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## SoCal's Past and Future Blow Into Santa Barbara With "A Handful of Dust"



Photo by Dani Lynch

Installation view of "A Handful of Dust" at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum

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"I heard someone say this is a monochrome show, but I think it's very colorful," artist **Mark Hagen** said at the recent opening reception for "A Handful of Dust," a group exhibition curated by **Laura Fried**, featuring work by Hagen and six other artists. At first glance to a visitor, "colorful" definitely isn't the first word that springs to mind — the works on view at **Santa Barbara Contemporary Art Forum (CAF)** (through March 24) are dominated by earthy tones, sepias, and shades of white. But upon further contemplation, the eye adjusts and notices an array of tonal gradations and hues. This nuanced palette underscores the pared-down elegance of the exhibition, which examines time and material in sculpture, while also highlighting the importance of regional institutions in broadening Southern California's contemporary art dialogue.

Los Angeles-based independent curator Laura Fried, previously of **MASS MoCA** and **St. Louis's Contemporary Art Museum**, selected emerging talent such as **Jay Heikes**, **Matt Hoyt** and **Ricky Swallow** for the show, on view at the not-for-profit CAF's exhibition space located in a small beach town 90 miles north of L.A. While most roads to contemporary art in California tend to lead to Los Angeles, which offers the pillars of artist community, art schools, and museums in providing a rich creative landscape, it's the regional institutions outside of city limits that offer an arena for shows like this one, providing space and support for curated exhibitions across a range of visual, media, and performing arts.

In curating "A Handful of Dust," Fried sought inspiration from diverse sculptural sources ranging from **Michael Heizer's** "Levitated Mass," to **Jimmie Durham's** stone objects, to **Cy Twombly's** lesser-known sculptural work. In regards to Twombly, Fried says, "his sculptures are completely enigmatic. He was making them in the 1950s and 1960s, [but] at the time his contemporaries weren't making objects like this, [so] they were expressive but totally out of time." Fried doesn't seek to eliminate time and context; rather she attempts to transcend it and create a context in which the prehistoric and the contemporary co-exist. This duality is exemplified in "A Plan for Swamplands" by **Allyson Vieira**. The artist's installation resembles an archaeological dig, with a mass of white rocks of varying sizes strewn across a large rectangular area; over time, these rocks will slowly disintegrate into dust. And, in fact, this will likely be the last viewing of the work in its current iteration.

With the exception of Vieira's work, the sculptures on display were made especially for this exhibition. Jay Heikes's series of objects in "A Toothpick to Pick the Last Nail" resemble a carefully cataloged set of prehistoric tools, while Ricky Swallow's small, meditative objects appear as if they would be perfectly at home in a glass vitrine at the Smithsonian. **Zin Taylor's** sculptural objects are decisively contemporary but nonetheless carry an unknown mysterious quality similar to that of a relic. "I thought about the idea of history and the ancient and sculpture, [and] this show is about the experience of looking at objects," said Fried.

Fried also thought about local history while curating the exhibition. "I learned about [Native American] Chumash cave paintings and geological rock formations in the Santa Barbara area that are prehistoric. Los Angeles is part of a larger whole: we're close to Orange County, Long Beach and Santa Barbara, there are these satellite cities that are doing interesting things and are easy to get to." CAF's Executive Director **Miki Garcia**, who joined the institution eight years ago after working as curator at New York's **Public Art Fund**, explains further: "We're the only institution between Los Angeles and San Francisco that is programming this caliber of art. We're not having an insular conversation but are part of a larger dialogue on contemporary art." CAF has exhibited an array of important emerging artists including the L.A.-based **Zoe Crosher** and **Jon Pylypchuk**, the Iranian-born Berlin-based **Setareh Shahbazi** and **Shinique Smith**, who lives in New York.

*[To see images from the show, click on the slideshow.](#)*

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