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Michael Dean's Sculpture at the Nasher Asks Why You Want to Understand It So Badly

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Aesthetically, the two shows running concurrently at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Kathryn Andrews' *Run for President* and Michael Dean's *Lost True Leaves*, could not be more different. It's a testament to much of contemporary art's surprising simplicity that despite the drastic difference in appearance, both sets of work essentially explore the same subject: how we convey and find meaning.

Run for President is a satirical examination of our political and cultural landscape that takes its cues from pop art and "Finish Fetish," a '60s art movement out of California. Michael Dean's *Lost True Leaves* has more in common with the unsightliness of Arte Povera – also from the '60s, but this time '60s Italy – and post-minimalism through an extensive use of industrial material and found objects.

Michael Dean is a London-based artist who has been shortlisted for the Turner Prize, and his work is on view at the Nasher through February 2017 as part of the Sightings series. The site-specific installation, *Lost True Leaves*, is an amalgamation of many of the visual and conceptual themes Dean has consistently returned to in his still young career, and it marks his first museum show in the U.S.

The inspiration for the work on view in Sightings is the typical esoterica of 21st century artists. According to Dean the new works created specifically for the Nasher space stemmed from learning that “evolutionarily, cacti can be described as having lost true leaves.”

One thing about contemporary artists is that if you pay enough attention to their art you can learn the most surprising facts. Cacti did indeed lose leaves as evolutionary protection. Leafy plants lose a lot of water through their leaves, so cacti developed spikes as opposed to leaves, in order to conserve water. Who knew.

Dean's work is characterized by a mature visual language. Self-made "books" with endlessly repeating letters, nonsensical words strung together, diagrams, found objects and abstract sculptures made of industrial materials such as steel and clay are all items found in his work, and all are present in the ground floor gallery of the Nasher.

For the installation, the glass doors and windows into the space have been haphazardly painted white so the visitor's view of the space is obstructed. Only a small preview of the sculpture-filled room is available as you pass down the stairs.

It seems oddly appropriate to refer to Dean's sculptures as creatures, despite the fact that there's really nothing human or animal about them. A set of four upright, almost featureless pieces cast and painted a peaceful shade of green stand outside the space, which is filled with over 20 more figures of various sizes.

Some, like the pieces standing guard, seem more sculptural; they're cast in concrete or covered in small lumps of clay. Others are composed solely of steel rods of various shapes and sizes, and seem unfinished. The pieces are difficult to describe – art is visual, people, it's not supposed to be easy to put into words – except that they seem very primitive. Dean is definitely exploring material, but his sculptures are oddly natural.

Papers and books and stray pieces of clay are scattered throughout the installation, giving the space a feeling of motion – of being, well, natural. This installation would call to mind a desert scene if it weren't for the fact that Dean has covered the walls and floor of the room with white vinyl. Some of the sculptures do look like cacti and Dean's spare use of color is vaguely Southwestern.

But despite the surprising personality with which Dean imbues his sculptures, he uses the seemingly inappropriate white vinyl to sabotage his audience's efforts to equate his sculptures to something in the "real world."

Dean makes it clear that his work is about language through his use of endlessly repeating letters, pages of books taken out of context, and the books he painstakingly assembles. Not every piece

is titled but some are, and the titles' profanity serves as another clue.

Dean's work is also a commentary on its own shortcomings, its complexity and the power of symbols to step in where language is absent. By removing recognizable features from his figures and his books, Dean is drawing his audience's attention to the materials and the objects themselves. His obsession with them is apparent, and that obsession encourages viewers to reflect on their own relationships with form, the meaning we attribute to inanimate and disparate objects, and our desire to make sense of abstract art.

He drops some overt hints to point us in the right direction. These may take the form of books and the occasional recognizable letter or word, or materials such as American coins and water bottles, products of our shared culture. These items entice the audience to look for ways these might resonate in the nonrepresentational figures that surround them.

By grinding his audience to a halt however, by taking them just so far and then refusing them the satisfaction of their intuitive conclusion, by investing his art with just enough, and yet not enough humanity, Dean is also showing us just how powerful our human ability to perceive and to comprehend actually is. Dean has made it nearly impossible to make sense of anything in his installation, and yet somehow, if you're honest with yourself, sense can be made.

Sightings: Michael Dean is on view through Feb. 5, 2017, at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St. Admission is \$10. For more info, visit nashersculpturecenter.org.
