



CAHUILLA

Sculpture by Lewis deSoto

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Essay by Nick Stone

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Lewis deSoto, CAHUILLA, customized truck, Jacquard tapestry, sound and lighting system,
Installation at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT, 2006
Photograph by Terri Garneau

360 LB.-FT. ONE TON MASH-UP

Lewis deSoto's *Cahuilla* is a product of the surreal, poetic simultaneity found in dreams, a manifestation in three gleaming dimensions of the rhizomatic "and... and... and..." idiom which Deleuze and Guattari declared muscular enough to wrestle with ontology itself. One imagines a dreamer's breathless description to a bemused companion upon awakening: "It was an enormous truck, painted with the colors of the desert... and it was also kind of a giant dollar bill, with the same lettering and symbols that money has... and it was also a casino - there was a woven craps table on the back and I could see the slot machine lights and hear the dealers... and at the same time, the dealers' voices were chanting in *Cahuilla*... it was unbelievable." Too, like a dream, *Cahuilla* is a vehicle capable of taking its passenger on a ride that is both sensual and conceptual; many of the components in its sequence of familiar forms are themselves transitive, stealthily piloted by an interior significance. In elements ranging from luxurious aluminum customizations to traditional beaded and woven motifs and a hybridized soundtrack, deSoto refers to a singular convergence of indigeneous tradition, newfound economic prosperity, a distinctly regional form of reified self-expression and the practical needs of desert survival.



Cahuilla indirectly reflects the history of the Cahuilla people, which since the early nineteenth century has been marked by a patient, pragmatic self-determinism. The tribe's definition of survival has never excluded non-native forms or methods. As missionaries, settlers and surveyors poured into their land, Cahuilla people learned to cultivate new crops and raise new animals, encouraging their children to learn Spanish and then English. In the 1950s, the tribe's traditional ceremonial house was sacrificed: the Cahuilla set fire to the house, releasing it to the sky in pillars of smoke. If this house was a locus of identity, its immolation represented a widespread recognition that, more than ever before, an adaptive identity was an unavoidable necessity. New languages, machines and other systems have been consistently and ingeniously absorbed into the tribe's existential flux. The combinatory dynamic of deSoto's Cahuilla represents, on the highly compressed level of a single totemic object, an analogous process of creative integration.



TeePee emblem with Mason's eye



Cahuilla emblem, cast aluminum, foil and resin

The tributary of Cahuilla history that informs both Cahuilla's sheer expense and its various casino- and currency-inspired details is tribal gaming, a phenomenon which began in October of 1980 with a dramatic police raid on the Cabazon band's fledgling Desert Oasis Casino (hence deSoto's choice of a 1981 GMC Pickup model as Cahuilla's foundation). Revenues from gaming have contributed almost single-handedly to an economic sovereignty crucial to the sustenance of the Cahuilla and other tribes, serving as both a powerful antidote to poverty and a buffer against relentless sabotage by hostile neighbors and government agents. The pride of prosperity is channeled in Cahuilla through the Southern California car culture idiom of luxurious, flashy customization. Typically employed to articulate an individual driver's status and style, the custom touches on Cahuilla are unorthodox in their references to disparate phenomena and multiple generations. The tonneau cover literally weaves together the geometry of a modern craps table with ancient Cahuilla glyphs of eagles and snakes. Likewise, the work's soundtrack, a seamless and otherworldly blend of Cahuilla casino noise and traditional tribal chants, reflects an artistic sensibility informed by the audio "mash-ups" that are unique to the digital age: homemade mixes in which recordings by the most unlikely combinations of artists collide in gleefully unauthorized harmony.



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Please Do Not Touch



Upper Left: Beadwork by Jeanne Gonzales, Cahuilla
Right: Upholstery pattern based on the engraving pattern of a U.S. one hundred dollar bill. Jacquard weaving published by Magnolia Editions, Oakland, CA. Photograph by Terri Garneau

Such heterogeneity is a recurring theme for deSoto: Cahuilla embodies, in what is perhaps its most ambitious and refined manifestation to date, an integrated mode of expression which the artist has been exploring for decades. In “Mapping Paradise,” Rebecca Solnit discusses deSoto’s installations, sculpture and mixed-media work in terms of a critical resistance to the European-born, modernist opposition between an organic, untouched Paradise and an artificial, technologically achieved Utopia, a duality which balances on a fulcrum of “embedded belief in some kind of a fall, whether it be from Eden or into suburbia.” Solnit draws a parallel with postmodernism’s pet binary of signifier and signified, that alienated tête-à-tête in which the fabricated, unnatural symbolic appears to aim a volley of names and models across an impossibly vast chasm, toward the unreachable territory of the “raw, neutral material” of the real. In contrast, Solnit sees in deSoto’s oeuvre a current of conceptual harmony to which neither modernist nor postmodernist binaries are relevant. The objects and relationships in his work are neither “merely metaphorical [nor] representational and therefore which cannot be replaced or dissected – ‘elements of inexplicability and of wonder’” in the face of which binary constructions stammer and wilt into obsolescence.





Tonneau cover, Jacquard tapestry published by Magnolia Editions, Oakland, CA



Tonneau Cover detail

It is telling that the Judeo-Christian story of the world's creation is couched in the terminology of dualism – the neutral void of nature, shaped by the hand of a monolithic creator – while both the Cahuilla creation myth (and Cahuilla history itself) display a more pluralistic, rhizomatic mode of development, wherein culture emerges from the interaction and conjunction of a multiplicity of brethren and languages. The latter model is echoed in the disregard for such distinctions as high and low, corporate and tribal, or form and function implied by Cahuilla's mash-up of custom car culture, heady casino glitz and handworked tribal craft. Beyond fusion or conciliation, Cahuilla posits in a very real and tangible way the simultaneous and fully incorporated existence of both its constituent parts and their disparate sources: the contemporary poetics of an ancient people, cruising down an endless desert road in an impossibly perfect truck.

Nick Stone

Sources:

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Tr. Massumi, Brian, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987: p. 25

Solnit, Rebecca, "Mapping Paradise," *Pé Túkmiyat, Pé Túkmiyat* (Exhibition Catalog), San Jose Museum of Art, 1991: pp. 19 – 26



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One Person Exhibitions (selected)

Culver Center for the Arts, UC Riverside; Palm Springs Art Museum; Art OMI International, Ghent, NY; San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA; Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL; Samek Art Center at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA; Bill Maynes Gallery, New York, NY; Worcester Museum of Art, Worcester, MA; List Visual Art Center at MIT, Cambridge, MA; Metronòm, Barcelona, Spain; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MI; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY; Artists Space, New York, NY; Matrix Gallery at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA

Group Exhibitions (selected)

Lancaster Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; Beall Center for Art + Technology, UC Irvine; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA; Aldrich Contemporary Museum of Art, Ridgefield, CT; Fowler Museum at UCLA; Art OMI Sculpture Park, Ghent, NY; Wave Hill, Bronx, NY; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museo Contemporáneo de Arte, Mexico City, Mexico; New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; Museu D'Art Contemporani, Barcelona, Spain; Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Fundação de Serralves, Oporto, Portugal; DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, CA; Denver Art Museum; The New Museum, New York, NY; Camerawork, Ltd., London, U.K.; Seattle Art Museum; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

Collections:

Bank of America, Charlotte, NC; diRosa Art Collection, Napa, CA; California Museum of Photography, Riverside; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, AZ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Microsoft Corporation, Bellevue, WA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO; Neuberger Berman, New York, NY; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA

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