Joe Chesla: Lying Heavy

The non-profit Sheldon Art Galleries exhibits works by local, national and international artists in all media. Over 6,000 square feet of the galleries’ spaces on the 2nd floor are permanently devoted to rotating exhibits of photography, architecture, music and children’s art. A sculpture garden, seen from both the atrium lobby and the connecting glass bridge, features periodic rotations and installations, and the Nancy Spirats Kranzberg Gallery on the lower level features art of all media. Education programs of the Sheldon Art Galleries introduce young people to the visual arts and provide workshops for talented young artists.

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Joe Chesla received his Master of Fine Arts degree from Utah State University and his Bachelor of Science degree from University of Wisconsin-Stout. He has studied at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, University of Minnesota College of Fine Arts and the Kansas City Art Institute, and lectured at numerous institutions nationally and internationally. He worked as a preparator at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, as Head Preparator at the Kemper Museum of Art in Kansas City and as a potter in Shigaraki, Japan.

Chesla’s work has been exhibited internationally in France, Japan, India, China, Poland and Taiwan, and nationally at Sculpture Key West (Key West, Florida), the Henry Lay Sculpture Park (Louisiana, Missouri), Washington University Medical Campus (St. Louis Missouri), Sculpture on the Streets (Effingham, Illinois), Alexander Gallery (Savannah, Georgia), NCECA (Scottsdale, Arizona) and the Art Gallery (Honolulu Hawaii). He has received numerous awards and grants including the Utah State Arts Grant, Utah Art Council Arts Grant, Jon Morgan Fellowship, George B. and Marie Eccles Caine Fellowship, and the Regional Arts Commission Grant. Residencies include Pays’Art at Marnay Sur Seine Botanical Garden, France, and the Academy of Fine Art in Katowice and Chorzow Culture Center (Chorzowskie Centrum Kultury) in Poland. Chesla is Professor of Fine Art, coordinating the Sculpture Department at St. Louis Community College at Meramec in St. Louis, Missouri.

All drawings featured in the brochure are Untitled, 2015-2017, and employ rust, graphite and encaustic.
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by Olivia Laeh-Gonzales

Immersion, stillness, meditation and an intuitive response to the elemental nature of materials are central to Joe Chesla’s artistic investigations, which have, most recently, found form in drawings that employ rust from tools and other objects along with free drawing on paper. Begun over a decade ago in 2001 when he was inspired by rust patterns on a cast iron sink, Chesla later began to experiment with a saturated salt solution, allowing a crystalline residue to form on the surface of the paper.

His inspiration is drawn from a variety of sources, but he credits the Eastern philosophies of Tao and Wabi-sabi, as well as the writings of a variety of artists like Agnes Martin, and credits the Eastern philosophies of Tao and Wabi-sabi, as well as the writings of a variety of artists like Agnes Martin, and the materials themselves, as guides in the direction of his work. In both, there is an emphasis on accepting situations that might be beyond control, and living mindfully and in the moment. Wabi-sabi, in its most rudimentary form, can be understood as an appreciation for the “beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete,” but it is also about the acceptance of the natural processes of change and disintegration. Chesla embraces these philosophies both in life and art. He finds transcendence and spirituality in simple materials, in their spontaneous transformation and in his interactions with them.

To create his most recent body of drawings, begun at a residency in Marney sur Seine, France in 2015 and further resolved at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in 2019, Chesla immerses steel and common tools like shovels and shears in a mild acid (vinagar) bath, laying them on top of archival paper. Chesla then works into the rust “prints” with graphite, charcoal and encaustic. He finds meaning in the chance effects of the rusting process and inspiration in the discovery of forms while tracing the contour lines. In several of these, he also layers powerful forms—graphite and charcoal marks and areas of charcoal, as well as pools of encaustic, to heighten the rust passages. By working into the surfaces that present themselves when he considers the rusting “complete,” he draws attention to particular passages, encouraging the viewer to navigate the space in a meditative journey of their own.

The title of the exhibit, “Lying Heavy,” reveals an additional layer of meaning—it is a phrase that comes from Chesla’s experience during recent medical treatments. For proper alignment within the equipment, the technicians would often tell him to “lie heavy,” allowing them to push and pull him into proper positioning for optimum treatment. He likens this acceptance of the manipulation and handling of his body to the way he allows the chance effects of the rusting process, and spontaneous moments of inspiration in the tracing of contour lines, to drive his work—“finding an acceptance within a process, giving way to making all this happen,” he explains. Like the manipulation of his body during treatments, over which he has little control, Chesla allows himself to be carried along by the drawing process—discovering, isolating and highlighting passages in the rust and staying in the present.

The Temporal and the Cerebral

In several of the drawings from his most recent series, Chesla layers powerful graphite—the silhouettes of real-world objects such as clothingpins, shears, screw drivers and other tools, onto the rust imprints. These forms are, as he terms it, “a place to rest,” and bring the work into the present, while the marks he makes surrounding the passages of rust are more meandering and cerebral. “I’m trying to approach each drawing differently—not necessarily looking for a pattern or recognizing a pattern but reacting to what is in front of me and exploring what is next,” Chesla explains. The merging of the two states of being within the drawing creates a kind of “sinking and surfacing” experience for the viewer between the temporal and cerebral worlds.

Macro and Micro

At once fragile and powerful, Chesla’s rust drawings can be experienced both from a distance, where the forms within the picture plane create a sculptural balance between positive and negative forms and the space itself—and close-up, where the small details welcome further examination, presenting us with both micro and macro worlds. At the micro-level, viewers will discover Chesla’s application of delicate graphite additions to the surface of the rust imprint. He traces the contours of the rust, creating almost geological surfaces that are a reminder of rocky terrain as seen in topographic maps or from an airplane window. Geological formations are also records of time-passing, and similarly, his marks and bleeds speak to the liquidity of time. In the wider “world view,” we see the drawings as an interchange between forms and spaces. The balance, harmony and beauty that these forms engender speak to the search for a higher truth.

Collectively, the drawings are, in essence, the tracings or mappings of a series of journeys: the journey of the artist into himself via the process of creation, the journey of the natural materials on their path from one substance to another, and the viewer’s awareness of their own movement through the work. The artist uses process—the exploration, discovery and articulation of form—to speak to the otherwise intangible. Viewing these works, we are asked to discover and experience