

Long ago, they say, a goat discovered the oracle.

High on the hill at Delphi, an ancient herder lost a charge to a crack in the earth. Safely retrieved, the animal began exhibiting strange and erratic behavior – making unfamiliar sounds, leaping wildly, refusing to eat. The herder himself descended, suddenly stunned by a mysterious vapor permitting vision into the future. The location became quite popular. After a number of excited citizens took the leap and died from overexposure, the community chose a single young woman to sit atop a designated tripod and inhale the fumes, eventually understood as the spirit of the great god Apollo. A temple was built, where her ravings were translated for paying customers by a network of priests, sometimes into elegant hexameters.

A booming industry sprouted at Delphi. City-states built exceptionally crafted treasuries and presented the finest statues, paintings, and tapestries to curry favor with the divine. The path to Apollo's temple was known as the

Sacred Way, a mandatory passage through which pilgrims attempted to decipher a complex iconography of language and symbols – billboards, really, for assorted kingdoms and coinage. Delphi was recognized as the navel of the world, and no major decision was entered into, no war waged, without consultation of its oracle. Prognostications, however, could be remarkably hard to parse, often taking the form of riddles that were brought to fruition despite an individual's best efforts to outrun them. In this way, the oracle offered less an explicit revelation of the future than an invitation to unravel its connection with the present.

If Not Apollo, the Breeze takes the ancient literary history of the oracle at Delphi as its starting point to explore the irrational, ambiguous, infallible, portentous, performative, hallucinatory, and predictive. Like the oracle itself, the exhibition presents a series of coded messages that address a future that is both hard to discern and right under our feet, like a road. Nine artists and one underground newspaper are included.

Early excavations of the temple site revealed a physical archeology incompatible with the notion of rising vapors.

Recent scholarship, however, suggests that underlying rocks may indeed sit along a fault line that once permitted the rise of petrochemical fumes.¹ Fact or fiction, storytellers have for centuries sided not with stone, but with the intangible. Part of the larger Delphic irony is that its very history is known through fragments. In his first-rate 1978 study, classics scholar Joseph Fontenrose outlines a fourfold categorical division of Delphic responses: Historical, Quasi-Historical, Legendary, and Fictional. “The Historical responses,” he writes, “include no ambiguous, unclear, or conditioned commands, no ambiguous prohibitions or warnings, no extraordinary statements about past or present, [and] no ambiguous or conditioned predictions.”²

I submit this not to flatten my own tires straightaway, but to point to the resonance of oracle stories across time. This exhibition traffics in such stories and is by no means definitive, or worse, accurate. The goat herder’s tale is one of many concerning the origins of Delphi, and several stories I’ve drawn from are so short, broken, old, and reassembled as to have no identifiable author or quotable source. That said, certain voices carry over the millennia.

The philosopher Heraclitus (late 6th to early 5th century BCE) wrote that “The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but causes to signify.”³ In this way, the site is an excellent partner for the subjective construction of meaning; despite Apollo’s grasp on what is, was, and will be, his spokeswoman, known as the Pythia, simply provides a *direction* of signification. Her statements force translation and interpretation, generally supporting more than a single reading. The insistence on signs not only problematizes definitive answers, but inspires an awareness of the subjective interpretation of answers. And, paradoxically, while the oracle can’t be wrong, the experience of completing the oracle – or bringing oneself to the oracular process – is a highly active and precarious one.

“Know Thyself” was famously carved in stone at the temple entrance, a suggestion and warning to representatives from across the Panhellenic world. Initially, its context is puzzling: What does self-knowledge have to do with divine omniscience? One answer concerns a clear delineation between man and animal, a boundary the Greeks were keen to outline. Another concerns humility: the constellation of gods was all-powerful, ever-present,

1 William J. Broad, “For Delphic Oracle, Fumes and Visions,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/19/science/for-delphic-oracle-fumes-and-visions.htm>

2 Joseph Eddy Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle, Its Responses and Operations, with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 22.

3 Heraclitus, fragment DK22B93, in *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, ed. Charles H. Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

and ever-meddling, hungry for praise and spiteful in its absence. To know one's place before them was critical. After all, gods usually didn't speak directly, but rather communicated through intermediaries. Know Thyself as Check Yourself.

Additionally, the oracular literature is crowded with metaphors of blindness and sight, not just in the Oedipus tragedy. Clarity of vision regarding one's circumstances – including awareness of one's lineage, deeds, and motives – plays a more significant role than chance or speculation in the construction of the future. Signaling toward the temple maxim, Socrates starts in on a Delphic inquirer with the following rhetorical dig: “And did you pay no heed to the inscription, or did you attend to it and try to consider who you were?”⁴ He goes on to explain that self-deception is the root of all unpleasantness, anxiety, and misfortune.

In more than one way, self-deceivers couldn't afford the oracular price tag. Consultation was rare and expensive; at one point in its history the institution was only open for business one day a week for nine months of the year. Petitioners drew lots to determine the order of admission, but those who brought larger donations

to Apollo were secured a higher place in line; the future was pay-to-play, even then. And its apparatus, like that of art, has always swelled beyond its center, drawing industrialists, scoundrels, and speculators. Plutarch writes of “oraclemongers” that “filled the poetic art with disrepute” by dressing up sacred messages in complex diction and grandiloquence, thereby taking advantage of those “most enticed by verse and poetic vocabulary.”⁵ Additionally, the temple required a sizable administrative staff.

The extended site itself, high on Mount Parnassus, was known for its majestic natural beauty and swirl of activity. Travelers sacrificed animals, the lyric poet Pindar performed hymns, lavish gold jewelry was draped across impressive sculpture, and athletes from across the Greek world competed in the Pythian Games, a precursor of the modern Olympics. A messenger from Euripides's *Andromache* recounts, “as soon as we reached the famous soil of Phoebus [Apollo], for three whole days were we feasting our eyes with the sight.”⁶ The chorus of the same playwright's *Ion*, the only drama to take place exclusively at Delphi, reports richly that their “eyes go everywhere.”⁷

The word *oracle* comes from the latin *orare*, “to

4 Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.24, in *Xenophon in Seven Volumes*, trans. E. C. Marchant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

5 Plutarch, *The Oracles* 407B, in *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

6 Euripides, *Andromache*, trans. E. P. Coleridge, <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/andromache.html>.

7 Euripides, *Ion*, in *Heracles and Other Plays*, trans. John Davie (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 106.

speak,” and the ancient future was consistently wrapped in and warped by language.⁸ Snarled by a primitive game of telephone – from Apollo to the Pythia to the priests to the paying customer – the holy word was translated into human speech, and then once again onto the receiver’s life. As Michael Wood writes in his valuable 2003 study, *The Road to Delphi*, “If an oracle is a form of words, and the fulfillment of an oracle consists in the match – some kind of match – between those words and an event, in the future or the present or the past, then the ultimate question about an oracle, as we have seen, is not whether it tells the truth but what we will allow to count as the truth. It is a matter of interpretation but above all a matter of reference, of how a particular piece of language hooks on to the world, in Wittgenstein’s phrase.”⁹ This is made literal in the famous “crooked pass” of the Oedipus story, where the oracle’s prediction finally latches onto the king’s experience. It’s at this special point that his predicament is illuminated before his anatomical vision is self-exorcised forever.¹⁰

The oracular point of completion had little to do with facts, analytics, logic, forecasting, or data crunching. The truth, it seems, was a matter of imagination, overlay,

and self-awareness. Although Oedipus was celebrated for teasing out the riddle of the sphinx (“Who walks on four legs in the morning ...”), it didn’t help him much in the end. Reason, or Logos, on its own was not enough it was the difference between knowing this or that versus knowing thyself. As we learn from his story, getting at solvable problems can be not only time consuming, but addictive. “The riddling Sphinx’ song / Made us deaf to all mysteries but her own,”¹¹ we learn through the honorable Creon in Sophocles.

A visit to Delphi is required, as Epictetus (2nd century CE) writes in his *Enchiridion*, when “no opportunities are afforded by reason, or any other art, to discover the thing proposed to be learned.”¹² This method is tempting and timely to consider given the local tech-fueled socioeconomic climate. When untold numbers of automated algorithms aim to dictate our future and freedom, it may be useful to explore not just *what* something means, but *how* it means, with intense and overt subjectivity. Delphic stories take place not where the irrational triumphs – the stark ravings of a madwoman – but where it meets the rational. San Francisco State classics

8 The Greeks and Romans both had multiple words for “oracle,” including those that implicated eyes, ears, and speech.

9 Michael Wood, *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 99.

10 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1976), 64.

11 Ibid., 9.

12 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter, <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>.

scholar Alexandra Pappas compellingly refers to this form of knowing as “sense adjacent.”¹³ While one of Apollo’s epithets is Loxian, the Oblique One, he is simultaneously the god of order and harmony.

Numerous contemporary business ventures position themselves as oracles of a new world order of financialization and information; one, in fact, simply borrowed the ancient name. Just last week, in fact, Oracle Corporation celebrated its annual OpenWorld conference, cordoning off several square blocks of downtown San Francisco and welcoming upwards of 75,000 “innovators, entrepreneurs, and disruptors.” In addition to key Oracle players, featured speakers included Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the United States House of Representatives. A full conference ticket was \$2,450.¹⁴

The many ways of reading an oracle are not without a wrong way. Herodotus (5th century BCE) tells of Croesus, the expansionist Lydian king of the sixth century BCE who made several mistakes in the eye of Apollo.¹⁵ The first was to associate wealth with happiness. Second was to test the abilities of a network of oracles with an arbitrary question.¹⁶ Pleased with the answer from Delphi, the king

manifested his newfound commitment by bestowing great fortunes and sacrifices upon Apollo. When he wished to take his men to battle, he approached the front of the line for a consultation. The response, as the story goes, was that “If Croesus goes to war he will destroy a great empire.” Imagining this referred to his enemies, the Persians, he forged ahead, completely destroying his own empire in the process.

Curious, now, that a site so intimately connected with the future calls to mind such ruins. In many ways, this exhibition explores related paradoxes of time, speed, numinousness, context, power, and accessibility. Its title, *If Not Apollo, the Breeze*, refers to the space between divinely inspired knowledge and a more pedestrian way of knowing. Apollo was golden, and so was his ticket; the breeze, on the other hand, is natural and free, but invisible and unpredictable. This is plainly not a show about the great gods of the mountain, but instead a study of the signs that continue to move us, century after century, hook after hook.

The exhibition logic is nonlinear, weaving together key elements of Delphic tradition with rhyming

¹³ Conversation with the author, August 28, 2017.

¹⁴ Apollo’s temple also bore the inscription *Μεδεν ἄγαν* (μηδέν ἄγαν) – “Nothing in excess.”

¹⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.31, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

¹⁶ The oracle at Delphi won him over when word came back that the king had, indeed, been boiling a tortoise and lamb stew for lunch on the day in question.

contemporary artworks. A network of equivocations, the show nonetheless aims to produce something to hold onto, if even for a moment. But an ominous and unsteady tone surrounds the works on view, much as it surrounds our present future. Chris French, professor of psychology at Goldsmiths University, reports that “Historically, people turn to astrology at times of social upheaval.”¹⁷ So too, perhaps, do curators turn to exhibitions about ancient oracles. French suggests that secret knowledge of the unknown often appeals to those in “careers where there is an inherent degree of uncertainty: sports people, actors, and, notoriously, gamblers.” Is this not, to a certain extent, all of us? Fundamentally, a visit to the oracle gave shape and outlet to very human hopes and fears. Perhaps this backward glance can steer us not only toward the present, but beyond it.

In a certain slant of light, it can indeed appear as if artists breathe a special air, engage in a complex dialogue with reason, and obliquely present us with signs. But artists are not oracles and neither are artworks prognostications. This exhibition does not suggest that our destinies are fated and that someone – something – out there is a step

ahead of us. Socrates (5th century BCE) says that “A poet is a light ... and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer with him.” He goes on: “It is the god himself who speaks, and through them becomes articulate to us.”¹⁸ I’d pivot slightly, instead choosing a bit from Ursula K. Le Guin’s introduction to 1969’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a science fiction novel mistakenly interpreted as predictive: “I do not say that artists cannot be seers, inspired: that the awen cannot come upon them, and the god speak through them. Who would be an artist if they did not believe that that happens? If they did not know it happens, because they have felt the god within them use their tongue, their hands? Maybe only once, once in their lives. But once is enough.”¹⁹

Taking the long view, it’s hard to believe that today it’s any harder to separate ideas from brands, lifestyles from mantras, and visionaries from charlatans. We tend to believe that cultural shifts brought on by mass consumerism, the warp speed of technological advancement, privatization of innumerable goods and services, manipulation of language for selfish ends, and the omniscience of the cloud (a tempting contemporary vaporous metaphor) are

¹⁷ Genevieve Roberts, “Horoscopes: A Sign of the Times,” *Independent*, January 20, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/horoscopes-a-sign-of-the-times-2189608.html>.

¹⁸ Plato, *Ion*, in *The Collected Dialogues*, trans. Lane Cooper, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 942.

¹⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace Books, 1987), xvi.

new phenomena, but they clearly aren't. Information moves faster, yes, but far be it from me, or from this collection of artworks, to suggest that what's lacking is the prodigious moral and intellectual effort required to participate in one's own present/future.

While various cultural traditions possess their unique prognosticative tools, this presentation takes place against the Western, columned history of Delphi. This is a show not about truth, as we've already learned, but about what we count as truth. At best, perhaps this exhibition speaks to a kind of "transhistory" that aims to compound the past, present, and future. This may be the vapor that makes old stories new again, positioning true predictive power as somehow right behind us, all around. It appeals to imagine this show, and the artworks that arguably constellate within it, not as sequential but as parallel and continuously affecting each other. At the risk of sounding absurd, I wonder if they can help us corral fugitive human communalities across landscapes, epochs, and eras. Where to now, at this crooked pass where time and truth grow further strange?

— Jordan Stein

If Not Apollo, the Breeze

KADIST, SAN FRANCISCO
October 11–December 16, 2017



The Delphic infrastructure trafficked in the commercialization of revelation, rewarding high-paying customers with solid access to the fume-inhaling oracle. Labat's *Makeover*, a giant green neon pot leaf, transforms KADIST into San Francisco's newest dispensary, recalling the transactional nature and altered state at the center of Apollo's industry.

Tony Labat (b. 1951, Cuba) has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1985. He works in video, performance, sculpture, and installation to explore politics and popular culture.

TONY LABAT *Makeover* 2011

STURTEVANT 



Pac-Man signals loudly to our contemporary cybernetic state of play in which bits of data/coin are collected in a frenzied, flattened space and each level clearly resembles the last. In just over a minute, the video not only toys with the false promise of eternal life suggested by our increasingly disembodied existence, but also pokes at the relationship between technology and predetermination. In the end, of course, there's no winning, just GAME OVER – again and again. The loop begins with the title character gobbling the artist's name, and with it her identity, imagination, and autonomy.

STURTEVANT (b. 1924, United States; d. 2014, France) lived for many decades in New York before relocating to Paris in the early 1990s. This exhibition marks the first time her work has appeared in San Francisco, home to untold advancements in our digital era.

STURTEVANT *Pac-Man* 2012

Untitled is a black-and-white photograph depicting a wave just before breaking as seen from the distance of an overlook. It was included in the previous KADIST exhibition, *What We Know That We Don't Know*, curated by Arash Fayezi. The show largely explored the relationship between paradox, architecture, and access.

Trisha Donnelly (b. 1974, United States) received the 2017 Wolfgang Hahn Prize. She lives and works in New York.

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BASHO MOTORCYCLE LOVES YOU

San Francisco Oracle was a countercultural newspaper published in the city's bustling Haight Ashbury neighborhood from September 1966 to February 1968, bookending the iconic "Summer of Love." In twelve issues combining poetry, spirituality, and speculation with revolutionary rainbow inking effects, the *Oracle* reached well beyond the Bay Area and spoke to a radical new American ethos.

This exhibition presents not the candy-colored prophecies of various gurus, but a quieter, more revealing corner of the paper – its classified section. There, surrounded by advertisements for drummers, carpenters, and head shops, are the desperate pleas of parents seeking wayward children. "Call collect," many of them read. The entries hit like they were filed yesterday, revealing the power of broken, ungrafted transmissions.

The *San Francisco Oracle* was edited by Allan Cohen (1940–2004). A remarkable facsimile edition was produced in 1991 by Regent Press, Berkeley.

San Francisco Oracle, 1966–1968 Edited by Allen Cohen

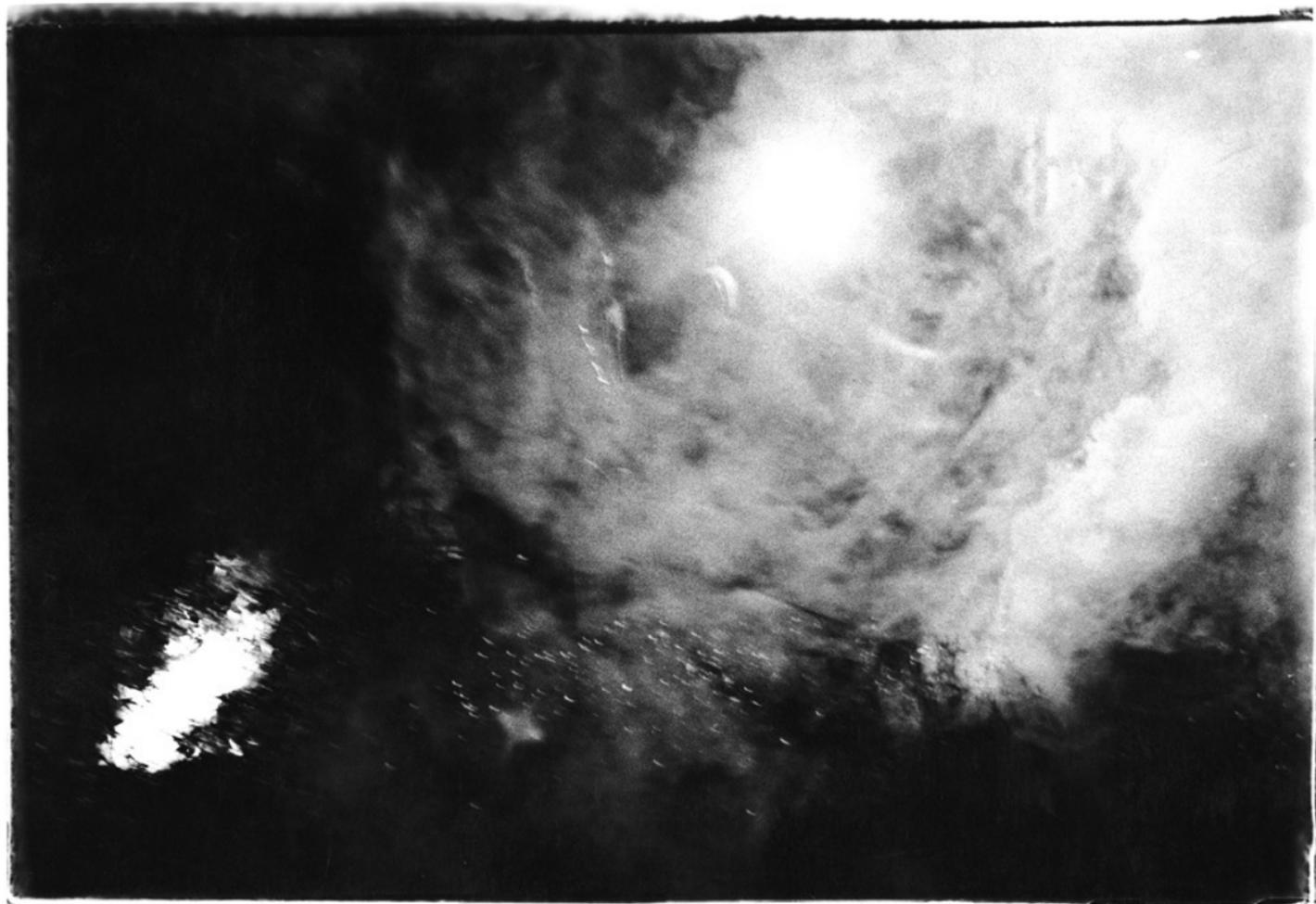


Sometimes, they open a new highway, and let it roll, open wide the earth, shake trees from their roots. The Old Woman suffers once more. Birds leave the edges of the forest, abandon the highway. They go up to mountain tops and from the highest peaks they take in the widest landscapes, they even foresee the space age ...

... I make paintings and watercolors of Tamalpais. Again and again. Why do I insist?

– Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1986)

Etel Adnan (b. 1925, Lebanon) is a poet, essayist, and visual artist. She lived at the foot of Mount Tamalpais, in Northern California, for many years. She currently lives and works in Paris.



In 1970, two young Berkeley curators gambled on an exhibition about the 1980s, inviting a host of artists to conjure and comment on the future. At the opening reception, Terry Fox took a flamethrower to a bed of jasmine plants outside the Power Plant Gallery, the interim location of the University Art Museum. *Defoliation* inaugurated *The Eighties*, Susan Rannells and Brenda Richardson's visionary show exploring war, sex, the media, the body, food, collaboration, and more. "This was my first political work," Fox said subsequently. "Everyone likes to watch fires ... but at a certain point people realized what was going on. Suddenly everyone was quiet."

Terry Fox (b. 1943, United States; d. 2008, Germany) lived in Seattle, Rome, San Francisco, Amsterdam, Paris, New York, Florence, Minnesota, Belgium, and Germany. He was an important figure in conceptual art, performance, post-minimal sculpture, and video art.



Automotive clay is used by teams of artists, designers, and engineers to construct car and truck prototypes at scale before final plans make their way to the factory floor. It is especially expensive due to its extended storage life, capacity to remodel, and complex chemistry. Here it plays the more affordable role of “earth,” surrounding a perfectly cylindrical cut of zebra skull. A collapsed mechanical core sample, Harrison’s sculpture addresses the disconnect between American and African-American mobility and heritage. Its bedrock question concerns the increased difficulty in parsing the real from the model, the natural from the manufactured.

Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989, United States) completed his BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2012. He currently has a solo exhibition on view at Atlanta Contemporary. Harrison lives and works in Detroit.



The voice is not a single mechanism of fixed origin; while it emanates from the body, it has no dedicated home within it. It is shaped as it moves, defined by distortion, translation, and notation. *Delphi Falls* performs an odd ventriloquism not only between the human voice and its animating force, but between image and perspective, the frozen and the liquid, birdsong and bell. "I'm thinking one thing, but then something else goes on top."

Mary Helena Clark (b. 1983, United States) was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. She lives and works in New York.



Larry Bell investigates the nature of surface and its relationship to space. His untitled construction, made from mirrored glass and a simple wooden frame, sits in the smallest gallery. It is the vapor, the crystal ball, and the silent seer at the heart of the exhibition.

Larry Bell (b. 1939, United States) is an artist primarily associated with the Light and Space movement of the 1960s and 70s. He lives between Los Angeles and Taos, New Mexico.



Pope.L's entanglement with language, materiality, performance, and critique are on display in nine *Skin Set* works made between 2009 and 2016. An open set begun by the multidisciplinary artist in the 1990s, the drawings comprise free-associative, text-based statements about people of various colors. A parody and indictment of racialized language and identity, they declare a network of mixed signals rather than intelligible answers or explicit biases. The tools Pope.L brings to bear on the systemic conditions that chart our collective "fates" echo the oracle's media – voice, self, and higher power. How can words be literal and simultaneously more than the sum of their parts? How does language hook onto the world? Who does the hooking? And who gets hooked?

Pope.L (b. 1955, United States) teaches at the University of Chicago. His latest project, *Flint Water*, is an art installation, performance, and intervention that calls attention to the contamination crisis by bottling tainted tap water and displaying it in Detroit.

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If Not Apollo, the Breeze

TONY LABAT *Makeover* 2011

Neon 48 x 48 inches

Collection of KADIST

STURTEVANT *Pac-Man* 2012

One camera video installed on flat screen, sound 1 minute 15 seconds

Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris

TRISHA DONNELLY *Untitled* 2007–2008

RC-print 10 x 8 inches

Collection of KADIST

San Francisco Oracle 1966–1968 Edited by Allen Cohen

Vol. 1 No. 8 1967

Offset lithography on newsprint 15 x 11½ inches

Vol. 1 No. 10 1967

Offset lithography on newsprint 17½ x 11½ inches

Vol. 1 No. 11 1967

Offset lithography on newsprint 17½ x 11½ inches

ETEL ADNAN *Untitled* undated

Oil on canvas 9 x 8 inches [green mountains]

Collection of Stephen Motika and Photios Giovanis

Courtesy of Callicoon Fine Arts

Untitled undated

Oil on canvas board 11 x 14 inches [red and brown mountains]

Collection of Tracy and Gary Mezzatesta

Untitled 1993

Oil on canvas 9¾ x 11¼ inches [still life with vase]

Collection of Newman

TERRY FOX *Defoliation* 1970

Performance documentation 11¼ x 8½ inches (each)

From *The Eighties*, the Powerhouse Gallery, University Art Museum,

University of California, Berkeley, March 17, 1970

Courtesy of Marita Loosen-Fox © Estate of Terry Fox, Köln

MATTHEW ANGELO HARRISON *Bodily Study of Unthinking Groups* 2016

Zebra skull, automotive clay 41¼ x 9½ x 9½ inches

Collection of KADIST

MARY HELENA CLARK *Delphi Falls* 2016

Single channel video, color, sound 19 minutes 58 seconds

Collection of KADIST

LARRY BELL *Untitled (Construction)* 2007

Coated glass and wood construction 21¼ x 21 x 5 inches

Collection of KADIST

POPEL *Skin Set Painting: Orange People Are Rotting Rays From Ruins*

Before The Last Enjoy The Griot Convey The Shrapnel Deploy 2012

Mixed media on vellum 36 x 23¾ inches

Collection of KADIST

Black People Wick 2011

Mixed media on paper 12 x 9 inches

Blue People Are The Color Of Oour Crimes 2010

Mixed media on paper 12 x 9 inches

Brown People Are The Sea In Leisure 2010

Mixed media on paper 12 x 9 inches

Orange People Are Gods Who Like To Tan A Lot 2010

Mixed media on paper 11½ by 9 inches

POPEL, CONTINUED

Red People Ream Of Talapia 2012

Mixed media on paper 12 x 9 inches

Unto 2016

Acrylic, ballpoint pen, cellophane tape, charcoal, coffee, door hinges,

hospital bandages, hospital bracelet, matte medium, ninja turtle band

aid, and oil on canvas 72 x 64 inches

White People Are Hung 2012

Mixed media on paper 27 x 12 inches

Yellow People Split That White Pussy In To 2012

Mixed media on paper 12 x 9 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York © Popel.L