



Lazzarini's distorted sewer covers pop off a cultural lid

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Ratio 3 / Robert Lazzarini

Caption: "sewer cover (i)" (2006) Cast iron by Robert Lazzarini Courtesy of Ratio 3, San Francisco Photo: Robert Lazzarini



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No one who saw the 2001 "Bitsreams" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art will have forgotten New Yorker Robert Lazzarini's part in it, even if his name has not stuck.

Given a small room to himself, Lazzarini showed several wall-mounted skulls, each smoothly distorted with the aid of a computer

and cast in human bone. Knowing viewers caught the works' reference to the anamorphic skull that Hans Holbein put into his painting "The Ambassadors" (1533), but that did little to soften the Lazzarinis' creepy impact.

Ratio 3 (note its restricted hours) brings Lazzarini's art to the West Coast for the first time with a show of two new sculptures and related drawings. Two wall-bound cast iron "sewer covers" have the proportions and mass of the genuine article, but Lazzarini has subjected each one to the sort of ripply distortions that mid-20th century Hollywood filmmakers used to evoke the onset of hallucinations or panic.

In form, an exercise in post-Pop surrealism, Lazzarini's "Sewer Covers" by their mass and material recall late 20th century classics of New York sculpture: Carl Andre's floorbound metal plates, Richard Serra's street-embedded "To Encircle: Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted" (1970), even John Chamberlain's chop shop abstractions.

Here in earthquake country, Lazzarini's wavy sewer covers stir anxiety about what the next great shaker will do to the infrastructure. More generally, they correspond to the sense that "the lid has come off" all sorts of things and forces in today's world that were better contained.

Lazzarini has made drawings by layering observed details of the "Sewer Covers." They produce a strange, timely-seeming sense of cross-eyed vision, unable to settle on a focal plane.

Binh Danh's 'Altars' at Haines: Should we enjoy the new work of Binh Danh at Haines?

Knowing that it borrows the likenesses of guiltless victims of the Khmer Rouge purge of Cambodia makes enjoyment difficult. So does the knowledge that American bombing and invasion of Cambodia late in the Vietnam War helped the Khmer Rouge mushroom into a conquering insurgency.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot, began a radical Maoist experiment in social engineering founded on the mass torture and murder of their countrymen. At Tuol Sleng they set up an extermination camp made even more grotesque by their seemingly pointless obsession with photographing all of their victims.

The Khmer Rouge archive now forms the basis of a museum in Phnom Penh dedicated to the memory of the massacred. Danh made negatives from images in that archive and applied them to leaves to produce what he calls "chlorophyll prints." He stabilizes the blazoned leaves against decay and fading by sealing them in clear resin.

In "The Leaf Effect: Study for Metamorphosis #2" (2006), Danh has placed a butterfly beneath the leaf-borne portrait of a frightened-looking boy. The insect specimen adds a hint of transfiguration to the metaphor of the lost life as leaf in the wind.

Danh was born in Vietnam in 1977 and knows the repercussions of the Indochina conflict on his ancestry. And he clearly intends his latest work to have an elegiac as well as a spiritually optimistic spirit. He has commented on the leaf portraits as figures for a Buddhist sense of the transience of personal identity.

But can we, should we, separate admiration of his pieces as artworks from contemplation of them as remembrances of genocide? Perhaps the answer will depend on one's generational position. Danh's subjects may remind us of more recent victims of torture and murder seen in photographs from Abu Ghraib prison.

But give Danh credit for devising aesthetic terms by which to test the power of his spiritual perspective against that of horrific historical fact, even if it fails that test.

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