

ArtSeen

Daniel Giordano: *Love From Vicki Island*

By [William Corwin](#)



Installation view: *Daniel Giordano: Love from Vicki Island*, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 2023. Photo: Ernesto Eisner.

On View

Mass Moca

Love From Vicki Island

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The universe described in the sculpture of Daniel Giordano is glistening, rotting, and perpetually sprouting bodies. There is only a kernel of familiarity and his lists of materials run on like the witches' brew in *Macbeth*—"eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog." Giordano uses moisturizing facial masks, eagle excrement, 24 karat gold, and gallons of shellac to create deeply personal characterizations of family life, Italian American identity, and in so doing overturns the entire notion of representation as an exercise in simple, comfortable, and relatable imagery.



Daniel Giordano, *Self-Portrait with Rain in the Face*, 2019. Cattails, moisturizing face mask, Murano glass, steel coat hanger, 15 x 9 x 11.5 inches. Collection of Elizabeth Joseph. Courtesy Wil Aballe Art Projects / WAAP. Photo: Michael Love.

A gold electroplated alligator hand emerges from a ziggurat of torrone (nougat) blocks caked in varnish. This motley preserved dessert sits atop an off-white raku ceramic pelvis which in turn is perched on a double stem of grotty aluminum which splats out into a base cast from a polypore (shelf fungus). The aluminum leg only connects to one orifice at the bottom of the pelvis, from the other dangles a grotesque gooey protuberance resembling a clam siphon, and resting on the fungal base is a single jade egg which we can only imagine emerged from said siphon. The title *Study for Brother as Gandalf the White* (2018–22) only adds to the layers of this cake of irreconcilable materials. On one hand it recalls Francis Bacon’s penchant for titling works as studies—trapping them in a state of eternal incompleteness—while positioning this fantastical beast, if it can be called that, between a real person—the artist’s brother—and a fictional wizard. The sculptures in the exhibition *Love From Vicki Island* (MASSMoCA, through December 2023) are decadent like Huysmans’s doomed jewel-encrusted tortoise in their intertwining of the cold presence of metal and glass with the sanguine, soft, and ephemeral substances of flesh and food, yet the oppressive cruelty of the French author’s inventiveness is replaced instead with the prophet’s (think Ezekiel) madness in combining unlike substances into hybrid, living beings. The “Study for Brother” series represents one of three sculptural typologies Giordano pursues; the

other two are masks and pipes, offering some means of becoming or entering the artist's menagerie on Vicki Island.

Twenty pipes are mounted to the wall at the bit (which goes in the mouth), and from the chamber of each a cloud of fragrant vapor curls outwards. The pipes emit different kinds of smoke: a gilded twist of Murano glass; *Pleasure Pipe XLV* (2019-2021), a conch shell surmounted with a lizard claw; *Pleasure Pipe LXXIX* (2022), a perfectly circular ring of plaster and wax; *Pleasure Pipe XLIV (tickle the throat smoke)* (2020), and a banksia pod looking like a multi-eyed or many-mouthed demon; *Pleasure Pipe LVI* (2020). Across the room, *Pleasure Pipe LXIX (So Fine)* (2020), part of a selection of larger pipes, produces a much smaller effluvium, but from its oversize chamber sprout long threatening honey locust thorns, reminiscent of Grünewald's torturous crown, and a reference to the artist's Catholic upbringing.



Daniel Giordano, *My Scorpio I*, 2016–19. 1970s Husqvarna motocross bikes, aluminum, Canadian maple syrup, cattails, ceramic, deep-fried batter, epoxy, phosphorescent acrylic paint, plastic wrap, railroad spikes, steel, stockfish, urinal cake. Courtesy the artist and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

While the pipes represent a selection of potential experiences, gifts, or punishments, the masks are personalities or passages from Giordano's memory. Most use a moisturizing face mask as a point of departure, immediately adding a level of grotesque floppy skin à la *Leatherface* (from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and highlighting the flayed look that people can achieve when applying these cosmetics. *Self-Portrait with Rain in the Face* (2019) is a lumpy visage with a phallic nose made of cattails. A single perfect long clear drop of Murano glass hangs from the nose. While it seems comic and minimal, like so many of the creations in the show, it has a mythological significance. *Self-Portrait as My Brother as the Weeper who Weeps Under the Weeping Willow* (2019) is a mask/portrait, less rain god and more Beezlebub: two bursting paunchy cheeks are composed of congealed blobs of real ladybugs. Though long dead, the spotty, shiny and faded red aphids seem to squirm and burrow, their insect-like nature independent of the surprised looking being with yawning eyes and gaping mouth.

There are many more complicated and odd beasts on Vicki Island—emerging from visions, nightmares, and hallucinations. The details are strangely specific, as in dreams, which is due to the care the artist gives to the long multistage process that each piece demands; casting, varnishing, baking, soaking, drying, plating, gilding, and more. Each step tweaks the whole into a category specific to the artist, while it further nudges the created form towards absurdity, or perhaps the sublime. *My Scorpio I* (2016–22) seems at first to emerge from masculine

symbolism—a pair of motocross-motorcycle bodies. On these are bestowed a regional flavor—always Italian; they are deep fried in batter like zeppole. Lastly the encrusted bikes are given long curling tails ending in dried and shellacked fish, becoming a zodiac sign. A series of personal signifiers is given a kind of oracular solution. The artist's methodology of clarity and self-discovery is not one of unpacking, but of packing more on evermore.

Contributor

William Corwin

William Corwin is a sculptor and journalist from New York.