



The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present *Pocket Ziggurat*, an exhibition by artist Chelsea Pegram. *Pocket Ziggurat* will be at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from October 7, 2016 – January 19, 2017. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Aaron Harbour, who provided the following essay.

Concrete & Seashells — A Sculptural Landscape

In Chelsea Pegram's new work in *Pocket Ziggurat* at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery, the edge between the sea and the sky, the 'offing', seems echoed in these strange sculptural landscapes, each like a miniature horizon. She was raised in southern California and educated in northern California. She has spent time on the East Coast, specifically New York, but her work retains a clean, coastal sense.



Untitled, cast concrete, decorative shell, 5.5" x 6.5" x 11", 2016

Pegram's studio, on Foothill Boulevard near east Oakland's Fruitvale District, is in an unassuming building, essentially a garage-like space tacked on to another structure. In her second studio after graduating from Mills College in 2011, Pegram has used its confines to continue to explore the boundaries of a sculptural practice.

Pegram's works, like those of many artists who work sculpturally, often only start to really come together for a particular art show. Artists only have so much room to store large works, so they cannot take the practical concerns involved production of new works for granted. And quite often these artists try to produce work to fit a specific venue. History, architecture, the flow an audience feeds into and out of a space, the lighting situation and much more can come into play when deciding on what to make for a specific project. But how then can a sculptor work on new ideas, experiment with new materials? This problem led Pegram to a creative solution: she built a kind of mini-gallery behind the roll-up garage door in her studio with a

windowed inset box not unlike the displays of a jewelry store window. In this little space, Pegram creates specific installations. She works in her studio with new materials, on new ideas, relatively quickly prototyping a new installation in the mini-gallery. These she shares with random passersby and those who know about her project. This accomplishes two things. One, it forces her to finish, even if only temporarily, a miniature installation that can document the seeds of future projects. Two, it engages a neighborhood not accustomed to contemporary art with what was going on in that secretive little garage. These small scale, short duration projects might never find themselves directly reflected in a particular show, but echoes of the experiments done in this little laboratory make their way into Pegram's practice and indeed into this show, for example long arching slats of wood put to use in *Pocket Ziggurat*.



Untitled, cast concrete, decorative shells, 6.5" x 13" x 3.5", 2016

Pegram uses familiar materials such as sand, concrete, wood, nail polish, and found and purchased shells. They give the viewer a way to access her process – art materials bump shoulders with things bought at a building supply store. Things rarely hide what they are. Pegram's works are sparse but not minimalist – sharing more in common with artists like Richard Tuttle or Ree Morton or Michael Heizer than Donald Judd. Her work resists being overburdened with prerequisites – history, references to things outside art (though this type of content lies beneath the skin). Rather there is an immediacy to their effect, Pegram's things are eccentric and beautiful, off-putting or strangely comfortable to be around in a similar way whether one is immersed in art on a daily basis or one happens upon a piece in an Oakland garage.

The exhibition's title, *Pocket Ziggurat*, reflects the playfulness with which the artist approaches scale. Ziggurats were a form of stepped-pyramid temple appearing over five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia. Using limited tools, ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, et al. built these structures for many purposes: the creation of something super impressive – something far more massive than any normal architecture at the time, and something which rose skyward to the gods, connecting heaven and earth.

Additional, strikingly practical functions were served by the particular form – having minimal staircases up, they were easy to guard (a kind of spiritual-military high ground) keeping secret the rituals performed there. Plus, the height protected the religious leaders from the floods that frequented the area.

But a 'pocket ziggurat'? What of a ziggurat's functions could possibly be performed by a miniature version? Though the practical functions are lost, the spiritual is retained, albeit once removed – and yet that remaining purpose is not without potency. I've seen charm bracelets with perfectly articulated pairs of scissors – these however realistic in shape, material, and motion are far from the usefulness of the real-size version. Yet we can look down at the charm on its chain and remember we love to craft, to sew, who taught us how to stitch a hem. The memory of the original's purpose is retained and through miniaturization becomes portable, a ziggurat nestled in a pocket, a pointed reminder of human potential and ambitions.



Untitled, MDF, basswood, aggregate, decorative sand, pine, latex paint, dimensions variable, detail, 2016

Pegram has chosen to make several miniature floors, raised surfaces upon which objects sit as if they were pedestals. This is similar to the play of scales of her studio mini-gallery. These objects are artworks, on top of them are things that themselves are standalone art pieces. The surfaces of the table-like sculptures are traversed by a series of lines – not drawn or painted on. Rather they are the result of router cuts into the wood. A kind of machine-drawing, they recall the lines on a map. In some, colored sand fills in the cuts. In others, basswood is inlaid, sometimes extending beyond the main surface, connecting smaller works to the 'mainland'. These lines hint at some ulterior purpose or symbolism but ultimately just hint, remaining abstract. This is a completely new body of work; they remind me of both urban planning dioramas and children's play tables. Are these small, human sized spaces within the larger building, or do they hint at some massive, unrealizable project?

Pegram's wall pieces are still sculptural, but through incorporating simple shapes and minimal surface decoration they start to feel as if they are part of the architecture of the space. Here and there objects jut out.

Sometimes they are large curving pieces of the same wood. Other times they are more specific. The pieces become a kind of shelf for charmed objects. In one, a cast of the artist's hand reaches out in a generous pose. It holds a strange object, a talisman – an eggshell, carefully carved with a series of horizontal lines. Magical and fragile, the egg is a surprise; Pegram's work is full of surprises, rewarding time spent gazing patiently, simply being in the same place, allowing the collection of gestures to suggest what they will.

Shells feature prominently throughout Pegram's work. These are homes that are grown, personal architectures that sea creatures excrete for purely functional purposes. And yet despite this purposeful efficiency, their dazzling forms amaze. With surfaces ranging from the coarse exterior of an oyster (this surface itself often the home of smaller shelled animals) to the smooth, almost alien interior of a conch, shells are some of nature's most captivating productions.

Pegram often embeds shells in concrete. Concrete is an atypical art material, but just like oil paint or ceramic it has many nuances that with attentive practice can be employed to a variety of effects. When casting in



Untitled, [detail], cast concrete, hot glue, sewing pin, nail polish, 8.5" x 2.5" x 3.5", 2016

concrete one has a form in mind that one builds a mold for. But everything from the way the material is mixed to the temperature and humidity of the studio can affect the resulting object's strength. As often as not, once the mold is removed the piece may have turned out cracked or crumbly. Thus with careful effort one can create moments where the piece looks like ruins, and others where the result recalls the most certain and secure of architectural forms. Also the surface takes on that of the mold, whether smooth or rough. In one work, a piece of wood was used as a mold that had the remains of purple paint still on its surface – in this piece not only the form but the color of the mold is reflected in the work. She uses color sparingly. There are pops of color here or there, in the shells, in the aforementioned purple of a concrete work, and in grooves filled with colored sand on the table pieces. Elsewhere, a tiny pearl-like object sits on the end of a pin extending out from a small concrete sculpture. It is red, a tiny dollop recalling anatomical features, or maybe candy.

Oakland is, along with the broader Bay Area, undergoing rapid renovations with the nature of neighborhoods shifting both demographically, new lofts replacing older single-family homes. Pegram's constructions offer an alternative to this model of demolition and formulaic redesign. Looking at once broken and finished, they give space for the viewer to reflect on drawing and building in the free sense with which a child experiments with blocks and art supplies – these new table sculptures mirror the way a few sharp crayon lines can cut a sheet of paper into grass and sky, can pile a few cubes of wood into a castle. And as easily they can be disassembled, repurposed, a castle tower becomes the base of a bridge to a ziggurat.

Aaron Harbour
Oakland, California
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Chelsea Pegram, Oakland studio, 2016

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