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Raw material

British artist Chris Drury brings a new perspective and a new kind of exhibition to Nevada

By Brad Bynum
This article was published on 08.28.08.



Inside "Cloud Pool Chamber," an image of the sky is projected onto a reflective floor. The logs used are from Donner State Park. Photo by Heather Anderson.

"Dust to Dust, Ashes to Ashes" was made from the skin of museum visitors. It's just one piece in *Chris Drury: Mushrooms/Clouds*, the new exhibit at the Nevada Museum of Art. It might be a relief—or a disappointment—to learn that it's less morbid than it sounds. The raw materials of the piece included dust gathered from the ventilation system of the museum. A large percentage of the dust in a heavily trafficked, indoor place is discarded skin.

The piece itself is an enlarged mushroom spore print, painted with pigments made from, among other sources, the museum's dust. That captured dust is an example of a hallmark of British artist Chris Drury's work: finding an unlikely, decaying local material and giving it a new life. By taking little bits of previous visitors and reflecting them back in a new work of art, the piece exemplifies one of the big themes of the exhibit: regeneration. New art made from old dust.

That the finished piece looks like a mandala—a circular Buddhist symbol meant to reflect the cyclical nature of life—just adds to the feeling of regeneration.

Air

Drury, born in Sri Lanka in 1948 but based in England, has made and exhibited artwork around

the globe, from Denmark to Tennessee, Antarctica to Japan. He speaks softly and with what appears to be a deep wellspring of Zen-like patience. But he has a mischievous twinkle of the eye that seems to reflect some private joke or a playful conspiracy, like he's about to drive somebody to their surprise party. He seems like a natural, humble outdoorsman, but, while in Nevada, his skin seemed on the perpetual verge of sunburn. Though he has helmed large-scale earthworks in far-flung places, he comes across less like a driving force and more like the calm eye in the center of a creative storm.

He's a process- and environment-oriented artist. He works with site-specific materials, and his artworks often reflect the environments where they were made. He has a globe-trotting, international perspective but is able to focus on the minute details of a specific place.

For *Mushrooms/Clouds*, he brought this perspective to Nevada and northeastern California. The works in the exhibit explore the unique landscape of the area and its explosive history.

"Nevada is amazing," he says. "It's so open."

Drury has long been fascinated with the forms of clouds and the regenerative powers of mushrooms. Mushrooms, Drury points out, have been an inspiration for many great minds, like the composer John Cage—and not necessarily for their psychotropic effects, but rather their symbolic import. These fragile, delicate lifeforms—neither flora nor fauna, but somewhere in between—play such crucial roles in environmental decay and regeneration. Not to mention their aesthetic beauty—a range of shapes and colors as diverse as flowers.

"And clouds are just these dream-like things," he says.

The violent legacy of the Nevada Test Site inspired a clear linkage:

"Mushrooms—clouds," Drury says, gesturing with alternating hands, "then the Nevada Test Site: mushroom clouds."

Fire

"Life in the Field of Death" is a two-part artwork that deals explicitly with the Nevada Test Site. The first part consists of two images presented side-by-side: an aerial photograph of Frenchman Flat, a large geographic feature of the test site, and a magnified image of the *Microcoleus vaginatus*, a resilient bacterial critter that manages to thrive in the otherwise barren soil of the test site.

The startling fact is that these two images, one an aerial photo covering miles, the other a microscopic organism, look hauntingly similar. It brings to mind an ancient Hermetic saying: "As above, so below."



The enlarged mushroom spore print that is "Dust to Dust, Ashes to Ashes" was created by artist Chris Drury using dust and, therefore, skin. Photo by Heather Anderson.

The second part of “Life in the Field of Death” is the actual gene sequence of *Microcoleus vaginatus*, written on the wall with soil from the test site. It’s like graffiti boasting a secret code for nuclear bomb survival. Nearby is another related artwork, “559 Shelter Stones,” a loose, sprawling, spiraling structure on the floor of the gallery. It’s made from 559 stones gathered around Pyramid Lake. The number 559 was chosen in reference to the number of genes on the wall. It looks like a futile, makeshift bomb shelter.

“In an actual nuclear blast, that wouldn’t really stand up,” says Drury.

Another sculpture, “Destroying Angel,” a basketball hoop-sized mushroom made of sagebrush, looms nearby, seeming to threaten the shelter. The destroying angel is a deadly species of mushroom, *Amanita virosa*, which bears a more than passing resemblance to its cousin of nuclear destruction, the mushroom cloud.

The sage, though uprooted, is flowering.

“Originally, we were just going to build it out of twigs,” says Drury, “but then it started to bloom.” Is there a metaphor there? No comment from Drury. But Ann Wolfe, the NMA’s Curator of Exhibitions and Collections, leans in for a whisper: “I would say so.”

Earth

This is an unusual show for the NMA. It’s not a retrospective packaged around a specific theme

or artist, but rather a collection of primarily new work created specifically for this exhibition. The artist and the museum worked in close partnership—with the museum doing a lot more than simply hanging the show. The museum was involved with the production of the artwork from conceptualization through construction and installation, blurring the traditional boundaries between artist and venue.

"We have a collaborative spirit," says Wolfe. "This is a new model for commissioning new artwork and being involved in the process from the beginning."

Additionally, the museum staff coordinated and arranged partnerships with other organizations, including the Desert Research Institute, which provided information and raw materials for "Life in the Field of Death," and the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe. The Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe collaborated with Drury on the piece "Winnemucca Whirlwind," an earthwork drawing modeled on traditional Native American basket patterns and drawn on Winnemucca Lake—a dry lake east of Pyramid Lake.

Water

The NMA and Drury collaborated with the FOR-SITE Foundation in Nevada City, Calif., for one of the keystone artworks of the exhibition, "Cloud Pool Chamber." Drury has built what he calls "cloud chambers" in Belgium, Japan, Nashville, Tenn., and locations all over the UK. Essentially, they are enclosed structures, with small entryways, made from local materials, with a reflective floor and a small aperture in the roof. These structures function like camera obscuras, the image of the sky above projected onto the floor.

"I've built these cloud chambers other places," says Drury, "but to do that here, it would've just been too hot. … So what we've done here is really more of a mirror piece."

The piece was originally constructed at the FOR-SITE Foundation—a sort of creative haven for artists investigating site-specific art—but has been temporarily reconstructed on the museum's roof. The raw materials include logs from the Donner State Park. The logs were constructed into a miniature, circular cabin with an open roof centered over a reflecting pool carved into a granite stone. The carved granite was modeled after the ancient Maidu grinding stones found at FOR-SITE. The opening is larger than the pinholes that Drury installed in earlier cloud chambers—so the Nevada heat is bearable.

The water in the reflecting pool has just a hint of ink in it to increase its reflective quality. It reflects nothing but the sky above and the clouds, or lack thereof, passing through. Museum visitors are encouraged to step inside the chamber. Inside, it's easy to forget that the chamber is on a roof in the middle of an urban area. It's like a Fortress of Solitude made of wood instead of ice. As the gaze passes from the reflecting pool to the sky above and back again, the viewer feels alone with the sky—and is again reminded: "as above, so below."

Some art exhibitions, particularly those of contemporary work, aspire to flash and excitement. This is an exhibition for slow, thoughtful, hypnotic contemplation—one built with earthy, primal materials: soil, stones, wood, dust, water and skin.