Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Metallum Terrae, *an exhibition by artist Kyle Karrasch, at the Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from October 21 – December 17, 2020. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.*

Metallum Terrae: The Alchemy of Kyle Karrasch's Aluminum Landscapes



Out of Sight, Out of Mind; hand cut aluminum cans, repurposed wood; 24.5"x20.5"; 2018

If you stare at Kyle Karrasch's *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* for too long, sunspots appear on your eyelids. Made mostly of aluminum cans and depicting the country's largest trash heap - the Apex Landfill in Las Vegas - the metal on metal landscape is bright. Sublime, cut-can mountains team with garbage confetti. Light scatters across pieces of blue sky and Pepsi nutrition facts. A burnished sun sets over a glittering wasteland whose shine is a literal foil for the gloom of the subject matter.

It is hard to find a place more suited for metaphor than a dazzling dump. Filled with things we once wanted but no longer use, Karrasch's too-shiny landfill (a part of his *Metallum Terrae* exhibition) is a perfect stand-in for everything that is wrong with us: garish material waste, spiritual hubris, greed. In the face of more pressing environmental concerns - drought, flood, permanent fire seasons, hurricanes that cycle through the alphabet faster than ever - the problem of trash seems almost quaint by comparison. A puzzle to be set aside until we can figure out how to beat the clock on global warming.

But trash and rising temperatures are "in this thing together" precisely because the companies that remind us of this platitude also tell us that the best thing we can do to save the planet is to be a good consumer. Incidentally, this still involves buying things - but more misleading is the myth that anything we do as individuals (including buying and not buying things) can make the difference between 1.5°C and 4°C+ of warming.

From this vantage point, Karrasch's unending work of saving soda cans and plastic bags from their destiny in the landfill or recycling plant is not a heroic gesture, but a romantic one - well-suited for



Resting Place; hand cut aluminum cans, repurposed wood; 4'3"x2'3"; 2018

conveying the Sisyphean task of personal resistance in the face of free market forces.

It's not a cynical picture, though, especially in the context of the entire *Metallum Terra*e exhibition. Over 11 pieces - eight aluminum landscapes and three sculptures - passion and irony give way to a rebirth narrative that includes the two-thousand-some cans that are in the room, but also the figurative wasteland that isn't.

In *Resting Place* - a stunning, closely cropped composition of a field of flowers - we find ourselves eye level with a child-sized plot of grass, face-to-face with a world that is the scale of insects and that, almost impossibly, seems to drop off at the back edges (due to some impressive color-arranging and shape-cutting that mimics a blur). It's easy to get lost in the piece, the same way you would in an actual field - vaguely drawn in by the beauty of the poppies, cosmos, and coreopsis, and then gripped by particulars. What is behind each blade of metal grass? More grass. What is that red object next to that white flower? A Coke can. Is that a caterpillar crawling beside the can? Yes, and there's a butterfly resting on a poppy, too.



Resting Place [detail]

Similar themes of transformation can be found in *Litter Bug* - a smaller flower field piece whose tall grass also hides a fully intact can (though this one's logo is obscured from view). A damselfly perches on the can, asking you to come closer to see if its wings look real enough. It stares at you with big, metal eyes that feel like they have exactly the same amount of consciousness as real bug eyes.



Resting Place; hand cut aluminum cans, repurposed wood; 4'3"x2'3"; 2018

An aluminum landscape titled *Truckee* is less overt, simply letting the cans and the "Thank You For Shopping" message on the plastic-bag-sky do the work of transformation. Choppy, blue-and-green waters slice around silver, gleaming boulders and craggy-cut foliage to paint a picture of one of the artist's favorite fishing spots.

Karrasch returns to the same river in *Paradise Lost* - a piece made following *Truckee*. Larger than the original, the landscape is more ambitious in scope as well, depicting the Truckee River, but also close-range hills, a field, a forest, rocky cliffs, and far flung snowy mountains - all lit from an unseen, Western sun. Breaking up the Hudson River School-like composition is a garbage truck on the bank. It dumps a load of the same glittering trash from *Out of sight, out of mind* near the water.



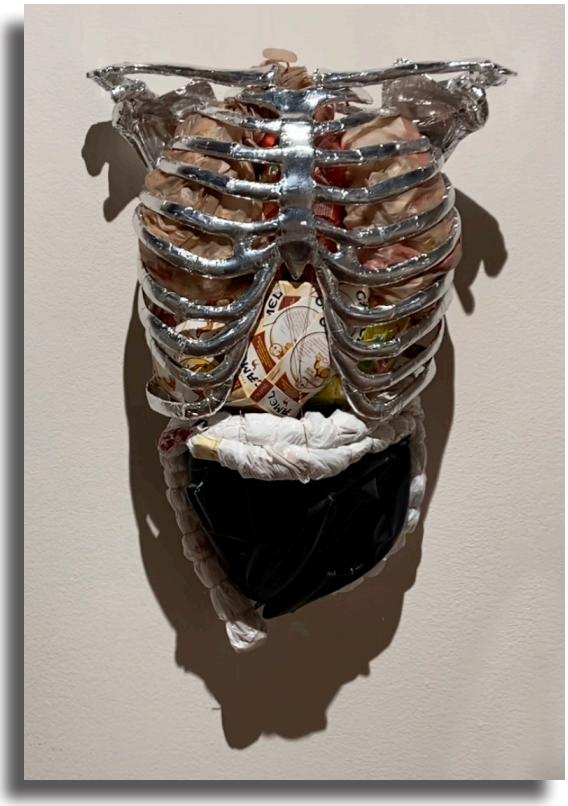
Paradise Lost; hand cut aluminum cans, repurposed wood; 39.5"x20"; 2018



Vanitas; hand cut aluminum cans, repurposed wood; 10.5"x7.5"; 2018

Nest to each work, a corresponding sketchbook page is mounted - giving a window into the artist's conceptual process as well as the level of planning that it takes to put together one of these pieces (it is a high level of planning).

Karrasch's valorizing treatment of these discarded objects offers an alternate form of materialism to his viewers - one that frames our relationship with trash as a longer, more conscious affair.



Consumed; aluminum, plastic, rubber, paper; 23"x18"xD8"; 2017

Throughout the exhibition, these little reminders of viciousness also warn us of what's coming for each person, whether we collectively ruin the world or not. In *Vanitas* - the artist's take on a memento mori still life - a butterfly lands on a skull that sits next to a potted plant. On the gallery wall, a three-dimensional aluminum ribcage, titled *Consumed*, is stuffed with trash instead of organs. The other two sculptures in the room (*Anthropocene Studies 1 and 3*) are black and white skulls that sit atop pedestals, smiling at us through their plastic bag skins like morbid jokes.



Anthropocene Study 1; convenience store plastic bags, polyvinyl chloride, aluminum foil; 5.5"x6.5"xD8"; 2020

The hundred-plus hours he spends researching, sketching, collecting, and cutting for a single piece is only the beginning of his contract with these materials. Once a work is finished, it lives a life that involves a lot less interaction with hands, but plenty of function as an object of beauty.

The rest of us come in at the end to look and behold. We are moved to recycle more or not. Bring reusable bags to the grocery store or not. Buy less. From an environmental perspective, our individual consumer habits are mostly marginal within a system that allows a handful of fossil fuel companies to account for more than a third of global emissions. But Karrasch's real trick is not getting us to recycle, it is crushing us with cans.

Turning aluminum into art can be alchemy when we realize that the task of rescuing trash from the waste stream and painstakingly arranging it inside of a gold-painted frame is absurd in the same way that our "consumer choices" are. We are screwed on our own - as helpless as one of Karrasch's insects - but capable en masse to demand more than we have, which is currently a pile of garbage.

Josie Glassberg

Reno, Nevada

November, 2020



Kyle Karrasch

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