

◆ KIMBALL ◆

CHICAGO.





# Euan Macdonald

*KIMBALL 1901-*

January 27 – March 25, 2011 | Pitzer Art Galleries, Nichols Gallery | Curated by Ciara Ennis



*House (everythinghappensatonce)* (1999), single-channel video projection, 20 minutes.

## Euan Macdonald: Images of Change

Lisa Gabrielle Mark

Like energy, entropy is in the first instance a measure of something that happens when one state is transformed into another.

—P.W. Bridgman, *The Nature Of Thermodynamics*

Euan Macdonald's work often presents the viewer with images of change in which the forces of entropy co-exist with the possibility of human intervention. *KIMBALL 1901–* (2010) is a stop-motion video projection showing an old Kimball upright piano onto and in front of which books are piled at intervals, gradually obscuring the piano, then disappearing as the process reverses itself. The piano is located within a domestic interior with an adjacent door and an antique sconce on the wall. The bench is a little worn, suggesting at one time it enjoyed regular use. The books are unseen before they make their appearance on the piano, but over the course of 5-minutes 49-seconds, they accumulate—mostly a couple or a few at a time. Occasionally a small pile is placed so as to touch the keys of the piano, resulting in a slow, sustained tone. Otherwise, an ambient airy sound underscores the entire video—occasionally punctuated by a noise in the background—evoking a reality beyond what is framed by the camera.

The piano is located in a room inside a 1920s-style house located in Echo Park, a district on the East Side of Los Angeles, and is owned by an elderly woman who has not used it in decades. Hence, according to the artist, there was a thick build-up of dust on everything that had to be wiped off before the video could be made. This style of house is subdivided into many small rooms, sixteen in this case. The room that houses the piano also contains the owner's personal library and would at one time have been referred to as the "salon."

There is a musty whiff of neglect and nostalgia about this room. It had not been used in a very long time, as the elderly owner had long since abandoned playing the piano in favor of using the room as additional storage, and dust had settled in layers over its entire contents, some of which might easily dissolve into dust if given enough time. Macdonald refers to this as “an entropic scene” (He refers to all of his works as “scenes,” whether video, sculpture, or drawing.<sup>1</sup>) Entropy, a scientific property defined by the second law of thermodynamics, refers to a measure of unusable energy such that, as usable energy decreases and unusable energy increases, entropy increases. Or, as Robert Smithson put it in his groundbreaking 1966 essay “Entropy and the New Monuments,” “energy is more easily lost than obtained, and...in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness.”<sup>2</sup> As it relates to this particular scene, the more the room is used, the more available energy it potentially contains, but as use decreases, inertia sets in and randomness or chaos increases—that is, things disintegrate and dissolve into undifferentiated disorder and disarray.

It is perhaps ironic that this randomness or chaos ultimately yields to a totalizing uniformity—“ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Human involvement, then, can actually be seen to help “preserve” or “maintain” a given set of objects and circumstances and to differentiate them. However, as we all know, human action can also speed up decline by other means.

In *KIMBALL 1901-*, Macdonald plays with these ideas, questioning what constitutes entropy and how this system might account for human intervention. Rather than wondering how a human presence might hold-off, preserve, undo or speed up the process of entropy, he asks if it is even possible to conceive of entropy taking place outside of any human intervention. Technically speaking, entropy cannot be reversed. Moving the shards and bricks of a dilapidated building does not reconstruct the building—it simply produces a rearrangement of shards and bricks. Attempts to undo entropy can even bring about further dedifferentiation (the crumbling of a wall, for example) or a decline of order.

However, Macdonald has said he sees the popularly understood notion of entropy as a misrepresentation, that perhaps entropy has no direction and intervention is in many ways inevitable: in accordance with the basic scientific principle, human intervention infuses energy into a process, effectively altering the march of time. If anything, Macdonald’s conception of entropy includes human involvement as part of the overall flow: “I think of entropy over vast periods of time, where arguments, theories, assumptions, ways of being get produced, are believed and then change into other forms slowly or abruptly depending on the circumstances and so on.”<sup>3</sup> In a sense, he conceives of entropy as a continuous and impure process in which human activity serves as just one force among the many that contribute to the dissolution of various entities. Yet this “downward slide” is offset by the generation of new entities, which may actually be the result of attempts to forestall the entropic process or to affect the subjective experience of time.

Using the piano as a kind of stage set, Macdonald uses stop-motion animation to create what he calls a “dramatization” of the passage of time by shooting still images of the books being piled up and sequencing them together through a video editing program, then reversing the sequence. (As Macdonald says, it is like a “slide show with sound.”) So we see the books gradually appear and then disappear, but no human presence is registered. The entire cycle appears to happen on its own, as a series of “instances.” A sense of continuity is subtly conveyed by the soundtrack, which comes across as ambient sound punctuated occasionally by naturally occurring “events,” such as a notes on the piano resulting from a book being placed on top of the keys, a car alarm, a jet plane or a bird singing. In fact, the soundtrack is composed of around a half-dozen audio tracks recorded in the room and in the vicinity of the house that were then blended (using two tracks together as the foundation over which other sounds were layered). When the sequence runs in reverse, the sound continues, “moving forward.”

Stop-motion is one of the earliest techniques for conveying the passage of time in film. It allows otherwise inert objects the appearance of moving through space—and

even time. The famous H.G. Wells movie *Time Machine* (1960) is distinguished by the use of stop-motion animation. As the lead character George (Wells) says, “Why is it that we usually ignore the fourth dimension? You see we can move in the other three...up, down, forward, backward, sideways. But when it comes to time, we are prisoners.” Macdonald’s use of stop-motion connects still photography to the language of cinema and the various ways narrative film can manipulate the viewer’s sense of time, liberating one to move “forward, backward and sideways.”

Of course, the time of Macdonald’s video—moving forward and then backward in time as books appear to be piled up and then removed—in no way approximates the actual time it took to move all the books. Stop-motion animation is predicated on gaps in which objects are moved, or adjustments are made, but that labor is rendered invisible. In effect, it creates the illusion of continuous movement or change over a relatively brief period of time. (One can also think of those stop-motion films of flowers growing or fruit decaying.) The fact that the animation is composed of still images makes *KIMBALL 1901*—more Eadweard Muybridge than, say, Chris Marker.

*KIMBALL 1901*—prompts one to think about duration and the many ways time is represented objectively and experienced intuitively. Structurally speaking, the work encompasses what could be called “present time”—meaning the time during which the video sequence elapses, as books are piled up and removed; “actual time”—the time it took to pile up the books (and, for that matter, record the sounds and compose the edits); and “mechanistic time”—which is perhaps most apparent during the reverse segment, as books are removed not through labor or any subjective experience of time but through the mechanical reversal of the original forward sequence.

The books themselves span a range that includes novels, reference books, with surprisingly few potboilers—the somewhat typical selections of a white, Anglophilic, middle-class family, with few exceptions. They include classics by authors including O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, George Bernard Shaw, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Evelyn Waugh and, of course, Shakespeare, alongside histories of California, England and

Scotland. Some titles call to mind specific eras, for instance, for some, Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization* will inevitably recall 1969, the year the book was published concurrent with the popular BBC miniseries hosted by the author, while few will know that Edgar Allen Forbes’s *Twice Around the World* was published to much acclaim in 1912. *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) suggests proto-New-Age self-improvement tomes whose counterparts can no doubt be found in the personal libraries of today’s Oprah viewers, while *Stamps of Many Lands* (1932), by the venerable-sounding Sigmund I. Rothschild, evokes a genteel hobby infused with a colonialist sensibility. (Mr. Rothschild, also a television host during the 1950s, passed away in 1991. Is such a name possible today?) The spine of one book simply and boldly declares itself: 1973. Evidently amassed over many years, the collection includes books that predate the home, perhaps belonging to the owner’s predecessors—including a few books from the 1800s that threatened to crumble into dust upon being moved.

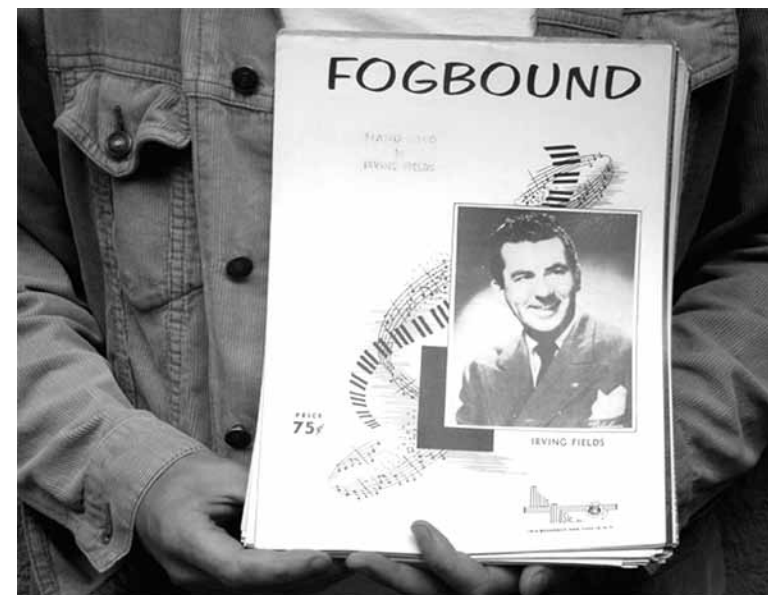
While the books contain clues about culture, class, biography and perhaps even social history (for instance, Anglophilia is a trait much more common to the generation of the homeowner and stamp-collecting has declined in popularity with the advent of digital communication), they can also be seen as indexical markers of time. Each book embodies several “moments”: the moment it was published, the moment it was received or purchased or passed along from one generation to the next and the moment(s) it was read and reread—a cycle of returns. Taking in the collection as a whole, one can see evidence of Macdonald’s “entropy of ideas,” as some things have faded into obscurity, while others have been moved in new directions or have sprouted vigorous offshoots.

Though the stop-motion technique employed in *KIMBALL 1901*—differentiates this work from Macdonald’s other work in video, it is undeniably connected to his other work. Looking at the books that are stacked horizontally, one can read the spines as lines of a poem (Mind Surgery/Music in the Life of Albert Schweizer.../The New Poetry), recalling Macdonald’s drawing installation and artist book *Selected Standards* (2007), which evokes a story or poem through the ordering of a found stack of sheet

music and is in turn related to his ten-minute single-channel video *Where Flamingos Fly* (2005). Macdonald took the sheet music—whose entropic scene was a music store sales bin—as a kind of readymade whose titles, when read in order, seemed to suggest a narrative.

Similarly, *Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit* (2010) is based on the “found” order of words in the title of a book by Charles Bukowski. Macdonald recombined the letters in the book title as anagrams that read as poems in an edition of five silkscreen prints. However, Macdonald is not a systems-based artist for whom the sanctity of the found order is untouchable. Realizing that human beings are compelled to try and crack a code when confronted with the apparently obscure ordering of letters or symbols or, perhaps similarly, to create meaning when confronted with works of art, he offers the gentlest of provocations, the subtlest of interventions. In each of the three aforementioned works, he takes an existing sequence and effectively messes with its interpretation through changes in syntax.

In other works, such as *House (everythinghappensatonce)* (1999), little or nothing appears to happen, yet change is implied. *House*, a projected video, shows a partially collapsed house that is perched precariously on the bank of a river. Though one imagines it could tumble in at any moment (and surely, if this were a Hollywood film, it would), it does not move—it just hangs there. Were it not for the rushing water and an occasional speedboat, one could almost read it as a still image that has captured the house at a single moment of its entropic decline. Yet this single instant is drawn out, unaltered, over roughly twenty minutes. A drawing produced in conjunction with the video, *Untitled (House)* (2000), appears almost as a schematic documenting the co-existence of two kinds of energy—the entropic force that bears down on the house in accordance with the laws of gravity and the horizontal rush of the river as it moves out into the world, nourishing new life. One imagines that in the reality outside the space and time of the video frame, the house eventually collapses into the river, dissolving slowly and becoming part of the flow—just as the piano and books in *KIMBALL 1901*—may one day be subsumed by dust, as old ideas give rise to new ones.



*Where Flamingos Fly* (2005), single-channel video, 10 minutes

## Notes

The epigram for this essay is quoted by Robert Smithson in “Entropy and the New Monuments” (1966), republished in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam, ed. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996), and available online at [http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy\\_and.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm).

<sup>1</sup> “In this regard my drawings, sculptures, and videos usually function in the same way for me. They are all scenes. They seem isolated until they are looked at or thought about.” Euan Macdonald, unpublished interview with the author, June 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments.”

<sup>3</sup> Euan Macdonald, unpublished interview with the author, June 2010.

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PINK DEER  
EYES BLINK  
OPEN IN  
A TRUER  
ALPINE  
GIFT

## The Dust Blows Forward and the Dust Blows Back<sup>1</sup>

Interveiw between Euan Macdonald and Ciara Ennis

**Ciara Ennis:** Presented in two very different forms, the exhibition presents a curious pairing of text and moving image works: an edition of five silkscreen text works, and a stop-motion video of an antique parlor piano obscured by a lifetime of discarded books. What led you to make such a pairing and what is the connection between the two subjects in these disparate works?



Book cover design by Barbara Martin.  
*Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit.*  
Black Sparrow Press (1979).

**Euan Macdonald:** Initially, the subject that connects them is the piano. The screen prints are permutations of a Bukowski book title. Earlier this year I produced another video, called *9,000 PIECES* (2010), of a factory machine designed to test the endurance of pianos. The machine is really unforgiving, intended to simulate a lifetime of use on the piano. It has a lot of mechanical arms that bang on the piano keys continuously for an extended period. In a sense it compresses time. After making that video, I was reminded of the Bukowski book title. It's a coincidental connection. The graphic design of the title on the book cover positions the words over an illustration of a piano keyboard. It looks as though the words are going to get thrown around comically when the keyboard is banged

on by a drunken player. The piano testing machine produces a kind of musical / mechanical distortion, which prompted me to rearrange the letters in Bukowski's title – to distort the original text. They remind me of those quasi-documentaries on the History Channel about finding hidden codes in ancient texts such as old scriptures. "Experts" draw out hidden meanings and conspiracies from the original texts—usually producing ominous prophecies of some kind. It's interesting how people construe any meaning or interpretation from subjects when they look and interpret something with bias for their own interests. The mixed up texts in the prints that I produced end up relating to the word combinations that appear in the collection of random book titles in *KIMBALL 1901*. This connects to the entropy of language and a breakdown of literary logic.

My experience at the factory led me to think of how we usually don't think about where things are made as long as we get to have and use them. This in turn led to the question of how the pianos end up in the world once they leave a factory. The piano in *KIMBALL 1901* was found in a neglected room in a house in my neighborhood. The room was essentially used for storage and the piano ended up surrounded by stacks of old books and furniture. The convergence of all these books and furniture around the piano suggests the random accumulation of time and memories—a typically nostalgic scene. I decided to make a stop-motion video of all the books stacking up around the piano. It's an obvious simulation, not unlike the factory machine, that also compresses time and events—ups and downs we can only imagine. I photographed all of the books getting stacked up around the piano, and then transformed the photographs into a stop-motion video sequence. It almost works like a slideshow, with sound. The titles on the spines of the books are from different eras and they suddenly create chance connections between each other in a similar way that the words in the screen prints connect to each other.

**CE:** The piano-playing machine in the Shanghai factory seems to have had a profound effect on you—it's hard to imagine something like that even existing and even harder to visualize it playing constantly for the equivalent of several decades. The continuous noise and use of the factory pianos stand in complete contrast to the silence and



*9,000 PIECES* (2010), single-channel HD video installation. 5 minutes.

disuse of your neighbor's piano next door, acting as a counterpart to *9,000 PIECES*. Were you conscious of this play of opposites and did you conceive them as a pair?

**EM:** Perhaps they are not opposites so much as they appear to exist at different ends of a spectrum of a period of time. While I was at the piano factory, I was thinking continuously of how the whole mechanical process of making such complicated instruments, or any other product, is carried out in remote industrial outskirts, which is typical of large scale manufacturing. There is an interior, anti-social condition in factory production, and I felt this to be an interesting contrast to what happens once these products, especially musical instruments, get mass-produced into the world to be bought and sold, played and socialized around. I don't see these videos as a

pair per se, though of course they are linked. The piano in *9,000 PIECES* is new, and getting tested to see how long its parts will last. The piano in *KIMBALL 1901-* is old, from another era and has had a long lifetime of use and many owners, though we can only see this piano as it stands now in the corner of an old room.

**CE:** In many ways *KIMBALL 1901-* is a portrait of absence that speaks volumes and reminds me of John Cage's infamous quote, "There's no such thing as silence," uttered in response to critics of his pioneering composition, *4'33"* (1952). Although removed, the owner of the piano is keenly felt—through the context of the living room, books and battered piano—perhaps more so than if they had been pictured. Was it your intention to create a semi-biographical work?

**EM:** It could be interpreted as a kind of biographical work, but I prefer to see it in a broader way. When I noticed the book titles, they connect to past eras rather than an individual because the books become markers of the time periods where they are from. The titles are mostly Anglo-American, from the 1980s all the way back to the late 1800s. I noticed titles such as *The Story of the American India* and *Oriental Philosophy*, which reveal America's Anglo colonialist past. The accumulation of all these books seems to be random even though they were collected and presumably read over long periods of time. The stop-motion effect I produced turns out to be coincidentally in sync with the time when the room was lived in and the things in it were being used.

**CE:** The same could be said of silkscreen printing and the Broadway font used as the typeface for Bukowski's text—both are anachronistic to some degree. Silkscreen printing lacks precision, in comparison to its contemporary counterparts, and is a very labor-intensive craft. The Broadway font is benign and innocuous, conjuring associations with the Golden Age of American musical theater of the 1940s—an odd choice for Bukowski's poems celebrating and reveling in low-life existence on the absolute fringes. Why was it important for you to use silkscreen printing to produce the anagrams, continue using the Broadway font and output the text in red?

**EM:** Screen prints are painterly. The color red came to mind because Bukowski mentions the word bleed in his title. I didn't choose the font. I assume the graphic designer of the book probably chose the font for its association with Broadway music. The title and font on the book cover might be an intended mockery of the whole commercial Broadway music genre. I re-used the font to simply indicate a connection to the original text.

**CE:** In relation to the text works I'm reminded of another piece by John Cage, *Music of Changes* (1951)—a piano composition comprised of a random selection of elements compiled according to successive coin throwing and reading of the I Ching. Since Dada, chance and spontaneity have long been used as strategies for creating art and poetry in an attempt to challenge conventional definitions and assumptions in favor of new and vital experiences. In generating the series of anagrams, what strategies did you use and how difficult was it to avoid linear narratives?

**EM:** When I made the anagrams, sometimes I used an online program. I could have done them all myself, but I was curious to see what words a computer program would come up with. I didn't want to avoid linear narratives, in fact, I wanted the final texts to appear purposeful and somewhat narrative, as if they were meant to be. This is typical of "discovering" hidden messages in pre-existing texts...I played with different word combinations until something interesting stood out to me.

**CE:** So, the specific word configurations and order were deliberate and decisive and had more in common with conspiracy theorists than chance operations and other strategies such as automatic writing employed by Dada and Fluxus?

**EM:** Both—they weren't completely decisive...nothing ever is...there is always some chance involved. Anagrams are defined as finding hidden meanings in words. The texts I came up with are a type of chance operation combined with a sort of surrealist automatic writing. I'm sure Bukowski would probably hate all of this! He is probably turning in his grave. His headstone says "Don't Try." Here I sort of did the opposite, though I don't think he meant it literally. But these texts aren't meant to be poetry. They



GAD (2004), single-channel video projection. 15 minutes

are the results of distortion and manipulation that show the problems of interpretation of language...or maybe even interpretation as a form of meddling.

As I made them I was sometimes purposefully drawn to crazy or truthful sounding word combinations...it was almost unavoidable not to be...in the end these texts are about relationships. In this respect, words like the book titles in the video are like any thing: objects, sounds, and colors. When they are arranged or found in proximity to each other, they change each other.

**CE:** Reference to music in its various forms has played a big part in previous bodies of work: *GAD* (2004)—a single-channel video of three guitars tuned respectively to G, A, and D falling and resonating at different intervals; *Selected Standards* (2005-2007)—an archive of 84 sheets of music found in and around Los Angeles and paired with selected photographs and drawings; *9,000 PIECES* (2010) and now *KIMBALL 1901-* (2010). In fact, most of your recent work, whether installation or video, has some association with music. Can you discuss the relationship between visual and musical forms and why it's so important in your work?

**EM:** Not entirely. Pictorial movement and change in landscape and duration have also been equally prominent for me. But in relation to your question, as soon as I began making videos, sound naturally became another component to work with. Sometimes sound is picked up during a shot, and becomes as important as the visual image. I've played music since I was a kid and so eventually, I involved music, and musical instruments, with visual work. But I have a distant relationship to music when I involve it with something visual. Even if I use a recognizable piece of music, I think of it as sound in a formal, social or historical way, as part of the composition of an artwork rather than just a soundtrack. The sound in *KIMBALL 1901-* is a collection of recorded sounds from the neighborhood where I found the piano, and is put together in a similar way that the sequence of images are for the video. Even as the books are removed, the sound remains constant, going forward in time.

**CE:** And finally Euan, despite the cyclical nature of the stop-motion video capturing the perpetual burial and resurrection of the dusty old piano, there is something deeply melancholic and final about this work that sets it a part from other pieces that you have made. Would you agree with this and if so why do you think *KIMBALL 1901-* has this quality?

**EM:** It is melancholic, but not final. It is a little sad that the piano eventually becomes hidden and muted as the books are stacked on it. But the books and then dust are also all removed in a different order, which re-reveal the piano, so the tide changes.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dust Blows Forward and the Dust Blows Back* (1969), from the album *Trout Mask Replica*, Captain Beefheart









































## Biographies

### **Euan Macdonald**

Euan Macdonald is based in Los Angeles. His work is included in the collections of The Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA; MAXXI, Museo Nazionale Delle Arti del XXI Secolo in Rome, Italy; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, Italy; Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus in Munich, Germany; Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal, Canada; DAIWA Radiator Collection at Museum Hiroshima, Japan; the National Gallery of Canada in Ontario, Canada; the New Museum in New York, NY; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada; and Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver, Canada.

### **Lisa Gabrielle Mark**

Lisa Gabrielle Mark is a Canadian editor and writer based in Los Angeles. She has written numerous catalogue essays for artists including, most recently, Marlene Dumas (MOCA/MoMA) and Lara Schnitger (Anton Kern Gallery), as well as contributing to journals and magazines such as *Artforum*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *C international contemporary art* and the *Globe and Mail*. Formerly director of publications at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, where she edited over 40 catalogues, she now produces and edits publications through her company, material means.

### **Ciara Ennis**

Ciara Ennis is the director/curator of Pitzer Art Galleries at Pitzer College. She has curated numerous exhibitions in various institutions in the US over the past 11 years including the University of California Riverside/California Museum of Photography; the Santa Monica Museum of Art; Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago; and the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica. Ennis's curatorial practice blurs fact with fiction and focuses on storytelling as a means to explore the fluidity and fragility of identity. She received her MA in curating contemporary art from the Royal College of Art, London.



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