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Not Only, But Also

Lucy Puls in Sacramento

By Tim Foster

Lucy Puls rarely shows in Sac.

The internationally known sculptor, a longtime professor at UC Davis (and current chair of the Art Department), shows regularly in New York and San Francisco, is covered by *ArtForum* and other art publications, and has her work sought by collectors and institutions worldwide; if Sacramento is off her radar perhaps we shouldn't be too offended. All the more reason to celebrate the two separate opportunities this month to explore the work of this exceptional artist, first at a group show at [BLOCK Gallery](#), and then at her lecture at Sac State on April 23.



Lucy Puls, *Ad Hoc Locum (Dragonflies)*, 2004

Puls' highly conceptual work is both challenging and entertaining. "Challenging" because Puls often produces work that, encountered outside a gallery, would not be immediately recognizable as art. "Entertaining" as in witty, charming and often profound. Much of Puls' work revolves around twin concepts of nostalgia and waste, and she is perhaps best known for her *White Elephant* series, in

which she encased discarded household objects such as toasters, computers and children's toys in resin. The work is both formally intriguing and emotionally arresting, capable of evoking an array of responses the longer one examines it.

I, like many, first encountered Lucy Puls at UC Davis. I followed the advice of a friend and enrolled in one of Puls' sculpture classes. It was a revelation. Puls changed my conceptions about art, and about the way to make art. She expected a lot from her students, challenging them to constructively criticize their own art and that of others. The process could be withering for the lazy or dishonest, but spurred furious growth in those who were willing to adopt her line of reason: "If you don't take your own work seriously, why should anyone else?" Puls' classes attracted the best and the brightest,

and they pushed to make the best work they could muster, knowing that Puls would teach them to make it even better. “Work” is the key word that I learned in those classes. Making art is *work*. Anyone who was serious about making art excelled in Puls’ classes. There were plenty of others who did not.

Several of Puls’ former students will show with her this month in *Mark*, a group show at BLOCK. Artists Nelleke Beltjens, Hedwig Broukaert and Richard Haley all received their graduate degrees under Puls’ tutelage at Davis. Beltjens, a Netherlands native who currently teaches in Bozeman, Montana, creates finely crafted geometric forms that bear the stamp of De Stijl and minimalist tradition. Broukaert is a Belgian artist whose work explores perceptions and images of the body in relation to contemporary culture; Block’s director Cheri Ibes accurately describes the work as “disturbingly beautiful.” Richard Haley is a Sacramento native whose witty multi-media sculptures riff on Nauman-esque themes of awkwardness, self-examination and absurdity. Also in the show is Casey O’Connor, a Sacramento artist best known as the unwitting instigator of the “500 Buddhas” incident in which O’Connor’s randomly placed sculptures were mistaken by authorities for historical artifacts.

Later this month Puls will also be making a rare Sacramento appearance to speak about her work at an Artist’s Lecture at CSUS. Puls has an incredible range of knowledge about contemporary art, and offers fascinating insights into her own work and that of her peers. The artist has not spoken in Sacramento in several years, and the event promises to be worth braving the endless parking lots of CSUS to hear.

Lucy Puls’ art is well served by the same rigorous work ethic and ruthless self-criticism that she preaches to her students. Her ability to hone in on the inherent nature of a piece, identifying and then eliminating any extraneous bits, allows her to create intensely focused work that functions precisely in its own logic. Working in an incredibly wide range of media over the past 3+ decades, perhaps the one unifying feature in her work is that there is never a single part of a Puls piece that does not need to be there. Each piece is *absolutely* what she wants it to be. And while nothing in this world is perfect, the work of Lucy Puls comes damned close.

Mark runs at BLOCK from Saturday, April 12 – Sunday, April 27. The opening reception will be Saturday April 12 from 6-9 PM. BLOCK is located at 1020 Tenth Street, and is open Sat-Sun, noon – 6PM, and by appointment. Call (530) 409 3304 for information.

Lucy Puls will speak about her work at 7Pm on Wednesday, April 23 in Mariposa Hall on the CSUS Campus at 6000 J Street. This event is free and open to the public. Call 916 278 6166 for more information.

<http://www.lucypuls.com/>