

HOME PAGE

Artist Daniel Arsham does ‘archaeological dig’ at Locust Projects

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Unlike Michael J. Fox, artist Daniel Arsham doesn't need a DeLorean to bring us back to the future, a future littered with the detritus of our consumer-oriented lives.

Arsham created an archaeological dig by literally excavating the floor at Locust Projects and filling it with reproductions of objects that currently clog 21st century dumpsites. Unlike the pottery shards, clam shells and animal bones from our ancestors, this dig highlights the nearly indestructible materials of the modern world. These plastic and metal objects may have a short shelf life when it comes to obsolescence, but they were built to last an eternity in subterranean wastelands.

This is not the first time Locust Projects let an exhibitor cut through the concrete floor of its exhibition site — Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa pioneered that practice in 2011 — but it certainly is the most ambitious. Arsham's *Welcome to the Future* exhibit, which opens Nov. 15 and runs through January 2015, features a hole measuring 25 feet in diameter and as deep as three feet in certain places. The artist filled that hole with some 3,000 sculptural objects he recreated from five specific materials, including volcanic ash, crystal and steel.

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Strewn throughout the rubble in a seemingly haphazard — but well thought-out and controlled manner — are a boom box that would make John Cusack proud, a Gibson electric guitar with its neck snapped off, film reels, camcorders, a push-button telephone and receiver, video game controls, a revolver and an assortment of other objects that either broke or lost their allure.

“There’s a mixture of things that we would automatically think of as antiquated, an array of objects both past and present,” Arsham said in an interview. “All of the objects are selected for meaning because I feel they are like icons. When I’m selecting these actual objects, I am spending a great deal of time finding an object that is an icon in itself. For instance, it’s not just a guitar. It’s a specific guitar — a Gibson.”

A musician friend gave Arsham the guitar after accidentally breaking it while on stage touring with his band. “Everything that wasn’t given to me is from eBay,” Arsham says. “eBay has become for me this contemporary Library of Alexandria. Anything you want you can find there.”

Arsham’s shopping list for this project was wide and varied, including the raw materials to recreate the trashed items: ash; steel; obsidian; glacial rock dust; rose quartz crystal. “They all have different purposes; that’s why they are available on eBay,” he says, explaining that steel is an additive in sand blasting; glacial rock dust and ash can be used in fertilizer; and obsidian is a landscaping element. And of course rose quartz has myriad uses from jewelry to spiritual healing to feng shui.

The materials were carefully chosen because they provide the ability to create a dump site where the objects on the outer edges are the darkest and those in the middle are the lightest. “The idea is that I am creating this kind of gradient, from black to white,” he says. The darkest objects come from volcanic ash, followed by ash and steel, obsidian, glacial rock and in the middle, the fairest of them all — crystal.

The idea for the project evolved from experimentation that began as early as 2011, Arsham says.

Just last winter he created a replica of a Casio MT-500 keyboard out of volcanic ash, crystal and steel for musical phenom Pharrell Williams, famous for his big hats and the *Happy* song. Both artists are linked to Emmanuel Perrotin, the French dealer who has been representing Arsham for years (and through whose gallery Arsham met his wife, Stephanie). Arsham says his wife plans to transition from the gallery to making children’s clothes, with their young son, Casper, as the model.

Although the world is his canvas, Arsham lives in New York with his family. In addition to traveling in pursuit of his art, often with 10 exhibitions in various stages of production, Arsham runs the Brooklyn-based architecture firm called Snarkitecture, which he co-founded with Alex Mustonen. Both studied their craft at Cooper Union and now produce works that blur the lines between art and architecture.

The ever-eclectic Arsham also has a background in set design, having worked with Merce Cunningham, who revolutionized American modern dance. Arsham describes the job as initially “terrifying” because “I had never worked on a stage, never even been on a stage.” Cunningham selected him from a list of artists provided by Bonnie Clearwater when she headed the Museum of

Contemporary Art in North Miami. “He never really told me he liked my work, but he kept inviting me back,” Arsham says of his sometimes bewildering collaboration with Cunningham.

In spring 2013, Arsham began talking with Locust Projects about his upcoming exhibition there. Once he decided on what he wanted to convey, he experimented with ways to create each individual object. “There was a lot of trial and error,” he says, “with the emphasis on error.”

First he had to make a mold of each of the 3,000 objects. He started with the original object, which he had to destroy to make the mold. Each object is made out of one of the five geological materials. “When you see a guitar made of ash, it is entirely made out of that,” he says. “There is no guitar inside.”

He had to devise his own method of binding his chosen materials so the finished object would look partially deconstructed — but remain stable so it would not crumble.

“I went to art school, and you don’t learn how to cast ash in art school,” he says. “I want [the sculptures] to appear that they are falling apart, but I don’t want them to fall apart. I want to keep them in a frozen stasis.”

To achieve that erosion effect, he mixes a set area of a given object with wax. That has an effect similar to pairing oil and water. Although the process is quite technical, basically the waxed areas fall away and the rest of the object has a binding agent that makes it nearly indestructible.

Everything about the exhibit has been carefully planned, including the entry. “When you walk into the gallery, you will be confronted with rubble, a wasteland of giant chunks of concrete, and there is a curtain you walk through to the back space, where the excavation is,” he said. All the concrete comes from the exhibition site floor, with the largest chunks of concrete measuring four by four feet and weighing 600 pounds. “They will be stacked and strewn on the ground like the rubble of a broken building,” he says.

“You are presented with this broken concrete, and then it is revealed,” he says of the archaeological site. “Viewers will make their own story, derive their own meaning from the work.”

In many ways the show is a homecoming for Arsham, who grew up in Miami and co-founded two artist-run spaces, House and Placemaker. Locust Projects now occupies the place where Placemaker use to be, and *Welcome to the Future* marks the first time Arsham has shown his work in the space.

Arsham was here for Hurricane Andrew — an event that may well have shaped his destiny and influenced his current exhibit.

“There’s this notion about architectural destruction and dismemberment that I experienced here when I was 12 that has come back into my work in a very controlled, slow way,” he says. “If you can imagine a storm being a violent destruction of architecture, my work has always been a sort of subtle soft dismemberment of the architecture. And I think that there’s definitely some relationship about making architecture perform and act in ways that we’re not used to, that is present both in a hurricane and in what I’ve done.”

If you go

What: ‘Daniel Arsham, Welcome to the Future,’ an exhibition of recreated modern objects found in a future archaeological dig. Simón Vega exhibits his Sub-Tropical Social Sculptures in the Project Room.

Where: Locust Projects, 3852 N. Miami Ave., Miami

When: Nov. 15 through January 2015. A conversation with the artist: 7 p.m. Nov. 15.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and by appointment. Free.

Info: 305-576-8570, or www.locustprojects.org





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