

Lewis deSoto BEFORE AFTER January 31 - March 28, 2009

Opening Reception:

Feb 6, in conjunction with First

Talking Art:

***Lewis deSoto in Conversation with
Anthony Torres***

March 12,

Reception at ICA 6-7pm

Talk at MACLA, 7-9pm

Admission \$5/free for members



Don't miss the counterfeit *DeSoto*
automobile parked outside the ICA.
ONE NIGHT ONLY, Fri February 6

Lewis deSoto was born in San Bernardino, CA and received his MFA at the Claremont Graduate University. His work is included in numerous public collections including the Des Moines Art Center, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art, San Jose Museum of Art, The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the Seattle Art Museum. DeSoto lives in Napa and is a professor of photography at San Francisco State University.

MAIN GALLERY

***Basho*, 1977**

Photographic installation

Shot in black and white film from 1973-1979, the *Basho* series (basho meaning “place” in Japanese) depicts the quiet and desolate beauty of the everyday - from the luminous reflections on cars and the ghostly light of abandoned buildings to the geometric forms of suburban architecture. DeSoto cites the influence of photographers like Lewis Baltz and Ralph Gibson along with his Zen Buddhist training in this early photographic work. Like the reductive work of Baltz and Gibson, deSoto imposed simple constraints to make the *Basho* images. He always used a tripod, set his SRT Minolta camera to the smallest possible aperture and printed the negatives without any manipulation in the darkroom. In applying these rules, the work emphasizes the inherent qualities of black and white film photography – including the glowing silver-tones and the grainy texture of the prints.

***Pakhan-gyi*, 2003**

Digital print

Buddha’s foot prints at Pakhan-gi (Myanmar) are one of the earliest representations of Buddha. Imprinted on the footprints are text and symbols that illustrate the wisdom of the Buddha and allude to his first steps after enlightenment. *Pakhan-gyi* references the Buddha’s footprint and is made out of a mosaic of thumbnail images collected from pornographic websites. The transparency of the images allows the feet to merge and emerge out a field of “desire.”

***End of Desire*, 2008**

Mixed media installation

End of Desire references a dry Zen Buddhist garden (Karesansui), most frequently used for meditation. The landscape of the Karesansui often is comprised of stones arranged to mimic rolling hills and ocean swells, reminding the visitor of the wonders of nature. deSoto has created a similar space for introspection, however, instead of stones, deSoto’s undulating garden floor is a field of aromatic cocoa shells.

Upon entering *The End of Desire*, the visitor is immediately distracted by the overwhelmingly smell of chocolate. Walking deeper in a landscape of inedible cocoa shells, the aroma overloads the senses – perhaps igniting a craving or memory. Like a Zen teaching, this serene, earthy and intensely aromatic installation poses a question about the nature of desire. According to Zen Buddhist tradition, desire is a source of human anxiety - to deny the existence of desire is to invoke its very existence. With a sweet and amusing twist, (while playing with the ancient and nearly universal sweet tooth for chocolate), *The End of Desire* encapsulates the spiraling contradiction of human desire while calling attention to all the chocoholics among us.

FOCUS GALLERY

***Recumbent (Grass)*, 1999**

Silk and wooden blocks

De Soto created his *Recumbent* series of three sculptures as a response to the death of his father – not quite an homage, but a visual expression of the artist's reaction to this painful period in his life. *Recumbent (Grass)* refers to the lawn his father maintained so meticulously throughout his adult life. Under the silk cloth lies the form of a figure based on the proportions of deSoto's father's body. DeSoto utilized scraps of wood from his father's workshop to create the "armature" under the cloth.

***Recumbent (Entropy)*, 1999**

Steel and electronics

In addition to an empty suit of armor, *Recumbent (Entropy)* includes a ticking audio component reminiscent of the sound of a car engine cooling off. This is a reference to deSoto's memory of touching his father as he was dying. The fragmented suit of armor, strewn on the floor, exudes an aura of the deterioration of life, energy, and strength of the body. This "knight in shining armor" is now an empty shell, rendered powerless. The exoskeleton is no longer the symbol of protection, but rather the reflection of death.

***KLS Series*, 2006**

Digital prints, editions of 7

"KLS" refers to the Hermann Hesse novella *Klingsor's Last Summer*, written during the summer of 1919. The book tells the tale of a tormented painter, Klingsor, during what the reader knows from the start is the last summer of his life. Like Hesse, Klingsor wrestles with the impermanence of art, expression, and his own desires, and is plagued with wild mood swings between elation and despair throughout the book.

Hesse's story of Klingsor's life and passions is distinguished by intensely vivid descriptions of color that recur throughout the novella – descriptions not only of the palette of the landscape, but the palette of Klingsor's erratic emotions. We may assume that Hesse's vibrant depictions of cadmium, cobalt and vermillion are due to his own artistic endeavors during that summer as a painter.

For many years, deSoto has ritualistically read Hesse's novella, systematically extracting his own interpretations of the colors described within the text. Chapter by chapter, deSoto entered a description of each of the colors into an internet search program that ultimately resulted in a palette of colors unique to that chapter. DeSoto has chosen to arrange the colors in a circle, moving from the center out, reflective of Hesse's cyclical approach to Klingsor's tale. The resulting images are deSoto's visual interpretations of Hesse's narrative portrayal of color in Klingsor's Last Summer.

Repose, 1997

Wood, aluminum and velvet

Whether gripped by fear or casually conscious of the possible dangers of air travel, it is a rare individual who doesn't fleetingly consider the possibility of disaster while watching the runway fall beneath the plane upon take off. And so, in considering a fitting title for the imminent disaster that deSoto's sculpture suggests, the first thought wouldn't necessarily be "Repose." The implied state of calm in the face of death seems to run counter to our natural instinct for survival. However, in deSoto's simple, elegant work, the artist has injected a sense of quiet resignation. For, in fact, from the moment of birth, we are all hurtling towards the same fate. Inside deSoto's fuselage is the figure of a woman, articulated in sections of cut aluminum running throughout the length of the sculpture. There is no panic or screaming or struggle. Instead, she appears to be in a perfect swan dive, willingly headed into the dark water below.

The Site Projects, 1981-1983

Digital prints, editions of 11

The Site Projects respond to the land art movement of the 1960s and early 1970s in which artists like Robert Smithson bulldozed earth, salt and rock to build large-scale earthworks in remote open spaces. Instead of physically and dramatically transforming the landscape, deSoto used the expansive California coastline as a stage for temporary actions. *The Site Projects* depict traces of his work captured with long camera exposures at night. For *Tideline*, the artist took a picture every ten steps along the horizon to create a repeated figure that is overpowered by the open night sky. *Tideline 2* used glow sticks thrown at ten foot intervals over a 25 minute exposure resulting in a knot of green lines hovering mid-air. In *Ellipse Tide*, the artist looped a 40-foot ellipse 28 times while holding

a flashlight to make its glowing form. *Wave System* incorporated 30 feet of natural fiber rope, kerosene, fire and the incoming tide to create an image of a glowing zigzag line. The temporary gestures in The Site Projects stunningly contrast the scale of the human against the impressive and overarching embrace of the world.

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Passion Trace, 2006

Unique digital print (edition varie)

Passion Trace maps the history of the artist's romantic relationships. Using colored lines to represent the women with whom he has had relationships and black for himself, he has traced their travels together on an invisible map of the world.

CARDINALE PROJECT ROOM

Zenith, 2000

Wood component, hi-fi and soundtrack

To make the sound for *Zenith*, the artist adapted a vinyl recording from the Jackie Gleason Orchestra rendition of I only Have Eyes for You. Transformed into a sonorous and repetitive trance, the altered music is amplified from a mid-century hi-fi sound system that appears to be floating high on the wall. As with the *Recumbent* sculptures, *Zenith* pays homage to the artist's father, incorporating music of his father's generation.

MAIN GALLERY – BACK

La Cena Pasada, 2002

13 1/24 scale automobiles, vitrine and table

La Cena Pasada (meaning The Last Supper in Spanish) is based on Leonardo Da Vinci's 15th century fresco depicting the moment during The Last Supper when Jesus announces that one of his

Apostles will betray him. DeSoto's sculpture includes 13 1/24 scale cars that symbolize each figure in Da Vinci's original tableau, with the car colors mimicking those in the original image. The cars are models of 1960's automobiles, marking the time when the artist attended Catholic Catechism and when his obsession with cars and driving was sparked. Precisely placed within the confines of the vitrine, the miniature automobiles encapsulate the tension between childlike infatuation and religious doctrine.

The Restoration, 2005

Framed lightbox

For many years, deSoto has admired the work of Johannes Vermeer. The 17th Dutch genre painter, often referred to as Vermeer, the Painter of Delft, is best known for his exquisite paintings of everyday people doing ordinary things. His portraits exist in a timeless "still life" world, emphasizing the subject over narrative. Despite the fact that Vermeer chronicled domestic life from the 1600s, his paintings have a unique modern quality, most often attributed to his acute rendering of natural light and his frequent use of bright colors. While absent of a clear storyline, Vermeer did insert symbolic objects into his simple scenes. For instance, a mirror was interpreted as self-knowledge; jewelry as a symbol of vanity and a concern for temporal matters; and light was seen as spiritual enlightenment.

In homage to Vermeer, deSoto references several of the master's paintings in *The Restoration*, a theatrical tableau vivant that depicts a seemingly everyday scene in a modern-day suburban garage. The initial inspiration for *The Restoration* and the "main character" in the work is a 1964 Pontiac Grand Prix that deSoto bought many years ago because the color reminded him of a Vermeer painting. Using the classic car as the focal point for *The Restoration*, deSoto inserted objects that are the modern-day equivalents of those that Vermeer might have used in the 17th century: a civil rights tapestry, an electric chandelier, the framed portrait of a contemporary (Gerhard Richter), and a car mechanic's manual. Finally, deSoto has chosen to present his tableau vivant as a light box, utilizing light bulbs to reference Vermeer's uncanny talent in the rendering of light with paint.

EXIT CORRIDOR

Lewis deSoto and Erin Neff

***Lament*, 2009**

Site specific sound work

DeSoto has employed sound and acoustical phenomena throughout his career to investigate our experience of space and memory. Sound is inextricably bound to our perception, our experience, and our emotions. In this site-specific installation, deSoto collaborated with San Francisco opera singer Erin Neff to translate Hermann Hesse's wistful poem "Lament" into music. The resulting vocal symphony fills the corridor as Neff's powerful voice resonates in the darkened space and envelopes the listener in a shroud of musical sound.

"Lament," which appears at the end of Hesse's 1943 novel *The Glass Bead Game*, is ostensibly written by the protagonist Joseph Knecht. The novel traces Knecht's life from childhood to adulthood. After achieving great success and respectability, Knecht questions the validity of his position in life and the novel ends abruptly with his untimely death. Following on the heels of this tragic ending, the haunting tone of "Lament" bemoans humankind's irreversible journey from birth to death as characterized by change. No matter our yearning for permanence, the element of change is inevitable.

Lament (Klage)

Herman Hesse

Translated from the original by Erin Neff

Edited by Lewis deSoto

Being in itself is denied us. We are a stream,
We flow eagerly into all forms:
Through day and night, into the cave and cathedral,
We simply pass through, yet the thirst for stasis drives us.

So we fill form after form without rest,
Though we feel joy and desire, neither will become home for us,
We are forever evanescent; we are forever the guest.
Neither the field nor plow calls us, for we cannot reap.

We know not what God intends to do with us,
He plays with us, clay in His hands,
This clay is mute and moldable, neither laughs nor cries,
This clay is kneaded but never fired.

If only once we were to harden to stone! To be lasting!
That is our perpetual longing and strife,
And yet what remains is an eternal and fearsome trembling.
There is never rest along the way.

NIGHT MOVES

Lewis deSoto

Observatory, 1993

Video

Observatory combines the static or “snow” of analog television with sounds collected from outer space. The interpretation of both television static and the sound recordings has been a topic of controversy as humans question the existence of extraterrestrial life. Some believe static (which can be described as radio noise from stellar sources) is intelligible data transmitted from other civilizations in the galaxy. The organization SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) has searched for patterns from the sounds recorded from outer space. For *Observatory*, deSoto produced an audio track of sounds from radiation belts, solar wind off Uranus, radio emissions from Jupiter and the signal from wobbling pulsar. The resulting work sounds similar to tribal drums; it beats continuously and is interspersed with random chirps and hums. With this strange sound overlaying the shifting black-and-white television static, the viewer cannot help but wonder about the meaning of its random chaos.

Hours

Tues - Wed, Fri 10 - 5

Thurs 10 - 8

Sat 12 - 5

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