

DENNIS LEON

AND THE ART OF INSTRUCTION



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The exhibition team would like to thank the Museum of Northern California Art (**monca**) for its encouragement and assistance with the development of the exhibition. We had hoped to bring the exhibition to **monca** after its showing at California College of Arts (CCA) but unfortunately, due to the high cost of shipping the work, that has not been possible. We hope some of the work will appear at **monca** sometime in the future.

The exhibition team would like to thank the sponsors who provided advice and support. They are Steve Oliver, Stephen Beal, Lorne Buchman, Christin Nelson-Leon and others who prefer to remain anonymous. We are deeply grateful for their assistance. We also want to thank **monca** and CCA for serving as our fiscal agents during the development of the exhibition.

We also thank Jaime Austin, CCA's Director of Exhibitions, who worked diligently with us on the planning and installation of the show, and the many volunteers who helped throughout.

Finally, we'd like to thank the artists in the show, and all the other artists who, while not appearing in the exhibition, gave us insights and anecdotes about Dennis as a teacher. Also, Ann Leon and Susan Peterson, Dennis's daughters, who made sure their father's work was in perfect shape for the show, Annabelle Ison, for the beautiful catalog design, our fine essayist Linda Fleming, and our brilliant and tireless curators, Chris Johnson and Squeak Carnwath, and our associate producer, Sheri Simons.

For information about the estate of Dennis Leon, please contact Ann Leon, **nepenthe662003@yahoo.com**.

To order a catalog, contact Joan Leon, **joan.leon1@gmail.com**.

## COVER

*Urbanstones #3* | 1988

Collage & pastel, framed

60 x 89 inches







## THE STORY BEHIND THIS EXHIBITION

# JOAN LEON



*Submerged Log #3* | 1987

Pastel

60 x 62.5 inches

The chronology of this exhibition involved an ever-expanding group of people over several years' time with the finished product being an innovative and fascinating exhibition and catalog at the California College of Art.

Its story began in 2019 at the Museum of Northern California Art (**monca**) in Chico, CA. where a show of the estate of artist Dennis Leon, was on display. Leon's work was familiar to the community from the walls of Leon Bistro, a popular, fine dining restaurant run by Dennis's daughters, Ann Leon and Susan Peterson. That and the fact that several of the faculty of area schools had studied with Dennis when they were students at the California College of Arts (CCA).

At the exhibition, Joan Leon, Dennis's former wife and a partner in Leon Bistro, met Sheri Simons, an art professor at California State University, Chico. They both knew artists who had studied with Dennis and agreed they could sometimes see connections and influences between Dennis's art and the mature work of the other artists – even when the medium and theme differed. They decided Joan would be the executive producer and Sheri, the associate producer. They also decided to test their concept and took it to Patricia Macias, the Executive Director of **monca**. Pat found it intriguing, and said her museum would be interested in showing it.



Sheri and Joan proceeded to talk with dozens of graduates of Dennis's, collecting photos of their art and their reminiscences. With the help of Ruth Fine, an emeritus curator of the National Gallery of Art in D.C. who was also a former student of Dennis's, they decided it really was a topic worthy of an exhibition. Ruth urged them to find curators who were artists and had experience teaching art and managing exhibitions.

At the suggestion of Dennis's daughters and Christin Nelson-Leon, Dennis's widow, they approached Chris Johnson, the Chairman of CCA's Photography Department and one of Dennis's closest friends. When he said yes, they asked him to ask Squeak Carnwath, who had been a student of Dennis's at CCA, to be Associate Curator, and she agreed. Chris and Squeak accepted responsibility for the selection of artists and their art and the art of Dennis's that would be on display, and primary responsibility for the catalog as well as other tasks.

The next step was to raise funds for the exhibition and add additional advisors. The first person approached was Steve Oliver, a collector of Dennis's work and longtime member of the Board of CCA. Steve agreed to help and then offered to suggest to Steve Beal, CCA's President, that we hold the exhibition at CCA. This was the perfect venue as Dennis had received an honorary Doctorate and a Distinguished Faculty Award from CCA and this exhibition would not only show

some of his later work but also that of several of his students at CCA. Then we added Lorne Buchman, CCA's former President who shared a meaningful friendship with Dennis. Lorne is now the President of the Pasadena Art Center College of Design, and Christin Nelson-Leon, Dennis's widow to our team as sponsors.

Jaime Austin, CCA's Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs, worked with our team to plan the exhibition, which took place in April-May, 2022. It was one of the final exhibitions held at the Oakland campus where CCA had taught for 100 years. After the completion of the Spring 2022 term, the Oakland campus closed and the CCA-Oakland joined the main CCA campus in San Francisco.



SOMEONE WITH WHOM YOU DISAGREED

## LINDA FLEMING



Dennis Leon was an extraordinary artist, thinker, teacher, articulate critic, and my dear friend.

His practice was consciously and directly informed by nature, and he was so completely present in his works that it is as if he was nature looking at itself. Dennis's intimate relationship with the natural world was enhanced by the many works over decades that he installed in the landscape of the Bay Area between 1975 and the end of his life in 1998. Those countless hours of observing a site and working in a place allowed the light, air, plants, rocks, sounds, and smells to seep into his being, transforming him and connecting him to specific sections of the earth.

In the early days this series of environmental engagements included text and were mostly guerilla actions that appeared without warning or sanction and remained until the wind, water, or human hands disrupted them. Some of the most notable of these were the 1975 Sutro Baths Suite #4 installation in San Francisco and the 1976 works Berkeley Pier Piece, Mt. Tamalpais Piece, and The Vacant Lot Piece. Simultaneously Dennis created evocative exhibitions of his sculpture and drawings in galleries and museums that conjured the rich density of the natural world and, eventually, he was invited to make site specific works in public and private spaces. These commissions allowed him the time to develop his sense of place and his presence in it. The nuance of the observed, the constructed, the acted upon and the evolved grew together into major works epitomized by his bronze installation "Untitled" at the Oliver Ranch, completed in 1993 which especially delighted him.

Dennis's exquisite drawings gave evidence of a keen observer possessing the uncanny ability to articulate the richness of those observations with a sensitivity of accumulated lines. He was equally able to express his thoughts in evocative language that informed the way he approached his work. He was stunningly articulate, which was the basis of his brilliance as a teacher. Dennis could decipher the intent of each individual artist and clearly examine their work to find where discovery was manifest. The difference between illustrating something and embodying something was paramount. Dennis once said that a certain artist "was mistaking an agenda for content". He had an uncanny ability

ALL PHOTOS OF DENNIS LEON'S WORK: RON SCHWAGER



to coax a better self from those around him, making him a beloved mentor and forging lifelong friendships with countless students all of whom were transformed by their interactions with him.

When I first began teaching at CCAC in 1986 the graduate students were based on the Oakland Campus within each program. The Sculpture Department held a seminar once a week with the entire 4-person faculty present in which each graduate student presented their work. It was in this environment that Dennis and I became friends. We soon were meeting in each other's studios and bringing that same laser focused critical eye to our own work. It is rare to find such deep connection with a colleague and I cherished our time together.

In 1993 Dennis and I were chosen for the CCAC Distinguished Faculty Award as a duo. He jokingly said, "I feel like I am only half distinguished". This award included an exhibition at the Oliver Art Center as well as a public lecture. The exhibition seemed easy to plan but we were at a loss regarding how to do a lecture together. Finally, we came up with an idea to write to each other over the summer. I would be in Nevada, Colorado, and New York and Dennis would be in California, Santa Fe, and briefly Colorado. To speed up the exchange we used fax machines to send the letters back and forth as there was no internet then and we were too impatient to wait for the mail. The structure of the lecture easily fell into place around our letters. The stage in Nahl Hall would be dark, a projection screen in the middle framed by lecterns on either side of it. I began the performance by switching on the light at my lectern and reading my first letter to Dennis as images of where I was and what I was working on at the time of writing projected on the screen. I would then switch off my light and, after a brief interval of darkness, Dennis would switch on his light and read his reply to me as his images were shown. We continued to read our entire summer correspondence in this way.

Thankfully, the fax machine created hard copies of these treasured letters which still exist. Because Dennis was so concise with language, I am including excerpts from these missives to share his thoughts about his work in his own voice and allow a glimpse into his enormous generosity as an artist, colleague, and friend.

He had an uncanny ability to coax a better self from those around him, making him a beloved mentor and forging lifelong friendships with countless students all of whom were transformed by their interactions with him.



*California Landscape 1B* | 1967

Cast bronze

28 x 25 x 5 inches

June 28, 1993

Dear Linda

We did a very brief trip to Colorado just north of Denver. I was struck by the rapid formation of storm clouds and the impact of weather in time and space. The storms developed in minutes, and we could stand in sunshine and watch them – or vice versa.

When we returned, I did a series of drawings to savor that experience. Yet I was aware of what a pleasant relief it was from the sculpture. It is not simply a difference of form and media (though of course, it is that too) but a real difference in a sense of self as revealed by the process. In the drawings, (speaking comparatively,) I seem to be trying to capture what I know I know. In the sculpture I seem to be trying to discover what I don't know I know. So, I have no idea what the finished form will look like. I thought that perhaps I was finally interested in what it means to me to live and be in the U.S. I called my friend Larry and said that I didn't know why I was making them. He replied, "Isn't that why you make them?"

When I re-read the statement we wrote for our show, I was very impressed with it – again! Especially the business about making art as a way to learn.

Love, Dennis

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July 8, 1993

Dear Dennis

I have started a new steel piece that is an outgrowth of the one you saw in my studio in May & that I just set up in New York. This whole body of work is from my French pieces "Some Models for the Universe". They have to do with the nature of seeing & seeing to understand. I find that I must build a construction to help me scrutinize physicality. My pursuit is very elemental. It exists somewhere in the interdependence of what we see & how we understand things to be. The works take on the forms of my unfolding understanding. I have started several wall pieces and am about to do a flat floor piece. These offer another aspect of experience where 2D & 3D meet. They contain the components of the massive structures, not as illusion but as information without dimension. I'm beginning to think of them as "Some Shadows of the Universe".

Making what you already know or discovering what you don't know you know aren't necessarily opposites but can come together in a memory of what you haven't seen yet. It's this memory that fuels the pursuit. As we were helping a sculptor friend take down his gigantic work in Soho, I told him how



moved I was by the piece called “Aurora”. He said “I already know that piece. It’s not new work for me.” I was puzzled by the contradiction of feeling that this piece was more physically thrilling than some others I’d seen & his disappointment in not feeling he was pushing forward, I realized that he knew the piece so well that it reached a crescendo & became a reality of its own.

Love, Linda

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July 8, 1993

Dear Linda

Your coupling of “Models” and “Shadows” is very interesting to me. Years ago, I did a series of landscape drawings which I called “Clouds and Shadows”. Although I understand that you have a personal meaning for “Model” it has always been a difficult concept for me. It seems to, of necessity, speak to a change of scale. When I do a piece of sculpture that seems insufficiently to occupy its own space, I complain to myself that “it looks like a model.” Yet I have enjoyed Giacometti’s uses of ‘model’ in works such as “City Square”.

It appears that ‘model’ is a quite cultural idea — by that I mean that its idea is descriptive, and its meaning is found in the interval between itself and that which it refers to.

If it is thought of simply as a title, then it suggests that all art could be thought of as ‘models’. Certainly, all meaning must function referentially.

“Shadows” fascinate me because they speak so eloquently of what they are not. They speak of that “other thing” whose physical properties (along with light) determine the form of the shadow.

In this sense, ‘models’ and ‘shadows’ are not contrasts, but two Compatible almost similar ways of seeing.

Of course, the shadow is also formed by the surface or matter on which it can be seen, and the model expresses its own physical properties no matter its reference. It is all so engrossing.

I am very excited. Today is Friday, and on Monday we install Steven Oliver’s piece up at the ranch. After two or three years, it seems to be going so fast now.

Love, Dennis

*Untitled 6B*  
Cast bronze  
15 x 12 x 5 inches





*Sutro 4B* | 1975  
Cast bronze  
7 x 8 x 5 inches

July 9, 1993

Dear Dennis,

We were visited by a friend named Marta who has retinitis pigmentosa which has slowly diminished her sight over the past 15 years until she is now completely blind. It is so remarkable to answer her many questions about what the world looks like. Since she knew my work when she was sighted, there is a visual language already started and she wants to be caught up. It is a different consciousness to articulate sight. Not just intention & meaning, but also material, size, gesture, detail, color, surface, form, it is a very fulfilling exchange.

Last week Del Honanie, a Hopi kachina carver of the Bear Clan was here and he showed us his extraordinary sculptures. They are rooted in very ancient cosmologies, and some are traditional, but many are his own investigations of his remarkable history. Marta touched each one asking: What is this?" "What is this?". Del's wife Lorraine described each one as Marta's hands moved across its surface. The most powerful storytelling occurred in the space between Lorraine's words, Marta's hands, and my eyes. I am fascinated not only by how we see, but by how we reason and the meaning we give to words. Both shadow and model are derived from the thing not seen. I am not thinking of model as of a different size as much as of a construction of a thought process. It is a device for feeling out that which I seek to explore just as modeling a surface implies feeling out a form. A model is a chunk of territory that allows me to investigate activities beyond my common perceptions. Its modelness is its perceivability. It is not depictive but referential.

Love, Linda

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July 20, 1993

Dear Linda

It was a strange feeling to finally finish the piece up at Steven's ranch. Lots of different emotions ... Steven asked me to give him some notes about my concerns. There were many of course, but I picked three thoughts that I consider to be vital to me:

1. "I want the work to express an intimate and compatible relationship between itself, the site in particular and nature in general. I consider intimacy and compatibility to be the equivalent of the classical concept of harmony"

That is what I wrote. I believe most people would understand "intimacy", but "compatibility" has special meaning for me. In nature, even the most outrageously contrasting element somehow has shared



roots with and an affinity for what is around it. I believe this is true even for such apparent contrasts as land and water or sky and earth. My sense of compatibility speaks to a gracious sharing or energy. It is almost as though contrast as such is the invention of humans.

A concept such as 'The Golden Mean' or a canon of proportion is a statement of faith in the way the physical world can be. That is what I meant by 'harmony'. Well, when, in my view, intimacy and compatibility occur in one of my outdoor pieces, I experience a harmony which resonates and resonates.

The second note I made to Steven was: I want the sculpture to be of the spirit and to be as modestly egocentric as possible" It is the phrase "modestly egocentric" which is important to me. In some sense, it is a great conceit to make something and put it out there in nature and risk mucking up the scenery for someone else's eyes. It can also be an expression of shared spirituality which can enhance the viewer's experience of the site. When the viewer is his own instrument of enhancement and feels a sense of discovery, then the work is reasonably modest. These values are merely mine. I do not offer them as criteria for anyone else.

My third note was: "I want the sculpture to be a blend of physicality and memory which combination enables me to believe that the work possesses poetic wisdom"

"I want the sculpture to be a blend of physicality and memory which combination enables me to believe that the work possesses poetic wisdom"

All of the properties of physicality are reasonably known to us. (Your conversation with Marta must have been extraordinary!) However, I have a personal notion of 'memory'. To me it is rather like a magical line of communication between myself and the physical object I say, "has memory". It has a lot to do with the object's history. The physical forces that led to its present state worked their wonders before this moment and yet are still at work. I can thus look at the trunk of a redwood and believe in its memory. Also, since I am a traveler, always in one spot at any moment, the form I look at may say "I came from somewhere else too — but at this moment we share this space."

To me, "how it got that way", and "how it got to be where it is" are twin pillars of memory. In an assumption of compassion, the outcome appears wise.

Well, I have rarely done as well with these concerns as I did with Steven's piece. No wonder it was with such a mix of emotions that I said, "You're done!" It actually felt as though the piece said that to me and then added "You can go now, stop by and visit me some time. I'll be here."

Love, Dennis

August 9, 1993

Dear Dennis,

I have thought a lot about the criteria that concerns you about your piece at Oliver's. I realize that for the past seven years my work has increasingly become more concerned with human thought. When we met in your studio before I left for the mountains, we talked about your work being concerned with nature and mine with culture. The human propensity to explore, define, and manipulate has formed a collective cache of information that can be stored in objects in a very different way than in words.

There is a language of construction which conjures a time in a place. This is the connective tissue in my work. The sense of coming from a place and alluding to that place while firmly sitting in its present environment has become an important arena for me. There is the simultaneous existence of the past and present, and the superimposition of realities.

Love, Linda

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August 18, 1993

Dear Linda,

There does seem to be some difference, don't you think, between describing one's work and knowing one's intention when working?

For various reasons, I have decided to show only the Melville pieces for our exhibit. I did not do these with Melville in mind. Rather, when I was very far along, he and Moby seemed to describe poetically how I was relating to the forms I had made.

I knew quite clearly that each piece shared the same roots. As though I were a traveler, likely as anyone would be on meeting a stranger abroad not to ask "Who are you?" but instead "Where do you come from?" The pieces seemed to reply, "We used to be one and now we are several". I felt that "The one is only knowable through the parts. Or perhaps the only way to know anything discreet is to invent a whole. In Moby Dick, the whale, the Pequod, Ahab and the sea have this relationship. The title "Melville" was, for me, a gesture of respect and affinity. The qualities of good & evil of fate in Moby Dick did not concern me much. The time sense changed. My elegy says, "What happened here?" The forces that produced the different forms are no longer at work and the sculpture invites body involvement on a fantasy level which is hopefully comforting or at least engaging. It is the engagement that I hope will again imply the whole. I was an audience when I read Melville. I am the missing part of the elegy.

Love, Dennis



*Untitled 21B*  
Cast bronze  
16 x 11 x 4 inches





*Aegean Isle 645* | 1995  
Cast bronze  
13 x 9 x 8 inches

After that summer we no longer wrote to each other, but our friendship continued long past our shared exhibition with exchanged studio visits, intense talks, walks, and field trips for two. Our last visit was in November of 1998 in Dennis' studio where he was making a new "accumulated" work. He would stand at a table with a torch, take a short length of bronze rod and heat and bend it arbitrarily and then toss it over his shoulder where it would land in the pile already building from the previous 3 weeks of work. The linear forms intertwined themselves into clumps and rhythms conjuring the way matter organizes itself when left to its own properties. He questioned the legitimacy of making work in this way, but it was clearly tapping into the forces that created the universe itself.

Just weeks after this visit tragically Dennis died following elective back surgery for the constant pain caused by years of making his work. It was so sudden and dumbfounding. He had left his studio with unfinished sculptures that he was anxious to get back to once he was healed. I was heartbroken and unmoored but honored to speak at his memorial. I thought that since he wasn't here in person to talk to any longer, I could resume writing to him.

## MEMORIAL FOR DENNIS LEON

December 13, 1998

Dear Dennis,

I've been working on some new things in the studio, and I'd love to talk to you about them. My new pieces have shifted from industrial forms to works derived from lace and webs, and continue my everlasting dance with structure, but they're made of steel which belies the delicacy of lace although the spectacle of the hand dominates. When I visited your studio in early November, I saw your most recent piece and how it is about the hand and its gesture. But as usual, we are doing similar things in opposite ways. Your piece accumulates. It starts with one and grows to many while defining its volume. Mine uses systems of measurement to generate and predict its perimeter. When we first worked together in the graduate sculpture seminar in 1986, you came up to me at the end of the semester to say that you "appreciated working with someone with whom you disagreed, but who was also right". That was the beginning of the precious discussions we have had about our work all these years. I told you that I make my work so I can see it and you said that you make yours to have company in the world. In your letter to me of July 20, 1993, you were so excited about the work just completed for Steven Oliver. You talked about your thoughts relating to the piece. Of the three, one comes to mind. You said "I want the sculpture to be a blend of physicality and memory—which combination enables me to believe that the work possesses poetic wisdom". You went on to say "I have a personal notion of memory. To me it is rather like a magical line of communication between myself and the



*Untitled 14B*  
Cast bronze  
10.5 x 19 x 10 inches

physical object I say has memory. It has a lot to do with the object's history. The physical forces that led to its present state worked their wonders before this moment and yet are still at work. I can thus look at the trunk of a redwood and believe in its memory. To me, how it got that way, and how it got to be where it is are twin pillars of memory. In an assumption of compassion, the outcome appears wise."

I always feel that you help me to hear myself more clearly, so I hope you won't think me loony if I continue to write to you this way.

Since no one can tell me for certain what happens when we die, I have decided that whatever I wish is as true as any other possibility, so I will proceed under the assumption that you will get my letters. Not only will you get the letters, but I believe that heaven is the perfect studio, that making continues and curiosity still brings delight, that materials are not frozen in time, they can be dew drops accumulated over millennia. Memory has form beyond the physical, Drawings are made with particles and breaths. Linearity no longer disrupts conversations. And gravity is a quaint memory.

My earth-bound self will miss the walks, the dinners, the visits to each other's studios. The times we went to look at galleries in downtown San Francisco and saw more resonant visions in corridors, street corners, and shoe stores.

There was the awkward time when we met in the cold for warm noodles at the Japanese restaurant on College Avenue. We hadn't seen each other for a while and were both surprised to find that we felt a similar disconnection from our work. We each hoped the other could dispel the sense of emptiness and were disappointed to find that we were each encased in full-fledged doubt. It was important to have your companionship then to compare notes on the cold wind blowing all meaning away.

Our times together always seemed to cut through the persistence of the mundane. It is rare to find one such as you and I don't see any reason to disrupt our discussions, so I'll continue to write, I will continue to talk to you, and certainly I will think of you while I work. I miss you my friend, but only if I forget that you are in the heaven I dream of. Please reply.

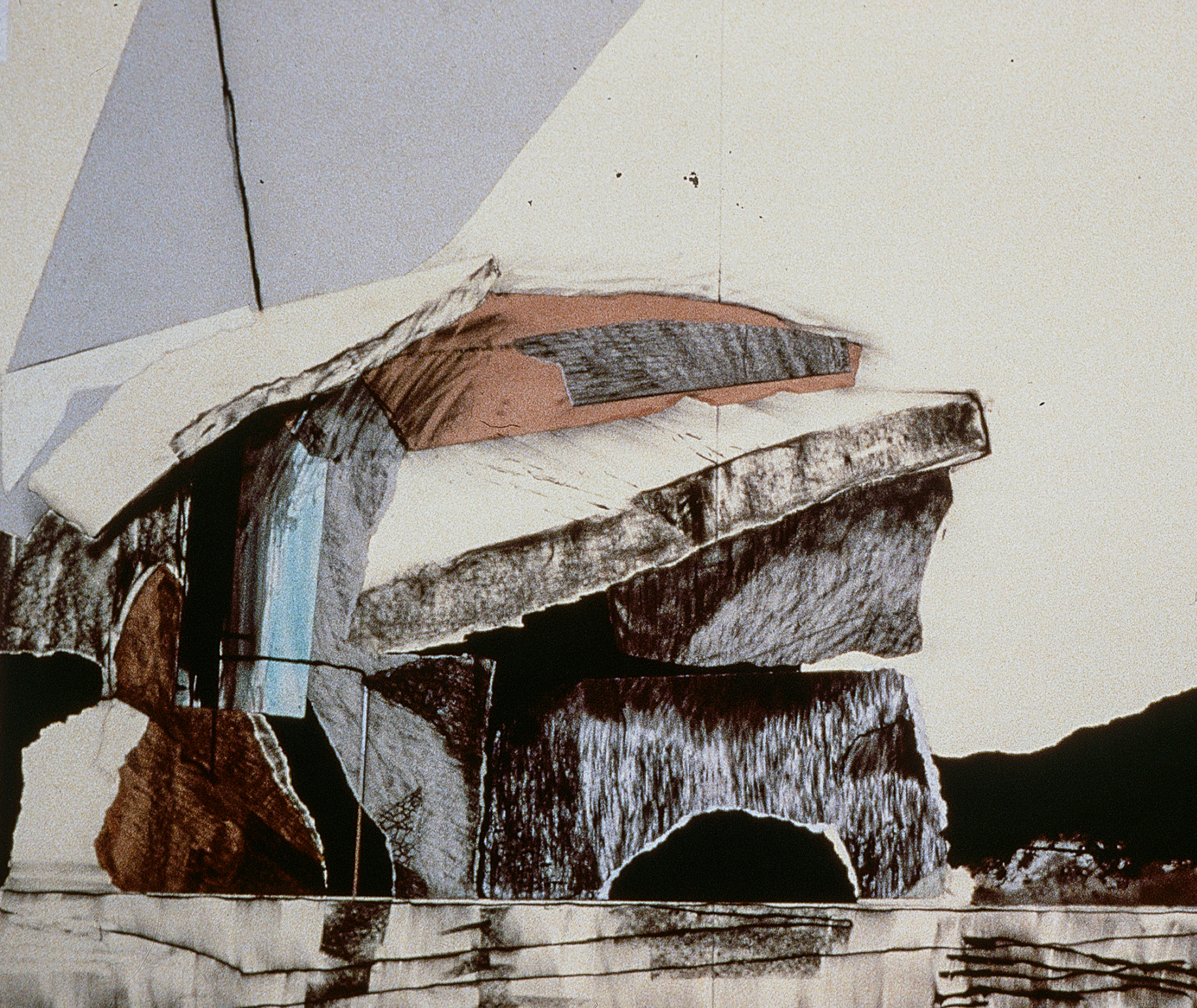
FACING PAGE

*Memory Lake #12* | 1988

Mixed media

64 x 49 inches







## A CURATOR'S STATEMENT

# CHRIS JOHNSON



*Path Piece* | 1977, Tilden Park,  
Berkeley, CA  
Stones and ceramic

Even today, if you know where and how to look, it's possible to see distinct traces of Dennis Leon's unique art and creative process.

For example: the hills and trails are often foggy and deserted.... This was once a volcanic crater, but now, as you move past the brambles under the sky, you can notice geometric carvings in stone surfaces and rock piles and structures that clearly belong to the land. But just as clearly you notice that these landworks have been constructed to be experienced as parts of an integrated whole.

The artists in this exhibition work in a wide variety of different media, with different materials, intentions and processes. Squeak Carnwath is my curatorial partner for this project and we asked the artists we selected for this exhibition to submit works that reflected the presence of Dennis Leon in the formative years of their lives. The following are some observations on a few of the many ways that these works can be meaningful and beautiful:

Dennis had a deep appreciation for natural surfaces. He believed that “physicality” in all of its forms, provided evidence of correspondences that make us whole. This can be seen in the dense and infinite surfaces that Naomie Kremer creates in her works.

Dennis Leon wrote that: “The outside was here first and exists in an extended way – the stage – a continuum. Whatever its particular manifestation, overall, the outside is composite, it is a place – it is multiple”. This comes to mind in the painting by Frank Cole.

Another characteristic of Dennis's approach to art-making was his brave and active engagement with forces of nature. Courage, persistence and resilience are ways to describe this and you can find these qualities in the work of Robin Dintiman and Mary White. You feel as well as see them.

But there is also an embodiment of moral and spiritual dimensions in the respect that Dennis Leon had for the natural world. Look at Anne Wolf's Shroud and in the way that Taraneh Hemami's works are surfaces that entail living presences and principled metaphors. Anne Wolf also creates installations and performance works that draw deeply upon the ways that communities need to amplify poignant meanings.

Dennis thought and cared very deeply about the integrity of free expression and one's place within family and community. This can be seen in the way that Susan Abbott Martin's pieces reflect workshop and home at the same time; and how Gale Antokal uses ephemeral materials like chalk and flour to render a fantasy of bodies and the sea.

Dennis felt that found objects, just as they are, have voices and meanings all of their own. You can see this in the works of Yoshitomo Saito and, again, Robin Dintiman.

At parties, with wine and song, Dennis might suddenly recite, from memory, long poems like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot.

He loved whimsical and wise words and ideas. You can see this in Squeak Carnwath's paintings and in the titles and conceptual markings that Jennifer Kaufman creates on walls and surfaces.

One last question about the works of Dennis Leon: What is added to major works of art when we discover that they are anonymous? That the hand and soul of the artist is there, but not the name? This is something that Dennis Leon understood very well.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to Joan Leon and Sheri Simons for inviting me to participate in this exhibition, and Squeak Carnwath for her curatorial partnership. And Christin Leon for her help in selecting the artists.



# ANNE WOLF

*Shroud* | 1999  
Hand-stitched cotton  
10 x 6 feet



PHOTO: LISA LEVINE

The way in which Dennis could encounter another human being and crawl inside of their mind—seeking to understand them. Not for power or a sense of superiority, but for company or maybe to find kindred spirits.

There was a real sense of purpose, integrity and kindness in figuring out how to support the growth of another person. I've carried that with me as an educator.

We—all of us who worked with Dennis at the time when I was in grad school. We all felt seen. And within that sense of being truly seen, we grew in our art and became more and more our truest selves. He brought out the best in his students—what was honest and authentic. Each person's gifts.

He always asked questions. He would say things like “What’s that like for you?”

And because we were doing this in the context of our MFA program community, we really saw one another. That was such a special and powerful time.





# FRANK COLE

*Storm House (A Different Past)* | 2019  
Acrylic on canvas drop cloth (unstretched)  
108 x 72 inches



# GALE ANTOKAL

*Group Shot 1* | 2007

Chalk, flour, graphite and ash on paper

19 x 62 inches

Dennis enabled me to realize something about space that still endures, a recognition that a place is signified when the picture plane divides into the above and the below. Whatever enters between this duality creates a tension between the two. This is very apparent in *Group Shot 1*. The drawing reveals my way of gently coaxing enigmatic and affecting essences from ordinary images that matter to me. The work was made with mutable materials (chalk, flour, graphite and ash) that are easy to disperse and wipe away. Flour and ash underpin the images of people caught between life and death. We are so lightly here.

Dennis also observed that when we depict a figure with its back to us, we show the vulnerability of the human form. What lies in front of these vulnerable, ambiguous forms, these humans, is an oncoming wave, suggestive of a maelstrom.

There is a loss that is not seen when we look at the photographic source of the work. I mediate this with my materials, bring forth and so give back the images that will dissolve into abstraction when viewed at close range. With distance from the work, the image is clearer. The sky and ocean exist as above and below. The circumstance of place, Dennis might say, in this case, a fateful one.



PHOTO: DON FELTON



# JENNIFER KAUFMAN



What made Dennis such a special teacher was that... he was kind of like a place himself.

He was a place where I could explore things that really mattered to me, that I hadn't found a place for previously.

When we met it was as if it made all the sense in the world to talk about death and dying and John Cage and poetry and a river I'd never heard of, and a vacation he and Christin took, and what he thought about *Giotto's angels*, and then some funny joke that I could never remember.

But it was just that he was a place. A place to learn together and it was deeply meaningful for me as an artist.

*Glimmerstrück* | 2016

Graphite, pastel, and archival tape on paper  
60 x 84 inches unframed

PHOTO: SIBILA SAVAGE



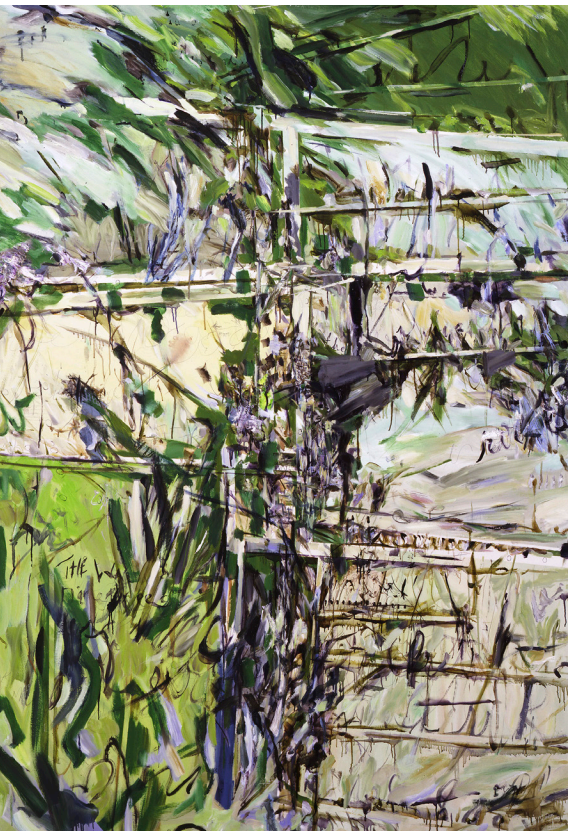
## MARY BAYARD WHITE

I didn't know Dennis as a friend. I knew him only as a teacher in our graduate seminar. At the end of the seminar he took every student aside and offered them a few words.

He said to me, "Mary, take what you have learned in your life and give it to others. Offer it and pass it on."

Dennis's advice resonated with me. It is a way of being that I've tried to carry thru my entire career: pass on what I have been given and grow.

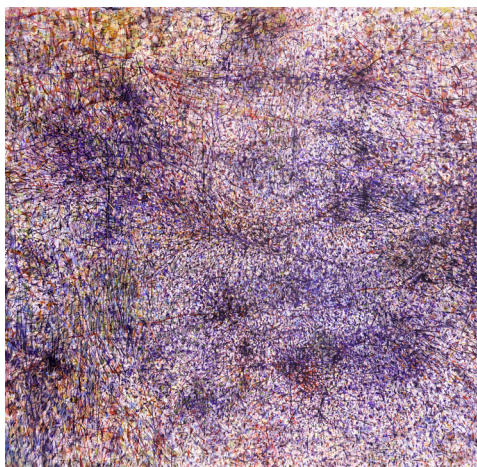
*Living on Fault Lines and Pacific Currents #2* | 2011  
Repurposed window glass, Oakland repurposed steel  
64 inches h x 22 inches w x 20 inches d



## NAOMIE KREMER

Early in my study with Dennis, he said (paraphrasing):

“When you make a work, you go on a journey. Along the way there are side roads you could take. On day 4 or 5 you might decide to go back to one of those earlier roads and explore it. Allow yourself that freedom.”



PHOTOS: BEN BLACKWELL

### TOP

*Only You* | 1998  
Oil on canvas  
84 inches x 60 inches

### BOTTOM

*As Is* | 1992  
Acrylics, pastels and ink on paper  
48 inches x 49 inches





*Axis Mundi* | 2016–17  
Oil on linen  
58.5 inches x 76.75 inches





## ROBIN DINTIMAN

... the essence of it from (Dennis) was permission.

He just was very gracious about giving you permission to be yourself.

And trusting that the intuitive way that I worked was the way.

He'd throw these questions at me about:

What's the relationship between freedom and decision?

You think you're free.  
You start in the studio  
or you start outside with  
the camera.

But you're not really free.  
Because you're you.



### CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

*Close to the Bone; We Are* | 1998–2021

Trash, recycled plastic bags, industrial urethane expandable foam, steel hooks and cable

9 x 5 x 8 feet

*Kinzu* | 2015

Photogravure

32 x 25 x 2 inches

*Indira's Web* | 2021

Palladium prints of the surrounds after the Tubs fire, rare orange cluster lily pods from Ithaca botanist, milkweed pods for monarch butterflies, spider webs and tent caterpillar nests, silk chiffon digital print  
12 feet x 15 x 1/8 inches





*We Are All Connected* | 2018-19

Birch collected after ice storm broke them, steel cable, wood glue, birch twigs, dried rose buds, black sand

45 x 36 x 45 inches



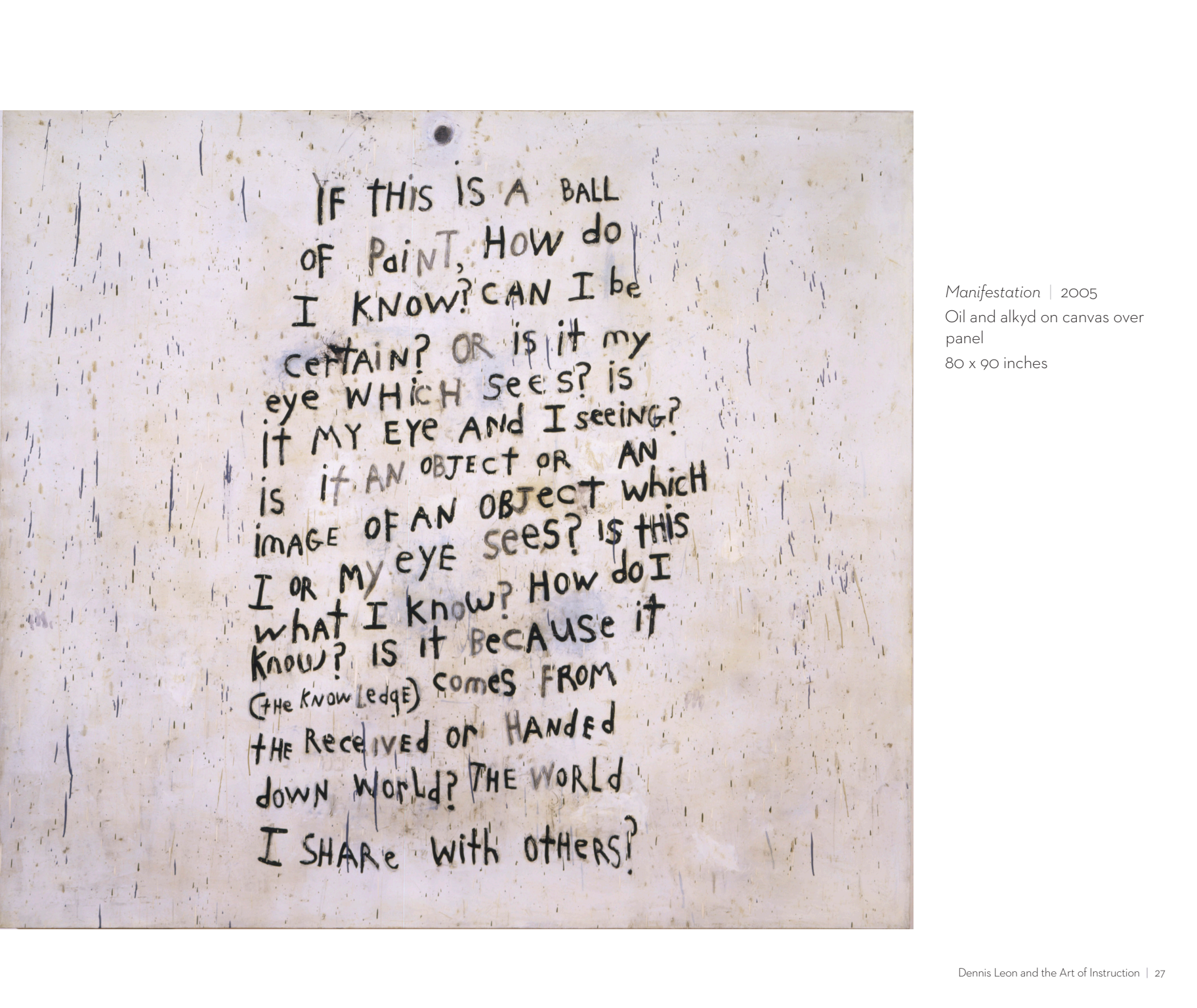
# SQUEAK CARNWATH



*Something* | 2008

Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel

90 x 80 inches



IF THIS IS A BALL  
OF PAINT, HOW DO  
I KNOW? CAN I BE  
CERTAIN? OR IS IT MY  
EYE WHICH SEES? IS  
IT MY EYE AND I SEEING?  
IS IT AN OBJECT OR AN  
IMAGE OF AN OBJECT WHICH  
I OR MY EYE SEES? IS THIS  
WHAT I KNOW? HOW DO I  
KNOW? IS IT BECAUSE IT  
(THE KNOWLEDGE) COMES FROM  
THE RECEIVED OR HANDED  
DOWN WORLD? THE WORLD  
I SHARE WITH OTHERS?

*Manifestation* | 2005  
Oil and alkyd on canvas over  
panel  
80 x 90 inches



# SUSAN ABBOTT MARTIN

*Not Your Grandmother's Crocheted  
Coverlet* | 2016  
Mixed Media

#1 *Not Your Grandmother's Crocheted  
Coverlet* | 2016  
Mixed Media  
7 inches diameter x 5 inches deep

#2 *Not Your Grandmother's Crocheted  
Coverlet* | 2016  
Mixed Media  
6.5 inches diameter x 5 inches deep

#3 *Not Your Grandmother's Crocheted  
Coverlet* | 2016  
Mixed Media  
6.5 inches diameter x 4 inches deep

#4 *Not Your Grandmother's Crocheted  
Coverlet* | 2016  
Mixed Media  
6.5 inches in diameter x 4 inches deep



PHOTO: BEN BLACKWELL

# TARANEH HEMAMI



PHOTOS: SIBILA SAVAGE

## ABOVE

*Recounting* | 2001

Digital print, vellum, encaustic and lacquer on wood panels

68 x 68 x 6 inches

## LEFT

*Hall of Reflections* | 2002

Digital transparencies, silkscreen, glass, mirror, resin on wood panel

variable installation with 64 tiles of 8 x 8 inches

# YOSHITOMO SAITO

There was a typically short and sweet California winter shower that wet the entire CCAC Oakland campus one day. When it stopped, Dennis Leon, Bud Schmidt (Sculpture Shop Tech) and I took off and walked down to the Hudson Bay Cafe on College Avenue for our routine coffee time after the early morning bronze casting session.

Before reaching to the cafe, Dennis suddenly stopped and showed me a small puddle of water on the asphalt pavement. There were some pine needles floating on the puddle. He said that this was remarkable.

I had no idea why he said that or what the implications were at that time, but that was the way he taught me the essence of sculpture:

Tangible reality with the physical body;  
unpretentious gestures that we learn from nature  
and poetry of an unexpected kind.

Dennis knew my English wasn't up to the level for high end comprehension at that time, but he was trusting my ability to come up with something unique in bronze. Therefore, he occasionally used things like a rain water puddle to relate his messages to me.

The 'millionyearseeds' in the show reflects the personal and peculiar contact I had with Dennis during my days at CCAC.

FACING PAGE

*millionyearseeds* | 2011-21

Bronze

Size varies

courtesy of artist and William Havu Gallery









Dennis Leon (1933-1998) was born in London, England. During the Blitz, he and his brother were evacuated to Wales. The family moved to Leeds in West Yorkshire after the war where Dennis studied at the Roundhay School and dreamed of a career in medicine while spending free time drawing everything around him.

After he and his parents migrated to the US and settled in Philadelphia he applied to Temple University as a pre-med student and showed his portfolio to his counselor. The counselor strongly urged him to choose Tyler School of Art, instead. He did so and earned his BS in Education, as well as his BFA, and MFA in 1959. A ROTC student at Tyler, he entered the U.S. Army, was stationed in Germany, and remained in the Army Reserve until 1963. After his active duty, he became the art critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer and continued in that role until 1962. His most noteworthy review for the Inquirer was to report on the forced opening of the Barnes Museum in Lower Merion in 1961.

In 1959 he joined the faculty of the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts) and served as the director of the Fine Arts Department (1965-67) and the Sculpture Department

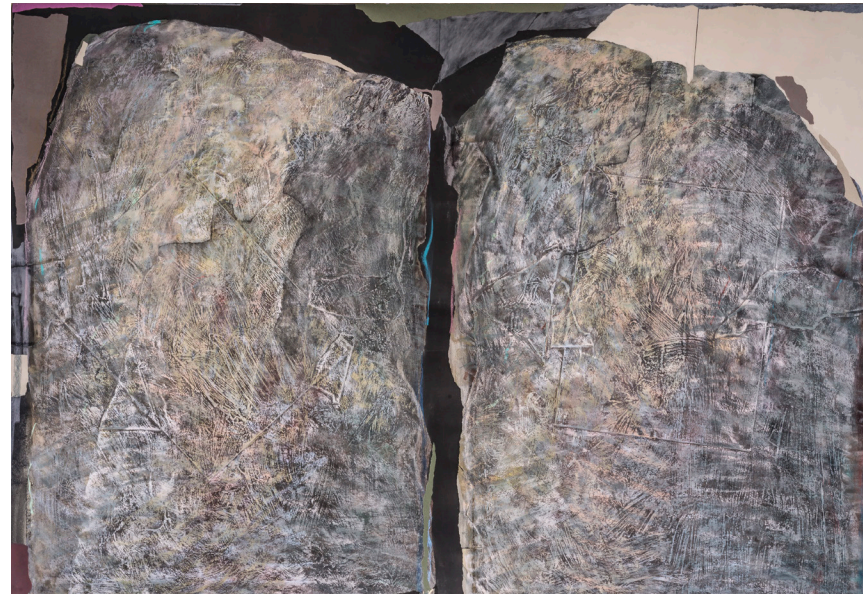


(1967-1970). He married Joan Schaefer in 1965 and they had two children, Ann and Susan.

In 1972, he accepted an invitation to serve as a guest faculty member at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of Art) in Oakland, CA. At the same time he wrote the essay for a book about sculptor Paul Harris, published by Rizzoli. After he and his family went back to Philadelphia, Leon was invited to return the following year as Chairman of CCAC's sculpture department, a position he retained until 1992. In 1993 he retired as Professor Emeritus. CCAC honored him with a Distinguished Faculty Award and Honorary Doctorate. Leon married Christin Nelson in 1987.

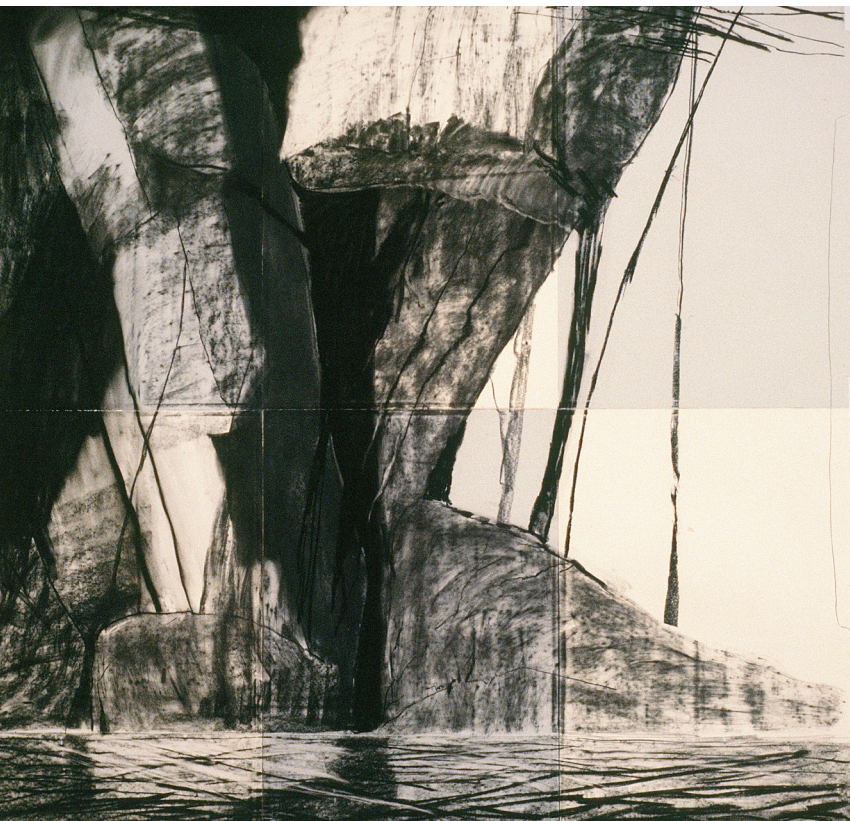
Leon's work is in the collections of the Berkeley Art Museum, the Di Rosa Preserve, Storm King Art Center, SFMOMA, the Oakland Museum of California, the San Jose Museum of Art, the Crocker Art Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among many others. His work has been shown in major galleries throughout the East and West coasts. He has placed permanent site-specific outdoor installations at the Oliver Ranch Foundation in Geyserville, the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, California, and numerous locations around the Bay Area including Sutro Baths, Berkeley Pier, Claremont Hills, and the Sibley Volcanic Reserve.

Leon was awarded fellowships from The Glass Art Society (Keynote Speaker, 1994), Marin Headlands Art Center Residency (1984), Djerassi Foundation Fellowship (1983 and 1984), MacDowell Colony (1982), Yaddo, and The National Endowment for the Arts (1979) John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as recognition from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1967).



*Twostones #2* | 1988  
Collage & pastel  
44 x 88 inches





*Harrison Lake #7* | 1987  
Collage & charcoal  
87 x 90 inches



*Harrison Lake #1* | 1987  
Collage & charcoal  
88 x 90 inches

#### FACING PAGE

*Beachstones #6* | 1988  
Collage & pastel  
64 x 93 inches







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Frankenstein, Alfred, Bob's Best Face Forward, San Francisco Chronicle, October 12, p.57.  
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#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Museum of Northern California Art (**monca**), Chico CA, one-man show, February-March.
- 2017 Woods, Rocks and Landscape, Sculpture and Works on Paper, one-man show, Shasta College Art Gallery, Redding, CA, August-September
- 2014-6 Harvest Inn Sculpture Garden Exhibition, St. Helena, CA
- 2014 Reverie...Interpretations of Nature, Chico Museum, in collaboration with Leon Bistro, Chico CA, February-March
- 2013-5 Large Pastels at the Ed Roberts Campus, Berkeley CA
- 2013 Five large bronze and wood sculpture, New Acquisitions, Luther Burbank Center for the Arts, Santa Rosa, CA
- 2007 Small Bronze Sculptures, Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2002 Reverie, Oakland Art Gallery, CA  
Dennis Leon: Perpetual Objects, Gallery 555, Oakland, CA
- 1998 Paule Anglim Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA
- 1995 Cheryl Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA

- 1994 Butters Gallery, Portland, OR  
J. Noblett Gallery, Sonoma, CA
- 1993 Oliver Art Center, Oakland, CA  
Cheryl Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1992 Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1991 Chemeketa Community College, Salem, OR  
Anne Reid Gallery, Ketchum, ID  
Cheryl Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
- 1990 Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA  
California State University, Fresno
- 1989 Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1988 J. Noblett Gallery, Sonoma, CA  
Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1987 J. Noblett Gallery, Sonoma, CA
- 1986 Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1984 Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1982 Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1981 San Jose Museum of Fine Arts, CA –  
Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1979 Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1978 Galleria d'Arte del Cavallino, Venice, Italy
- 1977 Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1973 James Willis Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1971 Philadelphia College of Art, PA
- 1970 Kraushaar Galleries, New York, NY
- 1968 Kraushaar Galleries, New York, NY

1966 Kraushaar Galleries, New York, NY  
 1965 Henri Gallery, Washington, DC  
 1963 Gallery 1015, Wyncote, PA  
 1961 Philadelphia Art Alliance, PA  
 1957 Dubin Galleries, Philadelphia, PA  
 patriciasweetowgallery.com

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016 The Poker Game and its Circle, Group Exhibition, Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA  
 1997 In Their Nature, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, CA  
 From Plastic Form to Printer's Plate: 16 Contemporary Sculptor/Printmakers, Exhibits USA, Western Washington University Gallery, Bellingham  
 1996 From Plastic Form to Printer's Plate: 16 Contemporary Sculptor/Printmakers, Exhibits USA, Texas Tech University, Forum of the Visual Arts, Lubbock  
 From Plastic Form to Printer's Plate: 16 Contemporary Sculptor/Printmakers, Exhibits USA, Loveland Museum, CO  
 1995 From Plastic Form to Printer's Plate: 16 Contemporary Sculptor/Printmakers, Exhibits USA, University of North Texas, Art Gallery, Denton  
 Facing Eden: 100 Years of Landscape in the Bay Area, M.H. de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA  
 1994 Dennis Leon and Morley Clark, J. Noblett Gallery, Boyes Hot Springs, CA  
 The Romance of the California Landscapes, San Jose, CA  
 1993 The Romantic Landscape, Holmes Fine Art Gallery, San Jose, CA  
 Metal Sculpture, California State University, Hayward

1992 Sixteen Sculptors, Oliver Art Center, Oakland, CA  
 1991 Monochrome, Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA  
 1990 Woodblocks, Etchings, Lithographs, Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA  
 The Undiminished Landscape, Security Pacific, San Francisco, CA  
 A Natural Order, Hudson River Museum, NY  
 Against the Grain, Oliver Art Museum, Oakland, CA  
 1989 Quiet, The Oakland Museum, CA  
 Topography, Fuller Gross Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
 Off Site: Artists in Response to the Environment, Richmond Art Center, CA  
 1988 Private Reserve, Dorothy Goldeen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA  
 Drawings by Ten, Mandeville Gallery, University of California, San Diego  
 Professors' Choice, Claremont Colleges, CA  
 Bay Area Sculptors, University of California, Davis  
 Bronze Sculptors, Walnut Creek Art Gallery, CA  
 1987 Bay Area Drawings, Richmond Art Center, CA  
 1986 The Impression of Drawing, Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
 1984 New Impressions, World Print Council, San Francisco, CA  
 1983 Resource Reservoir, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA  
 1982 Affects/Effects, Philadelphia College of Art, PA  
 1981 California: The State of the Landscape, Newport Harbor Art Museum and Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA  
 1979 Recreation, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA  
 1977 America '76, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Bicentennial Department of the Interior, CA  
 1976 Bicentennial Exhibition, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA



- 1974 Male and Female, University of California, Davis
- 1973 California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland
- Ball State University, IN
- 1966-73 Kraushaar Galleries Group Shows, New York, NY
- 1972 Curator's Choice, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA
- 1970 Peale House Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, PA
- 1969 Third Kent State University Invitational, OH
- 1968 Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY
- Temple University Music Festival, Philadelphia, PA
- 1967 Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, DE
- National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
- 1966 University of Colorado
- National Drawing Exhibition, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA
- Temple University, Tyler School of Art, Elkins Park, PA
- Sculpture and Painting Biannual, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
- 1965 Beaver College, Glenside, PA
- 1964 Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA
- 1963 Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA
- 1962 Temple University, Tyler School of Art, Elkins Park, PA

The Dennis Leon Estate is owned by his daughters, Ann Leon and Susan Leon Peterson, Chico, California.



*Submerged Log #6* | 1987  
 Pastel  
 82 x 96 inches

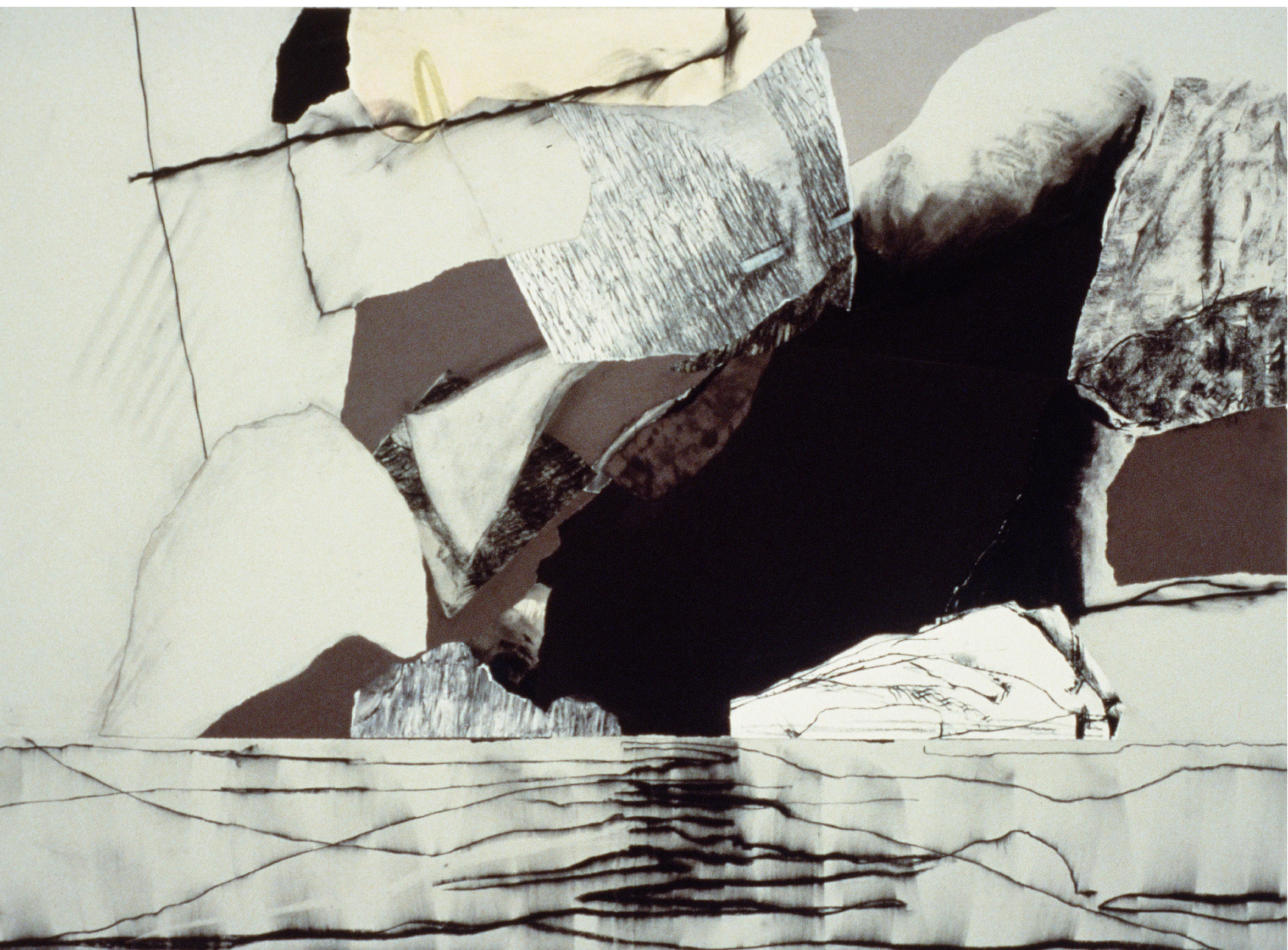
PAGE 40

*Memory Lake #9* | 1988  
 Mixed Media  
 94 x 60 inches

PAGE 41

*Memory Lake #5* | 1988  
 Collage & pastel  
 89 x 60.5 inches











## AUDIO INTERVIEWS

A key theme of this exhibition is the way that Dennis Leon, the educator, shaped the lives and creative work of the artists represented.

Five of these artists agreed to sit with me and share what it was like to know and work with Dennis at formative stages of their lives as students. The anecdotes, memories and experiences they share in these interviews, offer us a glimpse of not only Dennis's unique voice and pedagogy, but also very subtle and relevant insights into the process of learning to be an artist.

The camera image of any QR-enabled smartphone will automatically present you with a link to the various web pages I created for you to hear these interviews.

Thank you,  
Chris Johnson, Curator



**ANNE WOLF**

[www.chrisjohnsonphotographer.com/dennis.anne.html](http://www.chrisjohnsonphotographer.com/dennis.anne.html)



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**SONO OSATO**

[www.chrisjohnsonphotographer.com/dennis.sono.html](http://www.chrisjohnsonphotographer.com/dennis.sono.html)





Onestone #4 | 1988  
Collage & pastel  
91 x 119 inches





*Submerged Log #2* | 1987

Pastel

100 x 85 inches









*Urbanstones #4* | 1988  
Collage & pastel, framed  
60 x 89 inches