

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Lucy Puls' new show examines consumer-world castoffs

By Victoria Dalkey | SEPTEMBER 17, 2015



“Recinere (TV)” is part of the “Lucy Puls: [just you]” exhibit through Oct. 25 at Verge.

Lucy Puls hasn't had a solo show in Sacramento in nearly 30 years. That makes her current exhibition of 40 works from 1987 to 2015 at Verge Center for the Arts something of an occasion. Puls, who has been an influential teacher at the University of California, Davis, since 1985, has shown widely in the Bay Area and across the United States as well as in Canada and Italy.

As Verge's founding director, Liv Moe, who studied with Puls as an undergraduate at UCD, writes, “For the past three decades, Lucy Puls has been turning unwanted objects and photos of abandoned domestic environs into insignias of the consumer world.”

In her exhibition catalog essay, curator Dena Beard elaborates, describing Puls' initial fascination with thrift-shop castoffs and subsequent exploration of foreclosed houses during the recent recession. The bursting of the housing bubble left empty houses with abandoned furniture on the streets, prompting Puls to push her work further both in terms of subject matter and form.

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The earliest pieces in the show seem charmingly accessible and not very demanding. A stack of someone's castoff diet and exercise books is worth a laugh, as is a stack of 45 records with Olivia Newton John's "Physical" on top. Both pieces and a resin-coated crocheted blanket, denoting the abandonment of comfort, perhaps, are from 1999.

Darker and more premonitory of the later work is "Notae (Funk and Wagnalls Standard)" from 2003, a dictionary opened to the pronunciation key with handwritten notes saying "paraplegic," "psychiatric" and "Vietnam" suggesting a grim narrative.

Predictive of more recent works is 1987's "Equate," a formal, minimalist free-standing sculpture made of angled steel that's attached to a tall ladder-like structure of fiberglass and wood. It is placed near several wall pieces that combine photos of grungy interiors of abandoned homes and geometric metallic elements. The combination of depressing imagery with often lush color and strict geometry adds up to compelling formal works with narrative subtexts.

A large proportion of the show consists of floor sculptures that combine found objects – a hanging lamp, a television casing, a stainless steel sink and a phone charger, for example – with fool-the-eye elements made of photographs, paper and metal.

These are problematic works – ugly, poverty-suggestive items left lying on the floor. "Recinere (Cell Phone)" is a pile of old clothes strewn carelessly on the floor with a cellphone charger. Yet they can be elegant too as is "Recinere (Hanging Lamp)" and complex as is "Recinere (Speakers)."

Oddly beautiful is "Ad Hunc Locum (Plastic Dinnerware)," a tower of stacked cardboard boxes, sheathed by a diaphanous cloth and set with Melmac plates and cups in 1950s colors. It's both witty and moving.

Similar yet blatantly humorous and pathetic at the same time is "Ad Hunc Locum (Puppies)," in which puppy figurines have been dissected. It's a comment, says Moe, on the Jeff Koons puppy piece that caused him to be sued for plagiarism.

"Ad Hunc Locum (Plums)" is a moving piece that involves what might be a medicine chest, though its shelves bear labels saying "oil" and "vinegar." Inside the cabinets, which again are draped with sheer fabric imprinted with an image of a mattress and a small backyard, are dried plums – dark, desiccated, once-juicy fruits.

I was put off at first by Puls' use of Latin titles, which struck me as a bit pompous. But the dictionary piece reminds us that Puls is interested in language and its connotative possibilities. In "Geometria Concretus (12-09)," for example, she gives us a grungy carpet from an abandoned home broken by a cool, geometric shape, an example of impoverished concreteness and mathematical perfection.

San Francisco Chronicle

Lucy Puls and James Pitt review: sculpture

Kenneth Baker

Nov. 20, 2010



"Recinere (Faucet/Disposal)" (2010) photographs mounted on aluminum, stainless steel sink, wood and paper by Lucy Puls

Northern California sculptor Lucy Puls appears to have noted the forlorn, abandoned quality that much contemporary installation art exhibits.

She exploits that quality in new pieces showing at Electric Works, dovetailing it with a social issue: the home foreclosure crisis.

Her series "Repossessed: Brief Madness" turns on objects she has found - or noticed missing - after illicitly entering unoccupied, foreclosed-upon houses. The "brief madness" of her title might refer to her own furtive forays as well as to the desperation of insolvent homeowners.

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Puls' work's whiff of criminality restores vividness to the found object - a donnee of new sculpture for nearly a century now - prompting us to ponder whether the thought of it as stolen goods actually makes a difference in how we see it.

Consider the visibly timeworn stainless steel sink propped at the center of "Recinere: (Faucet/Disposal)" (2010). Puls warps its transplantation into sculpture by connecting it with a simulated faucet, hoses and garbage disposal made of paper and wood.

As in other pieces here, she has worked into the ensemble her own mounted photographs of vacated domestic spaces she has visited.

Where things belong has been a concern underlying sculpture at least since it left the pedestal in the 1960s. It meshes with Puls' ongoing interest in memen-toes and in common objects as mediators between subjective response and shared but unvoiced assumptions.

Puls' new sculpture bestrides two tracks that will run aground at different times.

When the foreclosure crisis finally wanes and fades from popular consciousness, the works' topical aspects will lose the immediacy they have now.

On the other hand, open-form sculpture and the mingling of photographic, found and fabricated elements will have a much longer life. Meanwhile, Puls' sculptures gain by drawing our attention to how work in this mode positions itself in social time as well as in physical space.

ARTFORUM



Ad Hunc Locum (Complete Audio System), 2005, Pigment print on fabric, stereo system with four speakers, cardboard boxes, artificial orchids, plastic bag, 80.5 x 67 x 40 inches

Lucy Puls

WIRTZ ART

Secondary markets shift constantly, and not just in the art world. The advent of eBay has altered the way we value objects that gather dust. Even Dick Cheney has seen fit to point out that a sizable number of Americans now avoid unemployment lines by selling their stuff on the Internet. Since the late 1980s, Lucy Puls has instead transformed household junk into sculpture, casting old toasters, books, LPs, CDs, and stuffed toys inside blocks of translucent resin and turning them into solid forms that exude a strangely alluring sense of loss.

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Puls's new work represents a visual, if not thematic, departure that mirrors evolving attitudes about the redistribution of functional and decorative objects. Her recent exhibition at Stephen Wirtz Gallery featured six sculptures, each composed of a flaglike piece of sheer fabric digitally printed with a photograph of a discarded object or objects. These include used mattresses, computer monitors, and battered appliances left on sidewalks or front yards in the hope that passersby will take pity on and adopt them. A number of the photographs also picture the handwritten "Free" signs made by the objects' former owners. Here, Puls matched these forlorn images with actual objects (a dented green cabinet, a Slimline rotary phone, a pair of oversize stereo speakers) that came from a secondhand source and tchotchkes purchased from the kind of ninety-nine-cent store that Andreas Gursky made iconic in his 1999 photograph. The arrangement of these materials has an appealing casualness that evokes scatter art and alludes to the way that sculpture, like any other consumer good, weathers periods of neglect as well as desirability.

Ultimately, what all the works in the show evoke is a tension within the idea of the unwanted. The dull beige computer monitor pictured in *Ad Hoc Locum (Complete System)*, 2005, is technologically outmoded, while the pile of soil in *Ad Hoc Locum (Ficus)*, 2004, as the residue of landscaping, indicates that there's a corresponding hole somewhere. The discarded objects seem to be emblems of laziness—there's a responsibility attached to large items past their prime: Arrangements must be made for their disposal. Puls adorns these images and large objects with cheap, closeout multiples—stylized plastic dragonflies, ceramic bunny rabbits, fake foliage. These items, while sparkingly new, are only minimally desirable. Rabbits, of course, conjure fecundity, a theme that emerges with particular effectiveness in *Ad Hoc Locum (Grapes)*, 2004, a loosely hung photo printed on fabric that depicts four mattresses leaning against a tree trunk. Clusters of plastic grapes are pinned to the image, weighing it down, while single grapes litter the floor below. It's a hygienic mess that gets us thinking about abundance and rot.

The aforementioned image of a computer monitor in *Complete System*, is arranged with a still-glossy black plastic stereo stacked on an Amazon.com box, which broadcasts a recording of fingers typing what turns out to be an unabridged definition of the word "time." This work, like the others, is all about duration and durability. As a whole, Puls's recent sculptures feel transitional, as though the artist is testing aesthetic boundaries and attempting to strike an effective balance between the prosaic and the pretty. Yet her interests are particularly pertinent at a time when large-scale obsolescence is visible and abundant and a plethora of "new and improved" options and innovations are launched every day. Although it concerns the expired, Puls's sculpture seems remarkably fresh.

— Glen Helfand

San Francisco Chronicle

Old record albums echo in Puls' work / Sculptor makes art from discarded objects

Jesse Hamlin

May 9, 2003



Chronicle / Liz Hafalla

Bay Area sculptor Lucy Puls with her show at Stephen Wirtz Gallery. To the right of her is "Notae Litterarum (Foreign Trade)", 2003, book, glue, steel--9"x12" to 1/2"x6."

Lucy Puls didn't intend to blast away part of Bob Dylan's face when she was sanding down a block of resin in which she'd cast one of his early albums.

It was an interesting accident that Puls, a noted Bay Area sculptor with a feeling for common objects that nobody wants anymore, set aside with other similarly effaced records that didn't work for her at the time. Now they've found their way into a series of new pieces that make poetic use of their roughed-up surfaces.

"With the sanding process, you never know what's going to happen, and that's what I love," said Puls, whose new show at San Francisco's Wirtz Gallery, "Things Go

San Francisco Chronicle

Round," features some beguiling works made with multiple images of classic albums from the '60s and '70s.

"It involves things I can't control, and I use that. Because it keeps me paying attention to the piece. Instead of forcing my will on the piece, it becomes a collaboration."

Puls has often been drawn to stacks of discarded stuff -- cups and saucers, toasters and Barbie dolls -- that languish in thrift shops before landing in the dump. Over the years, she has bought these cast-off cultural artifacts at rock-bottom prices and cast them in resin.

She decided to limit her choice of material further by using only things she could get free. "It takes me more out of the picture. I'm working with what's there," said Puls, who got these old albums gratis from a used-record store, where they were about to be thrown out.

She cast them in clear resin and, while sanding the resin to get the cracks and imperfections she likes, obliterated parts of the album cover image, exposing patches of cardboard and curving black vinyl. Then she photographed, digitized and made multiple prints of each, placing them on panels in various configurations.

ABSTRACT PATTERNS

By flipping and repeating these color-saturated images, Puls creates symmetrical abstract patterns she likens to Rorschach tests that "people can interpret any way they like," she said. They play off the familiar and sometimes fractured faces of Dylan, Paul Simon and the Jefferson Airplane.

"The work is not about the records, it's about patterns and repetition," says Puls, a tall, lively woman who teaches art at UC Davis. "My work is always about repetition and patterns and sometimes memory."

Puls, a 48-year-old Berkeleyite who grew up in Milwaukee, has no personal memories of these particular records -- Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence," "Who's Next?" and "Alice's Restaurant" among them -- although she did pine for the Airplane's "Surrealistic Pillow," which she used to look at longingly in Penney's. She didn't have a record player or money to buy albums.

But millions of people did own these records and have memories associated with them. "I love the idea that somebody wanted it, owned it, wrote their name on it," said Puls, who chose these albums because she found them in profusion. "I like the evidence of its history -- people touching it, using it, it having a life before I got to it."

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"Damnum Speciosum (Smiling Grace)" is made of four broken-up images of "Surrealistic Pillow." Together, they create an abstract shape in bluish black and orange that suggests some splayed animal skin. Or whatever else you'd care to see in it.

Nearby hangs a piece based on "Alice's Restaurant." Arlo Guthrie's image has been wiped out except for his Magritte-style bowler. Puls sees butterfly wings and candelabras in this accidental Rorschach.

"I didn't create it, it just happened," said Puls, who earned a bachelor's in art at the University of Wisconsin and her master's of fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design. "I find that the work gets better if I don't control certain things too much." But she exerts enough control to create a beautiful object or image that will draw people in.

"I want to attract the viewer, you know, a Venus fly trap," Puls said. "Bring 'em to the piece and you get a grip on them. And then I want them to go where they will go. And who's to say where they will go. But I want to at least give them some sort of visceral pleasure that will maybe make them reapproach the work again and again."

Puls takes pleasure in the curving roller-coaster rhythm of her five-panel Dylan piece, in which the young troubadour appears upside down, then right side up, then upside down, etc. "I could just keep printing these, and it could go round and round and round and never stop. It's my 'Endless Column,' " she said with a laugh, referring to Brancusi's famous sculpture.

THE BIBLE, RECONSTRUCTED

A smaller gallery contains some of the used Bibles, encyclopedias and other reference books that Puls has meticulously taken apart page by page and re-formed, page by glued page, into stacks and rolls and big round rocks. She sanded them so that words and phrases appear and vanish in a blur of type.

"I love the idea of knowledge contained between these covers," said Puls, whose reluctance to rip up old Bibles was tempered by the knowledge that they were headed for landfill. These pieces deal with the limits of what we know and the ephemeral nature of some facts and ideas, that "what was once current and accepted knowledge becomes outdated. We find out it's not true."



Damnum Speciosum (Smiling Grace), 2003.

SAN FRANCISCO

Lucy Puls

WIRTZ ART

5863 Chabot Road

May 1–May 31, 2003

Lucy Puls makes the vinyl LP record cover the basis for a winning new series of mounted ink-jet prints. Depicting the classic representatives of '60s and '70s light rock—Dylan, Simon & Garfunkel, Jefferson Airplane, the Who—these old chestnuts have cover art that's instantly recognizable but

hard to see clearly: They're templates without detail, lodged in our collective memory. Somehow unfamiliar when you look at them up close (which is exactly what Puls seduces you into doing), the remnant records were abraded to reveal the yellowing, grayish cardboard beneath a skin of glossy graphics and then digitally mirrored and flipped, so that the gray spaces and aberrant patches are transformed into pale Rorschachs and muted kaleidoscopic patterns.

Puls seems less concerned with the campy power of pop music than with arresting the decay of the ordinary. She captures visually compelling moments of wear and tear, and this resonates interestingly with her previous sculptural works—stacks of records encased in resin and sanded into smooth-surfaced blocks. She also scores with another set of works, in which she's bound the pages of old books into rolls—closer to toilet paper than to sacred scrolls—with binding threads creating colorful circular side views. The words are obliterated, but the pages get some new life.

— *Glen Helfand*

Lucy Puls' 'Untidy' Show Has Some Neat Meanings

Kenneth Baker

March 26, 1998

There are only three smart things in Lucy Puls' show of recent sculpture at Wirtz, but they are enough to remind us why she is one of Northern California's most closely watched artists.

First and least is the show's title -- "Untidy" -- which has an apt echo of fraught domesticity and almost excuses the fact that the work here pulls in all directions.

The second smart thing is an ensemble of concrete blocks in which Puls has cast stuffed animals, some with bright pink or green fur, like victims of a day-care mafia vendetta. Mashed faces and matted fur poke from the blocks, as if minimal-art geometry had suffered eruptions of repressed infantile emotion from within. A collision of styles thus becomes a symbol of adult ambivalence toward childhood memory and toward American culture's treatment of children.

The third clever thing is "Heads (Gray With White)" (1998): three little steel shelves that hold cast concrete or plaster dolls' heads. Here Puls nods to the wax severed heads with which Bruce Nauman evokes horror at violence, only she roots her "Heads" in the psycho-politics of American childhood.

“Without”

DIVERSEWORKS
HOUSTON

“Without,” curated by David Cannon Dashiell and Peter Edlund (originally for The LAB in San Francisco in conjunction with *A Day Without Art*) managed to integrate several different approaches to privation, absence, and loss into one remarkably coherent meditation. What is more remarkable is that “Without” also managed to avoid being ponderous or maudlin. In fact, the works collected here might usefully be categorized using the medieval terms for representations of death: *memento mori*, *danse macabre*, *vanitas vanitatum*, *ars morendi*, and *magines mortis*.



Comprised of 15 pieces, in all media, by 15 different artists, the show emphasized the correspondences among these diverse works. Acting as *memento mori* were Lucy Puls' *Matrona cum Umbraculum*, 1991, a cubed matron in shaded, shattered lucite (novelist Kevin Killian wrote in his exhibition essay that it attained the “nobility of repair”); Nayland Blake's perversely meticulous rows of a month's worth of daily apple cores preserved in vodka; and Kevin Radley's freestanding memorial column, covered from base to capital with counting marks and inscribed with the plea “HowManyMoreTimes.” The *danse macabre* appeared in clinical photographs of a pile of amputated feet and legs (*A Morning's Work*, 1865, by Dr. Reed B. Bontecou); a head served on a soup plate like a roast (Dr. Howard Brundage); and in the clinically inspired work by J. John Priola, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 1992, that pictures a severed penis (a sort of members' portrait).

ARTFORUM

The curators' inclusion of Therese Frare's moment-of-death photograph of a PWA, widely distributed as a Benetton ad, was criticized by many, but it was entirely in keeping with the conceptual design of the show. Appropriately placed with the other macabre images, it effectively marked one extremity in the representation of loss: even one's death, the ultimate personal loss, can be commodified—this obscene example of “corporate concern” was labeled simply “Marketing Photograph.” In contrast, Nan Goldin's haunting picture of Cookie Mueller before her husband Vittorio's casket, and David Wojnarowicz's death-mask self-portrait of himself buried alive in Death Valley operate more in the realm of *ars morendi*: instructions by initiates in the art of death.

Hybrid: Metamorphose, 1992, Rene de Guzman's compelling corpuscular panel of Plexiglas filled with human and animal blood, segmented and accessed through 16 “nipples,” and *Lock*, n.d., Elliot Linwood's low pyramid of human hair, can both be taken as still lifes on the subject of mortality. Both are either attractive or repellant depending on which memories are activated. Linwood's *Lock* triggers dread that is partly historical (death camps, executions) and partly biological (hair and nails are the “undead” body parts we regularly “lose”). Julie Ault's camp/poignant still life, *Home Is in His Arms*, 1990, consisting of a pair of glass slippers illumined by one red night-light, was part *vanitas vanitatum*, part *imagines mortis*.

Trying to visualize and articulate loss (that elevated slave of romance) is a tricky business indeed. Not all of the pieces in this show worked, but the overall effect was strong: strength in diversity (heroic and campy, elegiac and defiant) and grace under pressure. The most surprising thing it did was to make loss active.

— David Levi Strauss

The New York Times



Lucy Puls, *Lift*, 1987, fiberglass, polyester resin, corrugated metal, fasteners, pigment, 22 x 22 x 88 inches.

Review/Art; Four New Sculptors

By Michael Brenson

Jan. 6, 1989

Curtis Mitchell is one of many artists living in a raw warehouse area in Brooklyn, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge. One of his three untitled works in the "Emerging Sculptors" show at the Sculpture Center was inspired by a visit to Manhattan's glitzy Trump Tower. With its rectangular trunk shape, its marble facing and a carpet placed over it as carefully as a shroud, the sculpture suggests a fancy portable altar. But the carpet is pseudo-Oriental, the marble is veneer, and the black coating on top of the rug is prime New York City soot.

In his other two sculptures, Mr. Mitchell also takes pure geometric shapes prominent in Minimalism and Formalism and dips them in the gritty underside of New York life. An austere table covered with what looks like black earth is in fact a butcher's block caked with dried blood. The wall sculpture suggesting a red and green Formalist painting is a red beach towel almost entirely coated with Montauk Point sand. If Mr. Mitchell, with his black humor, his love of materials and his hatred of pretension, ever gains full confidence in himself, look out.

He is one of four artists in a show that has a quiet edge. Because almost all the shapes are simple and closed, the show can seem calm, even sleepy, but there is something rumbling within, and it has to do with an awareness of the disorder behind whatever remains of the orderly facade of American life. Although all the sculptures are modest and the show never really takes off, these

The New York Times

are, after all, emerging artists. This is the most coherent emerging-sculptors show the Sculpture Center has done.

Lucy Puls constructs sculptures suggestive of plants and sea. "Seer" is like a shell, "Lift" like an ark. Both are built with strips of Fiberglas arranged in layers. Metal sheets appear here and there, and they seem to protect parts of the sculptures like bandages. The screws holding the layers together jump about like rays of silver light. However organic and transparent these constructions may appear, they are penetrated by a sense of disjunctiveness and irrationality that distinguishes them sharply from the utopian Constructivist sculpture they bring to mind. Like Ellen Driscoll, Ms. Puls makes jarring, upbeat work that is systematic and arbitrary at the same time.

Susana Jaime-Mena uses shifts in material and tone to compose conundrums. For example, she will use lead for just one ridge of an otherwise all-wooden relief. Or she will lean two squares identical in size against a wall; one is covered with seamless lead while the other is built with interlocking blocks of concrete. The effectiveness of the work depends upon its ability to jam thought: to disrupt the machinery of logic just enough to make us change gear.

More than any of the other sculptors, David Kezur works with found objects. His open gray box filled with red magicians' balls is in fact a shoe stand. A relief that looks like two rubber legs with stumpy wooden feet was made by fitting an inner tube around two blocks of wood and then hanging the tube over a nail. In each of Mr. Kezur's works, something supportive or protective loses its protective and supportive function. What results is a sense of exposure, violence and, perhaps most of all, amputation.