller gestures, and in that translation of scale and intention — from the actual gesture to the interpretation and remaking of that gesture — you don't leave anything out. The mark is itself, its interpretation, and its representation as a mark — all three.

LO: *I didn't realize until afterwards that this idea of the frame within a frame or the painting within the painting was happening. Those big marks — when I started talking about the work I was like, "Oh my God, that big mark is made out of all these other big marks."*

JK: It begins compounding.

LO: *Like a Russian nesting doll.*

JK: I thought of "12 Paintings" as being really generous. That's something that I think is perceived as not cool right now in contemporary art. It's not cool to be generous to your audience. Shit, your show and Foulkes's felt generous enough that I started thinking that I could make a painting, that I could translate the energy that is, to me, inherent in drawing.

LO: *When I walked in your studio that was exactly what I saw. I was like, "This is an amazing drawing." Because with simple gestures you had really just drawn on the canvas and it felt like a very complete thing with a few marks.*

JK: I had always felt very confident about sculpture or performance or music, but painting felt scary. Maybe about the third time I saw your show I went to the studio and stretched the first canvas. I was just like, "I'm going to do this fucking thing right now."

LO: *How do you go from not stretching a canvas to stretching a canvas?*

JK: Shit, I don't know. I think you go from desire to action when you have no other option. And the second I did it I was like, "This makes sense, so now I've got to go and do this as well."

LO: *I wonder if the argument against painting could be because it has this historical primacy at its center. It's just this thing that gets rebelled against, you know? Maybe it has something to do with it being read as art.*

JK: Very simply read as art?

LO: *If you ask an average person "What's art?" they say, "Paintings." Somehow your brain fully believes in that. With sculpture, you have these materials to deal with. Even a Donald Judd is referring to...*

JK: ...other things made of steel.

LO: *Things that are made for the world have a function and are awesome.*

JK: It's interesting — this referential dialogue with the "real world" that a piece is in conversation with... I'm reading *Artificial Hells* by Claire Bishop right now, and she talks about this interesting point where when an artist does something — let's say you build a community center in the gallery... Her point was that criticism of those sorts of works is almost exclusively reserved for comparison only to other works of art. It doesn't get compared to or measured against the actual thing in the world that it's performing as.

LO: *Like an actual community center.*

JK: Exactly. The merits of the project can — and I'd argue should also — be talked about in relationship to the actual "real world" thing it's in conversation with: the community center, functional steel structures, the café. We can just talk about it as a café. Is it a good café

Next page:

Turn Turn Turn, 2013
Photo by Alexander Basile
Courtesy the Artist

Page 64, below:

The Long Way Home, 2013
Courtesy of the Artist and
Praz-Delavallade, Paris

Page 65, above:

The New World, 2013
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Courtesy of the Artist;
Rodolphe Janssen Collection
and Francois Ghebaly
Gallery, Los Angeles

Page 65, below:

Rats Get Fat..., 2012
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Courtesy of the Artist;
Praz-Delavallade, Paris and
Francois Ghebaly Gallery,
Los Angeles





or a bad café, compared to other cafés? Since art has gone so far as to include almost any situation, I think it's exciting that all processes are game to any single artist. I think in that idea there's this sense of freedom, and that sense of freedom is a valuable thing to exercise and convey.

LO: *I think making paintings it's weirder though than when you have the kind of fluidity of making art out of many different materials. You're literally using your hand and the paintbrush, and when you feel yourself making the same marks over and over again there's a consciousness to it that is always too self-conscious. And it's what can easily end up feeling stayed and overworked.*

JK: I'm always a little wary of respect in general, and when that sort of self-indulgence happens, it seems like this awkward, weird respect for one's self, for one's own work. It's like exalting what you do and then behaving respectfully towards it. It becomes a trap.

LO: *That's really subtle. That's a quality of dialogue with yourself, knowing you're imitating yourself from a year ago. Or maybe there would be a great sense of freedom in doing the exact same thing every day.*

JK: Hard to say.

Joel Kyack (b. 1972, Abington, Pennsylvania) lives in Los Angeles.

Selected solo shows:

François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; Kate Werble Gallery, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles;

Selected group shows:

Balice Hertling, Paris; Praz-Delavallade, Paris; Workplace Gallery, Gateshead; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; West of Rome, Los Angeles; Kavi Gupta, Berlin; CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco.

Laura Owens is an artist. She lives in Los Angeles.

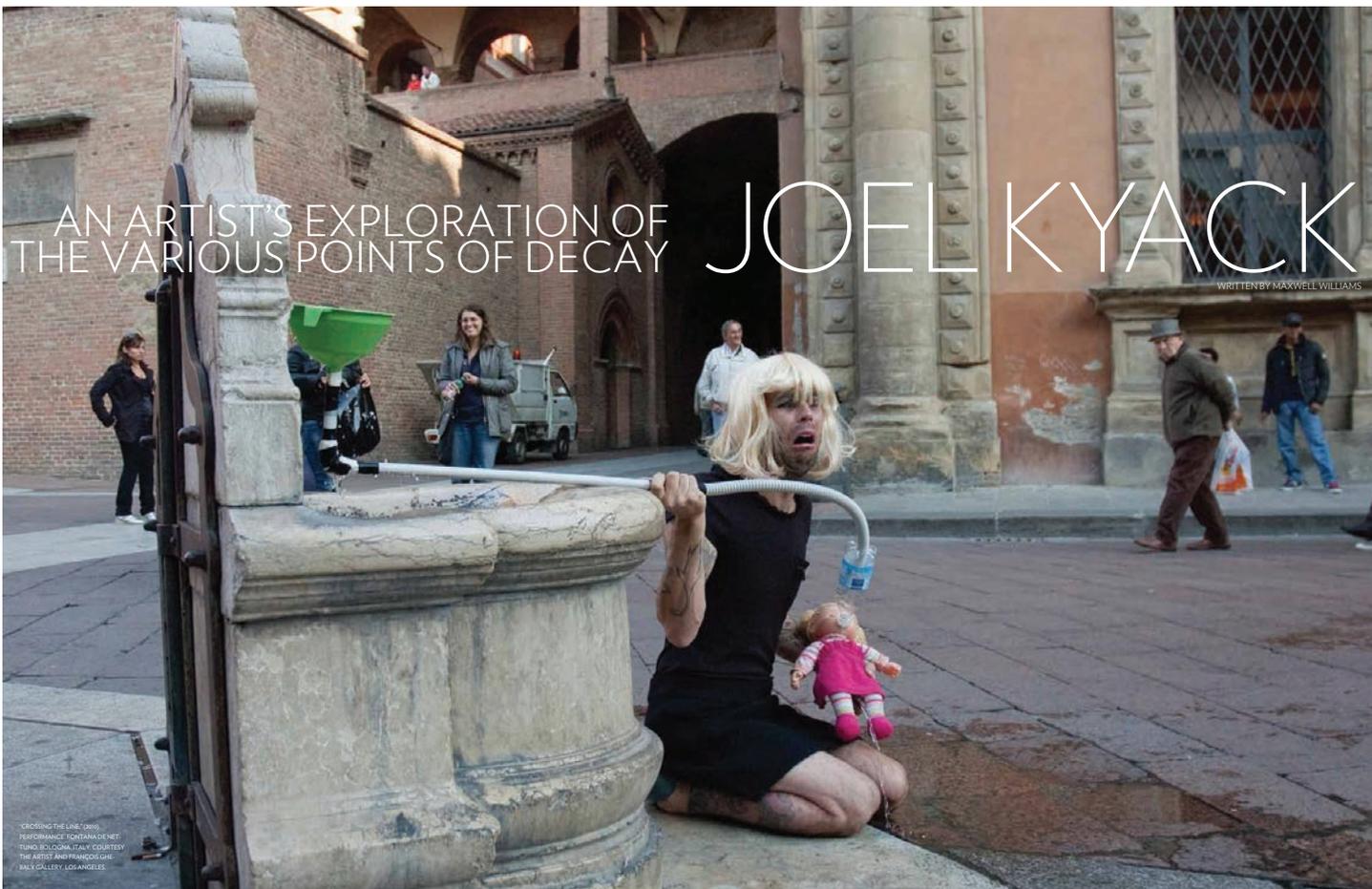


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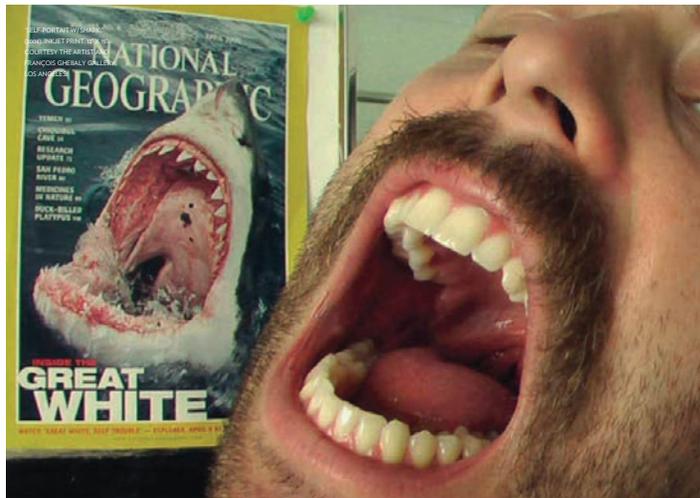
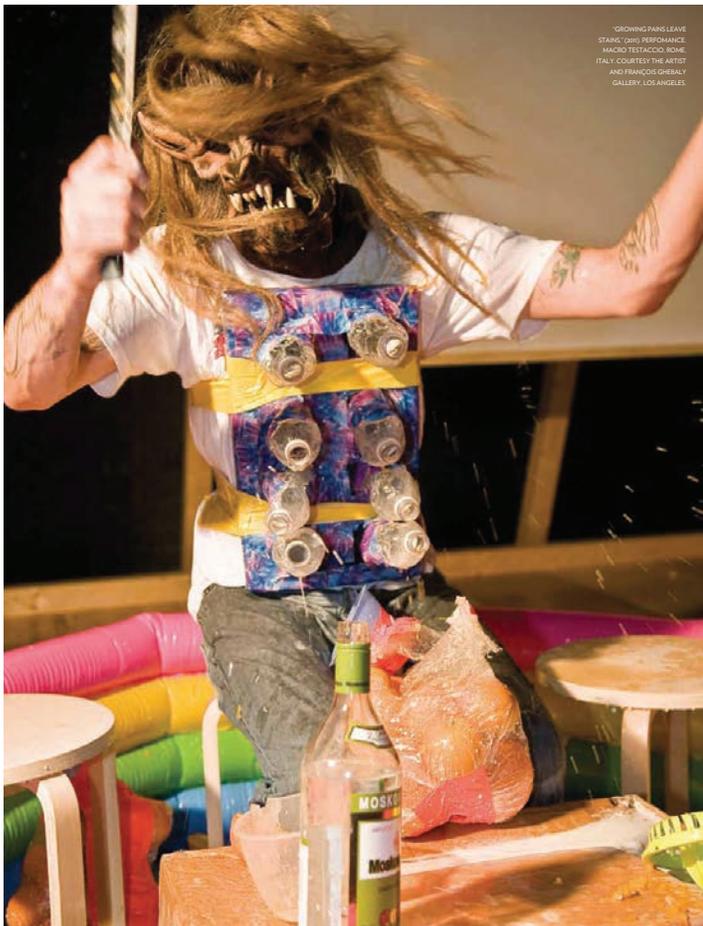
AN ARTIST'S EXPLORATION OF
THE VARIOUS POINTS OF DECAY

JOEL KYACK

WRITTEN BY MAXWELL WILLIAMS

*CROSSING THE LINE: 2010
PERFORMANCE FONTANA DE NET
*TUINO, BOLOGNA, ITALY COURTESY
THE ARTIST AND FRANKO GHE
BALLY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

'GROWING PAINS LEAVE STAINS' THIS PERFORMANCE, MARIO TESTACCIO'S BORN IN ITALY, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANCIS GREELY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



YOU ARE DOWN, YOUR HEART BEATS BILLIONS OF TIMES, YOUR LUNGS TAKE HUNDREDS OF millions of breaths, and your body insists its use to keep running as smooth as a Lamborghini. Then, inevitably, like a Lambo with 320,000 miles on it, no matter how rich you are or how powerful you feel, your body breaks down. You can fight it for only so long. Lesions and amputations and diseases turn you to a lump of deaving flesh and rotting organs. That's precisely when artist Joel Kyack's ears perk up.

Kyack's multifarious practice focuses largely on the human body's tendency to fuck up. Through work that some might consider gruesome—a performance in which Kyack's "body" is sliced in half at the torso with Kyack's top half pumping "blood" into both ends from a metal bowl, or gross as humanoid sculpture with a computer monitor head playing a video of a knife stabbing, while the body holds a mass of bloody entrails, or repulsive (pus, cum, piss, and shit all get an equal stake), Kyack explores death, dying, and the functions of the body with a cartoon-like fascination. It's got hoisting stuff.

Kyack took a long time to finally get to art making, so he has something of an outlier view. He always drew, and he even attended the mecca of all that is East Coast trash art—the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). There, he formed a noise-rock band called Landed and proceeded to release 10 full-length albums and tour for seven years. After Landed ran its course, Kyack became a tattoo artist in New York, where he refined his drawing skills and became familiar with bodily fluids, before falling in with a carpenter. After plying his trade as a part-time wood butcher and becoming intimately familiar with materials and the skills needed to manipulate them, Kyack began to apply newfound dexterity into his work. Since 2007, he's exhibited eight celebrated solo exhibitions, and his work continues to be hailed by everyone from *The New York Times* critic Holland Cotter to NPR.

Kyack, who lives in Los Angeles and shows with Francis Greely in Culver City, remains an enigma, an artist who handcrafts his sculptures and participates in his performances in an age when fabrication is king and the artist's hand is rarely seen. For the *Frieze Art Fair*'s first New York edition in May, Kyack has been working 15-hour days in Pennsylvania, turning an old landscaping van into a monstrous carnal game. He is exhausted when we chat on the phone—perhaps the sleep-deprivation is catching up to him. It seems like the only body Kyack doesn't seem to think about is his own.

How did you transition from making music to making studio art?
I didn't make any art for a long time—like seven years. I played music, and toured, and made records, and just partied my ass off. I was doing whatever the fuck I wanted. Landed plays now only very rarely. We're going to play at the Whitney at the end of May, with Dawn Kasper; who I do performance stuff with. She's in the Biennial, and she asked Landed to come play and do a performance with her.

I was getting frustrated that I didn't know how to do things. I could do one thing: music, that would earn me the money to then pay someone else to do all the other things—that's pretty much the contemporary Western world. I wanted to learn these hands-on things, and I just bullied my way in. I was living with a carpenter, and I started helping him renovate a carriage house. I was just there to help paint and hold things, but really quickly, I got into it and started working for him, and then working on sets with him, and then I started working for an architectural restoration.

I wanted to have an idea, listen to the idea, and be like, "How do I best serve this idea?" I guess I was trying to assemble this deep quiver of skills so that, when the time came, when I felt like my ideas had come together enough, that I would be able to execute the ideas in a way that felt exciting and urgent because I had this skill with this material.

With carpentry, you inevitably become a part-timer when you learn the trade—that's when you decide to approach that material as play. You can turn the skill off; you can turn it on. I'm trying to make this work that has an energy to it that feels like the person just finished it.

How do you know which direction you want to take something? Do you start with an idea of the direction you want to take?

I'm constantly exploring three ideas. I come back to these ideas of personal or individual agency; one person's ability to do something. That can be a lot of different things that happen conceptually or physically in the work, hopefully as both. Also, I'm often dealing with our relationships with our bodies—around the malfunctioning, alteration, and decline of the body. And I would say the third thing would be human's relationship with nature, and by extension, through that observation, nature's relationship with itself.

THIS PAGE: "SUPERBLOOPER," DAVID PERFORMANCE ON LOS ANGELES FREEWAYS. PHOTO: ANTHONY LEPORE. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALY GALLERY LOS ANGELES. OPPOSITE: "THE DAM" (2006). PERFORMANCE: UNAMI CREEK, HARBORVILLE, PA. PHOTO: ANTHONY LEPORE. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALY GALLERY LOS ANGELES.



Those three points work because they're things that are very basic, universal things. They're not so esoteric that you have to read a full-page press release to access the work. Like, when I'm dealing with some liquid shooting out of a body, we all know what that's about. *Laughs.* But there's a way to put poetry into those things that are usually thought of as 'gross,' or things we don't think of. We don't think about our bodies falling apart. The things that we push down are often the things that really define who we are.

Why do you think people don't think about bodily functions and liquids inside the body?

The body, like any other machine, is not something that you consider until it malfunctions. You don't consider how anything works—your car, your computer, your body—until something goes wrong. Then you've got to figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. So, we're hard-wired so that, when we're feeling good, it's time to just fucking enjoy ourselves. *Laughs.* Go out, have a good time, get laid, get drunk, go on a canoe trip. You don't sit around and think about the inevitability of death, but it always comes back

to that. That guarantee is the real one thing we all share: things die, things fall apart, things go away.

Does this interest in the decaying body surface in your daily life? Say, instead of small talk about the weather, you bring up ailments?

Absolutely. *Laughs.* The sharing of those things—that's what makes us human. Empathy is the thing that separates us from the other animals. It's in those moments that real human connection happens. There's nothing like being with someone you love when they're dying. I just saw a video on YouTube the other day that blew my fucking mind: It's a guy who had his foot amputated right below the knee, and he keeps it in his freezer, and he takes it out and shows it to the camera for about five minutes, and it starts to defrost, and he says, 'I got to put it back.' When a foot or a hand is cut off, those are denials of agency. If someone were to chop their own hand off, that's a big gesture. It means a lot more than just the physical act of chopping one's hand off.

It's an idiom: 'I'd give my left leg.'

When you begin your life, your relationship to your body is something

that's really tight. The way little kids use their bodies is very direct. They don't have that fear of death yet, their mortality isn't really a part of it. As you get older, you begin to change that relationship with your body. You fear it, you're ashamed of it, you're ashamed of your desire. It's an idea that pops up in classical nudes. Maybe I'm doing some updated version of that. But always perverted.

What are your thoughts on age, and what is about humanity that makes us fear getting old?

A lot of people can remember, as a kid, doing something totally fucked up. Now, they would never do anything crazy. Once you start realizing that life ends, you're going to do everything you can to make it as long as possible. If someone gave you a rulebook about: 'If you don't do these things, then chances are, statistically speaking, you'll last longer.' I think most people are practical, and that's what they'll choose.

Can you take me through what you're working on for Frieze?

When I was going up, my father was the Grand Marshal of the country fair in my town, and my family ran a three-game booth. From when I was



four years old until I was 18, I'd work the booth. Physically, the idea for my piece at Frieze manifested itself as a county fair-style game, which is more an art installation in a performance space than it is a traditional game. The piece is called 'Most Games are Lost, Not Won,' which is a quote from a baseball manager named Casey Stengel. Baseball is a game of statistics, so you're never hitting .200. Grounding on the idea of 'art fair,' I decided to incorporate a different kind of 'fair.' Instead of these art fairs being these nondescript spaces where you go and you set up a booth, park it up, and then take it somewhere else, this booth is a self-contained thing on wheels—it is its own little world. I've taken the architecture of it and cut holes into it, and I've made the whole thing into an abstract form of a body. There's a mouth area that's in the back that has a game where you try to launch a ball down the throat of this open mouth that also looks like a sphygmometer-like orifice. There's a target inside, and the ball just fits through the hole. You have to have the speed and everything right to get it in there. Chances are, you don't. One in thousands will get it.

In the center, there are two axes that open up like traditional fair-style hooters, and there are these two splayed rib cages, and the inside is like the inside of a body, but very abstracted. The walls are all way and they look like guts, and in the center, there's a children's pool, and it's raining blood into it. There's a rain machine in the center, and it's raining red liquid into it, and then floating in there are these little bobbing cylinders that have the same target markings as the mouth, and you throw these rings onto it. But they're in the water and they're bobbing around, and the ring just fits on it. You have to hit the motherfucker just right. If you do win, fastened to the outside of the booth are full-length mirrors that have paintings on them of all the systems of the body. They're painted at scale, so that when you look at yourself in the mirror, it's transposed on your body. The game is free to play, you get one shot, and if you win, you win the piece. If you don't win, you get a little fair ride ticket, and on the ticket it says, 'Most games are lost, not won.' A guy I play music with and I will work the booth. One of us will be in the booth working the pool game, and the other will be on the ground with the crowd working the other game.

How important is the element of participation to you?

The playing of it is really important to me, because I'm taking the notion of the contemporary art fair and inverting it. Whereas the contemporary art fair is predominantly incredibly rich, bougie people who are showing up, and through wealth, connection, privilege, they're getting what they want. With my 'booth,' there's art available, but no money changes hands and it's solely based on your luck. As far as consuming the art, some damn has the same chances to get it just as some huge international collector.

This piece addresses, too, the idea of an actual winner. Even though it's damn near impossible, there is this idea of you can like actually walk away with a work.

That's what keeps you going. It's 'effort.' But I don't have the answer to what it is. What is the win? What is the thing keeps you going? What is it that gets you out of the bed? What is that makes you go on, in front of the all the adversity that goes in the world? Maybe I think about the idea of 'the win,' or getting it right, because I play the game of art where there is no concrete answer to that. It's not like I'm a sprinter, and I can say, 'I'm the best in the world, and this is the time.' There is nothing I can do that somebody can concretely say, 'This is great.' You can always argue with what someone about what's great art, but I mean you can't argue with who the richest man is.



LOS ANGELES

The infinitude of the private man

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

Andrew Berardini dissects the unsettling work of Joel Kyack to trace certain ideas and themes, in an assorted sample of visions and elements that are as “anti-” as they are deeply and intimately American. Kyack likes Paul McCarthy, the mental isolation and physical vigor of *Into The Wild*, knives, and the ethics of DIY, in solitude, making do. Because in the end, the artist is an everyman, and like all free spirits, must shift for himself, create works that function, however he can.

List of Jobs Joel Kyack Has Done for Money, In No Particular Order:

AGENDA LOS ANGELES

Huntington Gardens
151 Oxford Road, San Marino, CA
www.huntington.org

The site of Rauschenberg's revelation and the best place to go with grandma on acid in Los Angeles. Make yourself a fake press pass before you go, they don't look that hard and it'll save you like twenty bucks. Millionaire's trophy spaces cases always make me uncomfortable, but the cactus garden is one of the strangest, spiciest landscapes one might likely encounter anywhere.

Public Art in LA various places
www.nomadicdivision.org
www.westofromeinc.com
www.laxart.org
www.makcenter.org

There is no doubt that the time has come to reevaluate public art and in Los Angeles they've taken note. Shamim Momim is launching an LA public art initiative, LAND (Los Angeles Nomadic Division). There is also a handful of other public art projects cooking in LA lately, including ongoing projects by Emi with West of Rome, LAXART, plus the MAK center in LA is going public.



This page and opposite
The Knife Shop, 2009.
Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly,
Los Angeles. Photo: Kurt Lam.

Dishwasher, Tattoo Artist, Graphic Designer, Pizza Maker, Illustrator, Prepress Technician at a Silkscreen Factory, Web Programmer, Math & English Tutor, Art Fabricator, Housepainter, Food Delivery Driver, Maintenance Man at a Townhome Complex, Residential Carpenter, Prop Fabricator, Set Carpenter, Architectural Restorator, High School Janitor, Vegetable Sorter, Art Instructor, Gardener, Assistant Tree Surgeon, Canvasser, Art Handler, School Van Driver, Animator, Musician, Artist's Assistant, Butcher, Rock Climbing Instructor, Crate Builder, Fish Monger and Full-time Artist.

As a godfather of the American "rugged individualist", Ralph Waldo Emerson is relatively benign, even if the trickle down of his ideas has been occasionally less so. Best remembered for his essay "Self Reliance", Emerson advocated for a radical nonconformity ("Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."). His work emphasizes a part of the American personality that is not only self-reliant, but believes that the individual and the will of the individual is the force that shapes society. The self-reliant American man became more fully and forcefully realized in the younger Thoreau, who turned self-reliance into a radical political gesture. According to Thoreau, the individual must eschew the comforts of modernity ("Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind"), and risk being civilly disobedient in order to make any progress.

This kind of radical self-reliance has wended its way through the years to take all kinds of forms: the pamphlet of epigrammatic self-awareness that populates the ever-burgeoning self-help sections at bookstores, the dangerous thrill of adventure tourism, the fierce independence of hardcore survivalists, the endurance tests of extreme sportsmen, the *Anarchist's Cookbook*, Herbert Hoover's oft-repeated "Rugged Individualist", the environmental movement (complete with a book by the Union of Concerned Scientists called *Thoreau's Legacy: American Stories About Global Warming*), libertarian separatists holed up in remote self-made bunkers like the Unabomber, as well as Thoreau himself serving as a cited inspiration for a cavalcade of American (and world) heroes, muckrakers, anarchists, and artists including Martin Luther King, J.R., John F. Kennedy, Mahatma Gandhi, Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman, and B. F. Skinner. Artists haven't missed the link between the civilly disobedient Thoreau and a few of the darker scions of this tradition, picking up on Thoreau's passionate challenges to the idea of the self. But these challenges for both Emerson and Thoreau were purposeful, to explore and progress the evolution of the individual.

In a journal entry from 1840, Emerson wrote in his journal a phrase that so beautifully sums up the earnest and sometimes dangerous energy of Americans when he wrote: "In all of my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man."

The infinitude of the private man has no better representative (in all of its encouraging and troubling incarnations) than Los Angeles-based artist Joel Kyack. Emerson and Thoreau serve as a foundation, in my mind, for the work of Kyack, not only because this sense of "the infinitude of the private man" but because of this strange of things stated above (nature boy trekking to libertarian separatism) seem to be wholly embodied, with all of their contradictions, in Kyack.

A resident and participant of Fort Thunder in Providence, Rhode Island, in the waning years of the twentieth century, Kyack lived and contributed to that space, which famously held a collection of misfits, riffraff, and RISD grads and served as a place where noise-rock outfits played, art projects were spun out and destroyed, and impromptu mattress wrestling parties flourished. Other than just by trying to be an artist in a tight-knit and relatively isolated community of individuals, Kyack collaborated in a numerous noise-rock outfits,

including most notably Landed (and currently Street Buddy), until he turned himself professionally to the pursuit of visual art. Kyack's practice, evidenced by his voluminous resume above is wedded to this American do-it-yourself vision of labor, the same strange spirit of the writers of "Self Reliance" and "Civil Disobedience," through mutated, evolved, misunderstood, debased, and reinvigorated through time. Many of his projects like *The Dam*, 2006, (a photo of a performance by Kyack standing in the middle of a river with a sheet of plywood, trying and failing to act as a human dam) and the video *At sunrise, New Year's Day, hike to the highest point you can and jerk off until you come*, 2007, (self explanatory) involve nature and isolation, but in which the body becomes a primary tool in reacting to it. And his action in *Radio Mountain*, 2007-8, is not unlike Thoreau's cabin at Walden, except for Kyack the cabin is an isolation chamber for making music with an FM transmitter being the only one-way mode of communication out.

Meeting with Kyack is like meeting a character out of a Kerouac novel ("mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars" from *On the Road*). Ideas burst out of him as he rattles off his numerous projects at a frenetic pace, most of them lavishly drawn as blueprints that resemble something between a teenagers marker and collage doodles carefully wrought in the boredom of fifth period and what they are, surreal handmade works of art.

He's in the spirit of what Jerry Saltz once called (in a *Village Voice* essay of the same name from Nov. 29, 2005) "Clusterfuck Aesthetics." The "living overlord" of this invented movement, Paul McCarthy, is described by Saltz in this same article as "a kind of dirty-old-man, raving-lunatic warlock whose autoerotic, sadomasochistic crack-head stories are replete with bodily fluids, babbling nincompoop characters drawn from politics and fairy tales, red-nosed reindeers mounting elves, and demented Santas defecating chocolate into the mouths of female helpers". Kyack is inspired by McCarthy, but not in McCarthy's live vivisection of contemporary pop mythology (Santa Claus and Uncle Walt Disney), but from a simple set of gestures involving the body, but one that's unafraid to explore the myths of Americanness. It's just that Kyack's quarry comes from a different place than the desecrated pop of McCarthy.

It's an ethos that amalgamates the fierce and fiercer self-reliance credo of Emerson and Thoreau, working-class punk rock DIY, Allan Kaprow's happenings, and the less art-philosophical referentialities of extreme sporting, survivalism, home improvement, and the makeshift mechanics who have to always make do. Kyack mixes all this with a tireless gusto and earnestness (not unlike the DIY-ers of all stripes: home improvers, punkers, and hunters). Knowing about art history can often become



an ouroboros, a snake eating its tail, of institutional critique until the art dematerializes into the deadened sterility of pure theory. But thankfully this mixture is not just an all-in proposition for Kyack, and more a moment when the black box of the imagination is fed with a certain kind of knowledge, that it starts to spit out a series of fevered imaginings.

My first interaction with Kyack's work, was in one of these thoroughly involved imaginings made sculpture titled *The Knife Shop*, 2009, Kyack's debut solo show after having graduated in 2008 from USC's MFA program. *The Knife Shop* was a manic agglomeration of things, all endlessly riffing on the knife as a subject, and included a knife making workshop complete with a mini forge and improvised anvil, a display table with an array of hand made knives, a half figure with a television screen for a head and yellow work glove holding a host of blood red globs, the same work glove is shown up on the chunky television monitor/head shooting through the air in a loop that never seems to meet its destination. On another end of the sculpture is another figure made of sheet-foam housing insulation and multicolored packing tape that looks like it's been repeatedly used for knife aiming practice with an old teatime sign for a head stating unequivocally "You Can't Put The Shit Back in the Goose". On the opposite end of this, there's a constant fountain of red liquid streaming into a red beer bucket, and numerous odds and ends including two disembodied eyeballs resting atop red food coloring jars (the red in the fountain) on top of a boombox box with a handful of model trees. The whole ramshackle contraption, unlike a lot of kinetic work, seems to work in its own roughhewn fashion. The sculpture is, in its own way, a monumental triumph of the fiercely handmade. In the press release for the show, Kyack in an interview with "spiritual advisor/aesthete/chemical coach Hani Bobo":

jk Well, I'm looking at the knife in all the ways I can think to look at it – as a tool, a weapon, an object, a symbol. To me, these interpretations seem to slip around each other pretty easily because the knife's form is so simple and constant, yet its uses span such an immense spectrum, and the results of these uses encompass such a huge range of form and emotion.

kk I see what you mean, but I wonder – what is this work in celebration of?

jk The knife is the gift of agency...

This agency is deeply synonymous with the this can-do American "self-reliance." Besides McCarthy and (though briefly mentioned) Kaprow, there's another artist I feel like Kyack is channeling, namely Bruce Nauman. Though Kyack wasn't aware of it when he made the piece, there's a famous legend, I may have even heard from Nauman's friend and colleague Richard Jackson, that Bruce Nauman almost gave up making art for knife making, but the task took so long to make a knife he might as well make art, but this idea of craft and the handmade permeates Nauman's work, even though like Kyack's, it's realized as post-minimal messiness. (In a piece in the Feb. 21, 1997 issue of the *New York Times* about Nauman and wife painter Susan Rothenberg, Michael Kimmelman writes: "There is a sense in his own work of labor as art, an oddly American notion of do-it-yourselfism that is not about esthetic bliss but about the beauties of science and craft.")

And when Kyack figures out how things work, it's not difficult for him to start building ideas out of them. In his sculptures, one can tell that the concept likely comes from some deeper consideration, but one which drops all the didactic meanings, and let's the skills, visions, and materials take over.

In *The Knife Shop*, Kyack made a series of knives by hand and played with this in the installation, each of the knives representative of some new gesture. One is a series with the New Hampshire State motto, "Live Free or Die," (a Thoreau-esque statement), emblazoned on its naked metal; others include a knife made from broken Budweiser bottle, six knives cut from a six foot two-person saw, a knife made from an old mailbox, five knives made from an ice hockey stick found on a frozen lake, and several skinners made from discarded circular saw blades. The knife in Kyack's not only gives him a sense of agency as a tool, but as a mode to explore meaning, especially in its relationship to the handmade, the body. Such issues in the hands of a lesser artist would look like a literal listing of the meanings of an object, but with Kyack he manages at some point to let the twisted strangeness of the subconscious take-over to make something infinitely more rich in meaning than any kind of literal thinking through could ever succeed.

And the sculpture, in the end, is beautiful, not because it's the slick finish fetish of an LA school, but because it is almost all quite obviously made-by-hand and much of it likely scavenged. It's a monumental sculpture both in idea and execution, and I can't imagine it costing more than a few hundred dollars to make, though perhaps with skills that may take years to acquire. Imagine taking one of his knives in your hand and looking about the assembled construction, think hard about the power of this simple tool of ancient origins, the agency it gives you, before setting it back and stepping away.



Opposite - At sunrise, New Year's Day, hike to the highest point you can and jerk off until you come, 2007. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Above - Double Barrel, 2008. Courtesy: the artist and Francois Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Josh White.

Los Angeles Times

'Superclogger': Puppet shows for the congested freeways of L.A.

Mizota, Sharon

June 11, 2010

Joel Kyack hopes his mobile theater helps commuters see other possibilities in their surroundings.



Artist Joel Kyack and his mobile puppet show, "Superclogger," perform in the back of a truck on the 210 freeway during rush hour. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times / June 1, 2010)

The freeway appears regularly in L.A. art — works by Ed Ruscha, Dennis Hopper and Catherine Opie come to mind — but rarely does art grace the Southland's concrete corridors. There is graffiti, of course, and a smattering of decaying murals, but for the most part, the freeway is an artistic wasteland.

Until now. Coming to select rush hour traffic jams this summer: "Superclogger," a mobile puppet theater by Los Angeles artist Joel Kyack. Accompanied by fellow artist Michael Hayden, Kyack performs shows out of the back of his nondescript white pickup truck for anyone who happens to be driving behind it.

Commissioned by the Culver City non-profit LAXART, "Superclogger" began its crawl through the Southland's most congested stretches of freeway on June 1, on the 405. (Kyack monitors the flow of traffic on Google Maps to find the slowest spots.) Additional shows will appear sporadically through Sept. 25, when they will be featured in an event at the Hammer Museum. Upcoming dates and freeways are listed on the LAXART website (www.laxart.org).

"Los Angeles has such a long history of cars and car culture that it almost seemed like a perfect project to see how a young, emerging artist would respond to this context," says Cesar Garcia, curator of public art and programs at LAXART.

Starting roughly at 5 p.m. on designated days, lucky commuters will see the back of the pickup's shell top swing open to reveal an energetic hand puppet dressed like a heavy metal musician. If they tune their radios to the frequency written on a cardboard sign on

the tailgate, they'll hear crashing guitar chords and a gravelly announcer's voice say, "Welcome to 'Superclogger!'"

What follows are four vignettes, each between 4 and 7 minutes long, in which characters discuss the vicissitudes of fame, friendship, snobbery, artistic integrity and love. An aging country singer laments the price of success; a naive young boy confronts upper class pretensions in a surreal conversation with a talking shrub; two construction workers shed their tough guy image with a karaoke version of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now"; and an isolated writer sets aside his novel for a lucrative screenplay and love.

All the scenes are about "characters sort of negotiating their want or their desire to make a world around them," Kyack says, "and then the will of the world often times putting up those blocks."

Kyack doesn't mind if people don't get the connection between the stories and gridlock; he doesn't even expect them to watch the entire show. "If someone saw 30 seconds of one of the plays, I think it's just as good," he says. For him, the content is secondary to the show's potential to transform the space around it. The plays are "kind of a trick, or that point of entry for someone to come in and then experience this performative space," he says.

Kyack hopes the novel experience of seeing a puppet show while idling in traffic will jolt commuters out of isolation in their cars and help them see other possibilities in their surroundings. For one thing, drivers might be more aware of the potential for a fender bender and exercise caution while watching the puppet show. But there are also larger questions about what behaviors are acceptable or permitted within a given space.

"How much have you forfeited?" he asks, in his typically emphatic, animated manner. "How much have you resigned? How much space? The highway is a complete forfeiture to the government. To their rules, to their land grab."

Case in point: Driving east on the 210 on a recent Wednesday afternoon, Kyack and Hayden quickly push the puppets out of sight as they pass a Highway Patrol car on the side of the road. "We're not doing anything illegal," Kyack says. "The truck is modified with seatbelts. I'm completely in compliance with the FCC." Since the transmitter radius is only about 100 feet and it broadcasts on unused frequencies in the area where the truck is driving, Kyack says the project does not require a license from the Federal Communications Commission.

California Highway Patrol spokesman Mark Garrett was not aware of any incident reports regarding the project. "There's no specific law that prohibits someone from doing something like that as long as they're seated legally," Garrett said.

For all its careful planning, the project has a decidedly handmade, impromptu vibe.

"I'm not a puppet maker. I'm not a playwright. This is the first time I've done either one," says Kyack. He wrote the scenarios, made all the puppets by hand and recorded the music, sound effects and voices (his and Hayden's) over a period of about eight months. Pre-recorded on CD, the soundtrack is broadcast from a small FM transmitter in the truck. The two men dress in black with cheap black pantyhose over their faces and sit in seats installed by a friend of Kyack's, master welder Peter Fuller. There is no curtain; the puppeteers' forms, if not their faces, are discernible behind the puppets.

"Materially, both for the modifications to the pickup truck and the puppets, I'd say it was just under \$300," says Kyack. This low-budget approach is integral to the project and his work in general, which also includes sculpture, installation and non-puppet performances.

"Legitimacy is so often informed by the financial backing," he says, "I like to think I'm operating in opposition to that, where I'm showing people that ideas can happen very simply too."

limbs, gravestones, kiddie pools, and assorted knives. Liquids move into, around, and over many of his sculptural works, with water finding its way through any available orifice. This is especially evident in works like *The Waterfall*, a video and photo piece from 2008 and 2013 respectively, in which Kyack himself becomes a vessel, simultaneously ingesting and excreting fluids through his own biological processes in front of a camera. The visceral nature of this gesture points to the artist's tendency towards the grotesque. The dormant violence that is intrinsic to many of his objects is made palpable in performances like *Growing Pains Leave Stains* (2011) and *Your Optimism Fills Graves* (2015). In these works, Kyack is a singular performer amid an arsenal of props, sculptures, and materials that he splatters, stabs, squirts, and sprays in gesticulating throes.

For *On the Floor in the Cave of Skulls*, Kyack has constructed new sculptural works from his fountain series. These fountains are an amalgamation of disparate materials sourced from thrift shops, hardware stores, and bargain bins that are pieced together to create a closed loop that allows water to cycle throughout each discrete piece. Every object employed has its own unique surface tension, bending and conforming to the artist's will only insofar as its material qualities will permit. When combined, the staunch pragmatism of the surreal assemblages allows them to maintain their materiality while also surrendering some of their signification in favor of a more subversive cause. This duality frees the sculptures to move beyond discussions of traditional aesthetics and into a complex discourse surrounding the body in relation to a ludicrously anxious social reality.

In addition to the fountain works, the exhibition includes a selection of Kyack's recent paintings, which echo the logic of the fountains but

with an economy of signs. The visual similes and puns that result from the connection of incongruent – or sometimes all too apparent – associations highlight the dark humor that permeates across his practice, where aesthetics are often subservient to practicality, where primitivism campaigns for art's potential as an unsophisticated wilderness.

MOUSSE

Joel Kyack "Old Sailors Never Die" at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles

February 20~2014



10 Questions w / Joel Kyack

1. If you were to be eaten, how would you like it to be?
 - (a) chewed up
 - (b) swallowed whole
 - (c) from the inside out
2. As water seeks to level itself, how do you respond to its effort?
 - (a) adapt to its rules
 - (b) attempt to control it
 - (c) drink as much as you can
3. Film sets are, to varying degrees, "built to camera" – a process where only the elements of the set that will appear in the frame of the camera will be built. For what could this be a metaphor?
 - (a) some of life
 - (b) most of life
 - (c) all of life
4. If you had to die at sea, on which sea would it be?
 - (a) Black
 - (b) Red
 - (c) Dead
5. What do you feel in destroying something that provides you comfort and companionship?
 - (a) freedom
 - (b) remorse
 - (c) indifference
6. You're forced to vacation with an in-law you don't care for. You get stranded together on a watercraft – what would that watercraft be?
 - (a) a jet-ski
 - (b) a deck boat
 - (c) a log
7. If your life was spent on the water and the water held you captive, what would you sacrifice for your freedom?
 - (a) your dignity
 - (b) your life
 - (c) someone else
8. When you see a sculpture you like you respond by:
 - (a) wanting to remember it
 - (b) wanting to buy it
 - (c) wanting to dismiss it
9. Describe the difference between the sailor and the ship she sails upon:
 - (a) no difference
 - (b) flip sides of same coin
 - (c) the sailor loses herself on the ship, the ship loses itself on the sea
10. The word "Island" begins with "I"... coincidence?
 - (a) yes
 - (b) no
 - (c) no

“High and fine literature is wine, and mine is only water; but everybody likes water.”
- Mark Twain, Letter to William Dean Howells, 15 February 1887

at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles
until 8 March 2014

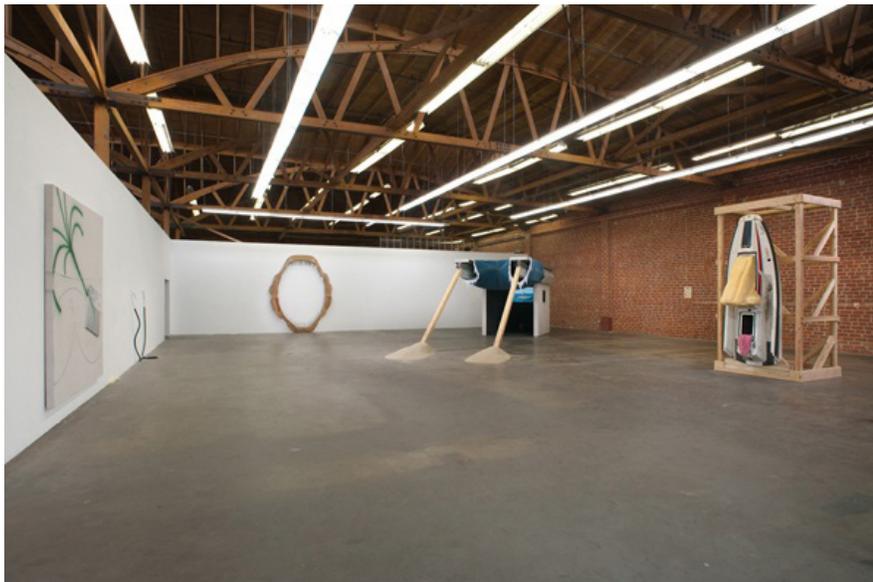
Above - *Old Sailors Never Die*, 2014

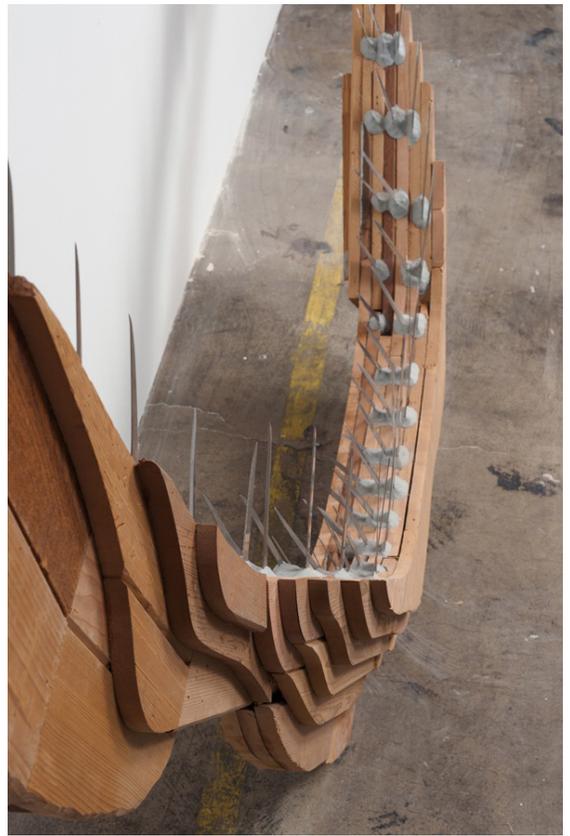


Decapitated Head, 2014



Old Sailors Never Die (Detail), 2014





Palm Tree Burial – High Seas, 2014



Water Level, 2014



NIGHT – INT. SHIP – DINING TABLE, 2014



NIGHT – INT. SHIP – DINING TABLE, 2014



Joel Kyack "Old Sailors Never Die" installation views at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, 2014

Courtesy: Robert Wedemeyer; the artist; François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.