

Daniel Giordano's New Show Opens at Mass MoCA February 4

"Love from Vicki Island" Brings Together the Newburgh Artist's Outré Sculptures

By Carl Van Brunt

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My Immaculate Conception, Daniel Giordano

"I consider my derrière a national treasure," declares Daniel Giordano, his face displaying an intense yet impish gaze. Giordano is in his Newburgh studio, the top floor of his family's former garment factory on Grand Street where women's coats were once crafted, and where the young sculptor—he's 34—now creates his own outré line of art.

Nearby, a cast of his posterior tops a sculpture of a colorfully stylized, richly textured, and wildly oversized cowboy hat. The big hat is one of the many themes, or "veins of work" as Giordano calls them, that figure prominently in the sculptor's often outrageous and aggressive art. He calls this vein of work "Talent." Another hat, *Talent 1 (Titanic)* is black and includes a stylized six shooter emerging from its crown that seems to be firing at an unseen foe. All this rests on a stack of tomato sauce cans—the total height of the concoction reaches 48 inches.



Pleasure Pipe

Like the competitive tennis player he once was as a teenager traveling on the international circuit, the psych out is part of Giordano's game. His intent is to shock the viewer, to undermine fixed expectations of what art should be and perhaps in doing so deliver a rocket serve of truth. With his provocative statement, and more importantly his art, he may be channeling a *Louhan*—one of the ancient Chinese Buddhist masters who inhabit the fantastical landscapes manifested in the watercolors of Wu Bin, a Ming dynasty painter whose work Giordano admires—transmitting a koan to an adept. Or perhaps, he's role playing a "big hat" who just rode into town in a Spaghetti Western to deliver a message. His statements, verbal and/or artistic, are often enigmatic.

Giordano is in the midst of preparing for three solo exhibitions. One of these will occupy three rooms at Mass MoCA for a year beginning February 4, another is at the Turley Gallery in Hudson beginning March 4, and the third is at JDJ Gallery in Manhattan opening March 8. Giordano is ambitious and not prone to wasting time. "I am competitive with myself in the arts," he says. "I do have aspirations to achieve the highest accomplishments within the art industry." He uses the term "industry" in part because he sees himself continuing the family history of making products to be sold, though he considers the actual process of making art as something undefinable and often painful.



Study for Brother as Merlin's Beard, 2015-2017

Family and his hometown of Newburgh, where the Giordanos have lived for three generations, are especially meaningful to him and shape his work. Giordano came back to Newburgh after getting an MFA at the University of Delaware and a few years in New York City. He realized that all he needed for subject matter and inspiration was here in this post-industrial city on the banks of the Hudson.

The line of coats the Giordanos manufactured in their Newburgh factory was named for his Aunt Vicki, and Vicki's name fittingly appears in the title of Giordano's show at Mass MOCA: "Love from Vicki Island." Vicki was an entrepreneur who ran Vicki's Video Villa and later Vicki's Cool Delights, an ice cream store. She also was the manager of a Little League baseball team that won a championship. He still has pasta with her every month or so and mentions with a smile that "she has strong opinions." He professes to challenge himself with questions like "Do I have it in me to be Vicki, to channel Vicki, to be the force that Vicki is, and to sublimate it into the work?... these are the sorts of funny things that go on in my head."



Self Portrait As My Brother As the Weeper Who Weeps Under the Weeping Willow

Giordano's older brother Anthony has been his personal guru in many ways, opening the doors of culture. For instance, it was Anthony who first introduced the artist to the British 20th-century painter Francis Bacon's intensely expressive work. "My brother took me to the Met and we came upon a painting called *Head 2* by Francis Bacon and I almost fell on the floor. I didn't know that art could be so badass. I remember thinking 'Oh my God, this cuts out all the BS and it's straight emotion and it's intense and it's got a commanding presence and that's what I want my work to do.'"

Other brotherly influences were less highbrow but equally important. With their mother, the Giordano brothers made annual pilgrimages to the Dutchess County Fair, where they were fascinated by the work of a local artist who made figures of wizards out of tin, often incorporating crystals. These are referenced in Giordano's vein of work dubbed "Study for Brother"; mostly tabletop sculptures that look like small, bizarre humanoids with an overabundance of energy. The sculptures also alluded to Anthony's fantasy films and books, video game and card game obsessions, warlocks, gnomes, and fairies.

My Scorpio 1 was inspired by his brother's zodiac sign and his love of the Etruscan Chariot at the Met. Another familial reference is the fact that his mother's brother was a motorcycle daredevil. Reconciling these two snippets of family history, this work is a prime example of the visual power that Giordano is capable of delivering with his homebrewed approach to art making.



My Scorpio I, 2016-19

The angle of the motorcycle parts contacting the gallery floor generate a sense of tremendous momentum abruptly interrupted. The swooping airborne arcs above the disabled machine suggest an unplanned flight for the rider but also summon up a frozen moment of wordless reality for the viewer. During the construction of the assemblage, most of the piece was fried in cooking oil. The complete list of materials for the sculpture includes: 1970s Husqvarna motocross bikes, aluminum, Canadian maple syrup, cattails, ceramic, deep-fried batter, epoxy, phosphorescent acrylic paint, plastic wrap, railroad spikes, steel, stockfish, and urinal cake. Similar lists of materials can be found in the descriptions of most if not all of Giordano's work, sometimes including bodily fluids, dead insects, and bald eagle excrement. These lists become a kind of word art or concrete poetry extending the dimensions of his pieces into literary space-time.

While this might seem to be simply an attention-grabbing gambit, the unusual materials are in fact integral to the artist's creative process. And while other works reference the *Commedia dell'arte* clown Pulcinella—his very prominent mythic nose is rendered by the artist in mascarpone mixed with epoxy—Giordano is deadly serious about his art. He sees many of his works as reliquaries that include real objects from his life as a way to help communicate his being's actuality.



Self-Portrait as the Cloacal Kiss

Though his works may appear abstract at first, they are representational, often inspired stylistically by monsters from sci-fi and horror movies like *Aliens* and *Pumpkinhead*. Though static, they emerge through an associative visual logic where one volume, shape, found object, color, or texture leads to another seamlessly, creating a sense of dynamism. Though sculptures, they can be read as paintings rendered in space that the viewer assimilates over time. "I'm interested in the sheen or the mattiness, the glossiness, and whether it's metallic, as well as the inherent color that's involved in the material," Giordano says. In a lot of ways I'm approaching the work like a painter." He likes to think of these processes and others as "Giordanophying"—a way of making his work more authentically his own.

That Giordano confronts us with such a visual no-holds-barred screed of who he is can help us awaken to who we are as human beings. We are what we eat. We are how we make a living. We are the families we come from. We are the places we live. We are the history we inherit. We are the times we live in. We are the people we love.

When considering Daniel Giordano's challenging art, it is worth remembering this quote from another badass, Pablo Picasso: "Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain conceive beyond any canon."