

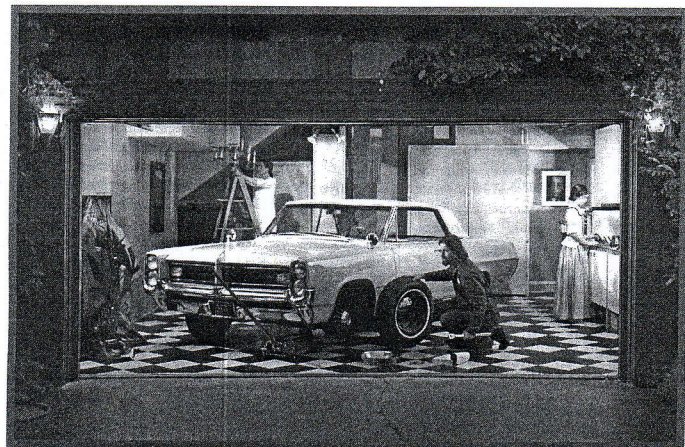
Northern California

Lewis deSoto at San Jose ICA

Would Jesus drive a '64 Chevelle wagon? Would Judas pilot a '60 Ford Starliner?

These are a few of the choices conceptual artist Lewis deSoto grapples with in assembling a contemporary take on

either way you're trapped in a cycle of competing desires that do not, in the Zen scheme of things, lead to enlightenment. *Pakghan-gyi* (2003), a collage of tiny pornographic images inserted in and around outlines of the Buddha's footprints, makes the same point by appealing simultaneously to voyeurism and its opposite—whatever that might be. Fittingly, the exit image of a nearby grid of twenty-four black-and-white photographs, *Basbo* (1977), is of a hearse. This montage, dominated by memory-laden images, leads viewers into a gallery filled with op-ish, computer-generated prints and sculptural representations of the artist's deceased father. This homage, which plumbs the mysteries of corporeal existence, takes several forms: an aluminum torso outfitted with a motorcycle



Lewis deSoto, *The Restoration*, 2005, light-jet transparency in light box, 26" x 35", at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, one of fifteen works that figure prominently in a 36-year survey of the artist's work that includes photography, sound installations, sculpture and prints at San Jose's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). At a distance, one might reasonably wonder what the connecting thread is between these works. After all, deSoto is perhaps best known for transforming a '65 Chrysler New Yorker into a vehicle of historic re-imagination in which the truth about his namesake, the Spanish conquistador Hernando deSoto, is revealed. Here, in a tightly focused, elegantly mounted retrospective, *Before After*, the artist demonstrates that regardless of media, his work revolves around three themes: desire, mortality and transcendence. The result is a portrait of a hydrocarbon-powered, millennial-straddling Zen Catholic whose quest for meaning roams from the earthly to the ethereal.

The show opens with an olfactory blast from a room strewn with cocoa hulls, *End of Desire* (2008). It functions like a Zen joke: You can salivate or resist the overpowering odor of chocolate, but

gas valve, which was (presumably) opened to fill the cavity with holy water; a wooden armature covered with fabric in the shape of the deceased's body; and a suit of armor arrayed on the floor that emits ticking sounds the artist compares to those of a cooling engine. By likening the life force to things vehicular, deSoto demonstrates how we anthropomorphize machines and how automobiles become objects of quasi-religious devotion that are woven into the fabric of our existence.

La Cena Pasada (2002) goes even further by replacing the above-referenced dramatis personae of da Vinci's fifteenth-century *Last Supper* with thirteen scale models of '60s-era muscle cars. These appear in a glass vitrine. In a similar spirit, deSoto updates Vermeer with *The Restoration* (2005), a back-lit transparency in which a baby-blue '64 Pontiac Grand Prix appears on the parquet floor of a suburban kitchen, attended to by a mechanic who looks a bit like Jesus, or a maid that could have walked off one of the Dutch master's canvases. ICA Director Cathy Kimball writes in a

superb exhibition brochure that deSoto was strongly influenced by Vermeer's sense of color and light and by his practice of inserting symbolic objects. Yet it's the car at center stage that dominates. What it and similar references point to is the syncretistic mix of car culture and religion that pervades much of deSoto's output. And it's this reflexive, irony-free combination of the two that gives the work its power.

Elsewhere, *The Site Projects* (1981-83), inspired by Robert Smithson's earthworks, document deSoto's forays into environmental photography. But instead of bulldozing dirt, deSoto photographed moving light sources at night with long exposures. Of four examples on view, *Tideline* resonates most strongly. A crepuscular image made under extraordinary natural lighting conditions, it combines the time-lapse effects of Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) with same feelings of infinity generated by Richard Misrach's pictures decades later. The idea, that humankind is just a spec in the universe, is a consistent theme throughout.

The exhibition concludes with two powerful installations. *Zenith* (2000), a wall-mounted hi-fi cabinet, feels as if it's being levitated by the drone of an audio loop from the minimalist composer Terry Riley, but the sound is really an unrecognizable snippet from the Jackie Gleason Orchestra. *Lament* (2009), situated in a narrow, nearly dark corridor, reverberates with the recorded voice of opera singer Erin Neff, who improvised a haunting melody to words from Herman Hesse's 1943 novel *The Glass Bead Game*, about a life that starts promisingly and ends tragically. It's a remarkable piece of acoustical alchemy that turns a small area into something cathedral-like. Penetrated by a dim ray of blue light, the space serves as a metaphor of what lies ahead for all of us.

Like so much else that is transporting in deSoto's exhibition, *Lament* whisks us out of ourselves with a dissonant, bittersweet message: While life *does* have an endpoint, there is also light at the end of the tunnel.

—David M. Roth

Lewis deSoto: *Before After* closed March 28 at the San Jose Institute for Contemporary Art.

David M. Roth is a contributing editor to Artweek.

Michael Light at Hosfelt Gallery

Michael Light is a pilot, and his new photographs were taken from the window of an aircraft that he himself was flying over the western part of the United States. The resulting images retain a surveyor's perspective of the landscape, but because of the photographer's altitude, seem remote. Often he shoots the land without a horizon, filling the frame of a large format negative with a flat register of the physical world, omitting the ethereal sky that more traditional, possibly more sentimental, American landscape artists like Ansel Adams or Albert Bierstadt tended to emphatically include.

With technical titles like *12,374' Dunderberg Peak and the Kavanagh Ridge from 10,500', Hoover Wilderness, Near Bridgeport, CA* (2008), Light calls attention to his physical distance from his subject. Depicting an eroded mountain peak, the image is not so much a triptych as a landscape slashed into three sections and separated by frames. The distancing effect of this is comforting rather than distracting because the land appears to be inhospitable. Though captured with a facility recalling Adams's photographs, Light's terrain is a warning rather than a promise, a fate maybe, but not a destiny. The scale of the vegetation offers no

Michael Light, *Oil Derricks Near Taft, CA*, 2008, archival pigment prints mounted on aluminum, 30" x 24" each, at Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.

