

Daniel Giordano is a young artist, 34 years old, who is presenting a highly accomplished show on the top floor of Mass MoCA, located in North Adams in the northwest corner of Massachusetts. The museum is devoted to challenging contemporary art, often sculpture that is original in startling ways. Giordano's show, called "Love from Vicki Island," celebrates the very local circumstances of his creativity: the artist works on the third floor of his father's former coat factory in Newburgh, NY a site that once hosted light industry across the Hudson River from the now gentrified art town of Beacon. (At Beacon, the Dia Foundation has established a permanent site for contemporary art. That space's holdings consist of elegant, usually late modernist or minimalist works, which were made by a generation a good deal older than Giordano.)

One mentions the historical circumstances of this kind of work because, for people who belong to Giordano's generation, artists forty years or younger, modernism has become a mostly completed way of seeing. Giordano himself believes that modernism remains alive; his show, incorporating materials such as Tang, the orange drink powder; Italian cheesecake made by the artist's aunt; and even American bald eagle excrement, is notable for its variety and demotic expressiveness—the circumstances of Giordano's youth. But the work is also elegant in the same way that a piece of folded cardboard by Robert Rauschenberg would be considered elegant; it is a way of repurposing the casual, the refuse of daily life, into an esthetic of the moment, in both materials and purpose. Yet Giordano's sculptures derive their strength both as references to personal experience and as a challenge to good taste, whatever that may mean in the early 21st century.

So, instead of attempting an obvious homage to the great advances of the 20th century, Giordano puts out a democratic version of the elegant art he probably saw while growing up in the distant environs in New York City (Newburgh, a town that has never truly recovered from the loss of its industrial commerce, is one-and-a-half hours north of the city). Whether his new work is a continuation of the modernist tradition of the experimental, or of trash resulting in unusual finesse, can be debated. The balance Giordano effects, between high culture, often abstract, from the past and the populist underpinnings of his youth, as well as the regular

rejection of deliberate elegance in current art, needs to be carefully examined.

We are living in a time in American art when a determined effort is being made to erase all boundaries between what traditionally has been considered high, middle, and low culture. There is much to be said in favor of the attempt, especially given its intended consequence, namely, the opening up of image-making and the current art practices to as many people as possible. But something is lost, too—when art is forced to maintain a simplicity in favor of broad communication, the spectrum of both intention and form narrows, so that an attractive intricacy may be put to the side.

Complexity yields to feeling and

LOVE FROM VICKI ISLAND DANIEL GIORDANO at MassMoCA North Adams, MA

by JONATHAN
GOODMAN

direct manufacture. My own understanding is that visual art is the best medium for combining differing influences of class and culture within a single composition. What we might call a thematic collage works very well in art. In Giordano's case, he abandons a high delivery for a rudimentary regard, in which the art can be so "primitive" as to startle. Indeed, Giordano easily walks on ground many might be uncomfortable with; one of his most striking pieces is a huge mascarpone phallus, some two feet long, rising into the air. The rawness of the form, and its implications,

directly challenge subtlety and indirect meaning, attributes we often associate with high culture.

For more than a century now, the convention of ambitious art has been to break the rules. But because we now have an established tradition, one lasting more than a decade, of formal defiance, how do we make art new—a broadly known command announced by the poet (and excellent art writer) Ezra Pound in 1934. That dictum challenges any lineage we might care to examine. But, because of an already established tradition, fine art can easily slip on its own slope; despite current art attempts to move beyond the modernist esthetic, it has a habit of making itself known, even now. Because Giordano's works appear to reject modernism, that does not necessarily mean an intuition of modernism's affection for freedom, even at times for chaos, is not to be found. The rough-hewn spontaneity of Giordano's work puts the audience in a place of active participation; we react to the eclectic force of his art, its improvised condition, in ways that enlarge our appreciation of a non-directional approach.

At the opening of his show at Mass MoCA, Giordano commented to an audience member that the work was about his life in Newburgh. This city is regularly cited as the next new center for contemporary art, as a sister community to Beacon and the Dia just across the bridge connecting them. But this never quite happens; Newburgh remains in difficulty because of a lack of money and social divides. Yet Giordano remains having grown up close by his studio, and surely can contemplate the changes in Newburgh since the time of his youth. The point, though, is clear: the artist is obliquely praising his beginnings. The deliberately populist, American slant of his work can easily be seen in light of the city's manufacturing history; his father made women's coats before changes in trade shut his business down (Giordano works in the former factory). Now, there are a few blocks that retain the elegance of former times, but a lot of Newburgh's geography is difficult because of considerable poverty and drugs. This has made an impression: Giordano's work looks like it is taken from a realistic understanding of a city in decline for decades. His art, then, rises out of the detritus he so cleverly uses to create it.

Daniel Giordano

LOVE FROM VICKI ISLAND

The drafts for his latest holding in Brooklyn, New York, Daniel Giordano creates fantastical sculptures. From moments of his own life to the "old-fashioned" (1941-42), he finds what he calls "the best, the best" with his hands and feet, and uses a variety of materials to create his work. He often uses the bodies of the Founding Fathers, which he finds to be "a great deal of fun." He often uses a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, to create his work. He often uses a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, to create his work.

The artist's incorporation of his own personal and social history is a recurring theme in his work. He often uses a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, to create his work. He often uses a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, to create his work. He often uses a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, to create his work.

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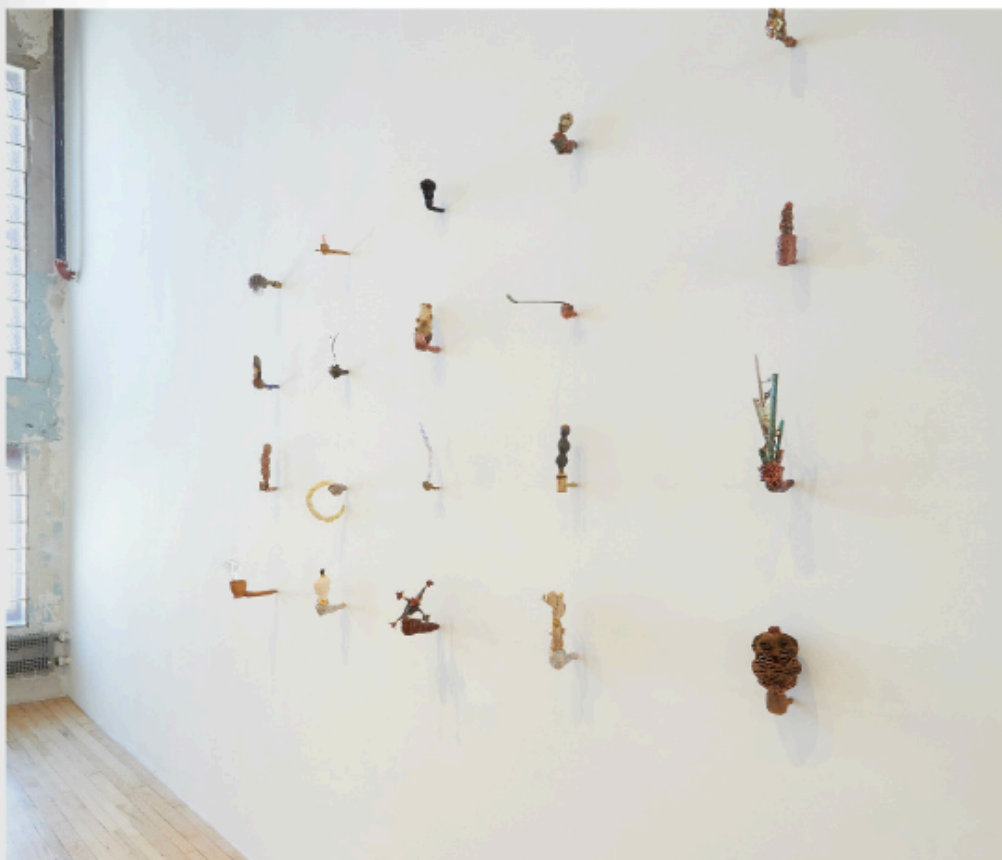
Installation view: Daniel Giordano: Love from Vicki Island, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 2023. Photo: Ernesto Eisner.



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Time attaches itself to everything; the work we see in the show is burnished by the history of its own making. But the decline I describe can also be seen as a starting point; we move from speculation about the past into an acceptance of it enabling its current use. Even the pedestals of Giordano's artworks hold significance and come from his family's factory. They are fiber drums made of thick cardboard, used when the factory was active. Moreover, the floor the artist works on is jumbled not only with his own materials, but with remnants of the family business, elements which Giordano regularly uses. Many artists have a tendency to work autobiographically, even if they find the open acknowledgment of doing so difficult. The point is that Giordano actively embraces the presence of his family, using his parents' ties to Newburgh as a forceful vehicle for creativity. Giordano uses a broad variety of components taken from his studio's surroundings: sewing machine parts, water caltrops (taken from the Hudson River), turkey vulture claws, the result of roadkill, and old bricks. But, as the title of the exhibition suggests—"Love from Vicki Island," Giordano is establishing a direct reference to the factory space where he works, as well as a pointed reference to his aunt Vicki, and the affection that drives his works' creation. The community he is engaged in, both as artist and person, results in an ambition to keep the memory of a once-thriving city alive.

In the striking, more than startling work entitled *Study for Brother as the La Pulcinella* (2016-22), the dominant form is a large cheese-and-epoxy-cast phallus, in a state of erotic excitement, rising into the air. It is supported by a single leg of cast aluminum descending into a large, cartoon-like foot. The pedestal is one of the cardboard barrels used while the factory was in operation. Its outside is coated with pomade (the favorite hairdressing of Giordano's brother). Made of dozens of elements, including Truck Nutz, gold leaf, plastic wrap, and nail polish, the sculpture acts as a homage to the adventures in love experienced by Giordano's brother. *La Pulcinella*, known in English as *Punch*, is traditionally characterized as a brutal, deceitful, and vindictive puppet character originating in earlier Italian culture. The puppet's rough personality complicates this work, intended as a homage to the sexual prowess of Giordano's brother. The *Pulcinella* series is regularly constructed from Italian

confectionery, raku-fired ceramic, and cast aluminum, as well as myriad materials too great in number to list. Beside the mythic, and comic, distortion of Giordano's white, oversized penis, the sculpture is also a recognition of mutual support between two brothers; Ricard Brautigan's poem, "Donner Party," was the initial inspiration for the emphasis on fraternal connection.

Part of the artist's success has to do with the assembling of myriad items in the works. The number and variety of Giordano's components is inestimable, and unusual to the point of eccentricity; the process is variable, including reductive sculpture, the crafts of casting in aluminum and firing ceramics, and the use of readymades, both purchased and found. Materials are most often castoffs transformed by their close physical proximity to other objects. But then the refuse often results in genuine beauty. For example, the face masks, whose shape is oval and which are *My Bear-Nakeds* (2019-20-21) involve unusual materials. For example, Giordano stretches tightly woven copper mesh onto cedar built oval stretchers. The copper mesh was used on the factory press machines to shape the garment with steam forced through the metal. Yet their use in Giordano's art creates objects that evade industrial suggestion and result in beauty. Inspired by the bird's eye view shape of the Roman Colosseum, the copper masks glow with a transcendent sheen. At the same time, they resemble paunches filled with fresh gnocchi.

Giordano is close to his father. The artist can be seen as reworking his father's factory components and materials in a transformation that is part homage, part alchemy, and part recognition of the present freedoms available.

In *Study for Brother as Timid Ballerino* (2016-22), the figure is again based on Giordano's brother. When Giordano was a child, he read the story of Billy Elliot, whose father enrolled him in boxing classes—but Elliot skipped the classes for ballet instruction, eventually becoming a professional. The Giordano family of four lived in a one-bedroom apartment, with the two brothers sleeping in the room outside their parents' bedroom. According to the artist, his older brother had difficulty sleeping and would regularly play computer games, dance, and sing songs, keeping Giordano up. Giordano shapes the figure, placed in a contrapposto pose, into a tall, thin person, with

a white cone hat (actually a light fixture, filled with phosphorescent acrylic), and a prominent phallus made of upholstery foam soaked in epoxy resin. By representing the dramatic presence of his brother as a elongated, puppet-like sculpture, Giordano offers evidence of an emotional attachment that the brothers share to this day. The long, thin, spindly legs, which rise out of mounds, made of cast aluminum, which serve as feet. His right hand pushes upward in a gesture of ecstasy. As I have said, Giordano personalizes his themes with references to his family (his parents still live close to his home), which intensify the examples of culture he uses. The artist's recognition of his brother is a good example of his need to establish local, highly personal interpretations of broadly recognized cultural tropes.

Giordano had more than a few very rough self-portraits lined up in several rows on a wall of one of the gallery space's side rooms. Primitive, ebullient, almost aggressive, the masks grin back at the audience with abandon. In *Self-Portrait with Idle Hands*, made in 2019, Giordano has fashioned a small, rounded mask with simple openings for eyes and mouth. The mask is strengthened by the artist's application of used cosmetic face masks—once again, Giordano is turning personal habits into fine art. A trail of what resembles hands, colored amber, hangs down from the nose, whose primitivity both amuses and jars. Composed of such ingredients as Canadian maple syrup and chili peppers, the portrait's very rough configuration, including a prominent, bulbous nose, of course bears no real resemblance to the artist. Instead, it is a defiant product of someone dedicated to visual aggression, being an explosion more than a portrait of self. As a demonstration of expressionist rebellion, the self-portrait exists within the decades-long tradition of the American artist's giving the finger to the audience, that group of people he likely needs most. Small matter, though: by now, we are used to facing such displays of active disregard, in ways that raise the artist above the crowd.

There is something more to be said about Giordano's disregard for "high" culture. Culturally, America is moving more and more toward an expressionist democracy, in which the stuffs of daily life are to be preferred over the pious elitism of an affluent sublime. By staying so close to the materials and feelings of his family, Giordano



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

keeps the middle-class modesty of his upbringing alive. Ever since the start of modernism, art must not only be new, it must demonstrate a contempt for conventional culture. The materials of Giordano's art may be considered prosaic, but from such modest and awkward beginnings, he creates imagery that lasts. For some, it may be hard to acclimate to the deliberate rejection of what we used to call the good, the beautiful, and the true, but Giordano uses this rejection to remind us that beauty is found all over—in the corners of a dust heap, as well as the grand halls of a museum. Inevitably, though, he is driven to accept the infrastructure of a visible career—the basis of public success as an artist. Yet Giordano retaliates in ways that would overemphasize the needs of a career, in favor of a less rougher vision, both materially and thematically, that has been leading American art for some time.

The danger of a consciously rebellious attitude can be that the outlook becomes a caricature of itself: the artist roars at the crowd, and the crowd, instead of becoming offended, demands more. Giordano, we remember, is still quite young—not yet 35. So we would expect him to keep relations between himself and his audience wary, perhaps combative. But this does not take place in his art; instead, the interaction is subdued by his concern to establish a dialogue, no matter how fraught it might be, via indirect communication. His lists of components used to build his work can comprise some thirty elements, but they hold together in ways that convey a unity rather than dishevelment. In a similar fashion, Giordano may seem to attack the public. He works more effectively out of a private reality. We can even say that his phalluses are both an abstract form and an erotic presentation. Thus, revolt becomes not so much an end as a means, leading us to an exchange rather than a conflict. It may well be that good art is finally a discussion rather than an attack—although aggression in art may well lend pique to what we see.

The lyric flower sculpture called *Toutone* (2016-18), stands as a trophy dedicated to what the artist hopes to achieve. In this work, the trophy is metaphorical. Giordano offers a bright yellow, gold-plated circle attached to a wire rising from a low pedestal. Next to the vertical wire is a kind of stump—a tree limb without branches or leaves, abruptly cut off at the top. The work is set on a waist-high table that lifts the

yellow disk high into the air. (The word *Toutone* comes from Quebecois slang; it means, contradictorally, a slender but also overweight young adult.) Intended as a response to a friend critiquing the work, this piece may be the most poetic in the show. But the lyricism is undercut, in a very interesting way, by the stark nature of the piece; the column of cast aluminum simply works its way upward, demonstrating neither visible support nor a declaration of beauty. Giordano, as always, evades an open statement of visual beauty. But, even so, the artist's anti-esthetic results in statements of memorable attraction, in which his rough-hewn assertion regularly carries with it strongly formal appreciation.

The last piece to be described, *My Scorpio I* (2016-22), consists of the frames of two motocross bikes from the 1970s, with curved extensions climbing quite high above the fractured motorcycles. It is a remarkable piece, given some to metaphysics in a family manner—Scorpio is the astrological sign of Giordano's brother, and the artist's grandfather was a motorcycle daredevil in the circus—and to Italian culinary traditions—the entire piece

is actually deep-fried in accordance with Giordano's preference for fried calamari. Italian-American culture has never been served so well in this show. The fried motorcycles become emblems of Giordano's life, as well as paying homage to a vividly ethnic way of life that is beginning to disappear. As a result, this contraption, clearly meant to be humorous, also alludes to a time when the ersatz was accepted as genuine, and the ethnic importance of food was culturally distinct.

At the same time, the motorcycle plays a large symbolic role in the spirit of American revolt, beginning in the 1950s. One thinks of Marlon Brando, and, later, Peter Fonda making their way on heavy metal chariots, their self-confidence an alternative vision of the American dream. Riding a motorcycle was a distinctly male way of asserting oneself; quite humorously, Giordano's version transforms the vision into an Italian culinary tradition. There is something comic about the displacement; the artist looks at a venerable tradition of revolt and turns it into food. At the same time, the sculpture is a potent reminder that visual art is a transmitter of expansive self, often



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

in opposition to conventional moores. Here Giordano does an outstanding job of referring to self-assertion, so deeply a part of modern culture in the States, and reworking it into something Italian to eat.

In the long run, it will be highly interesting to see how Giordano proceeds. An artist of ambition and unusual technical skill, he makes art that keeps him close to family and, indeed, the very local geography of his home: an old mill town up the Hudson from New York City. Giordano of course knows New York City well, having lived there and now making trips there as often as once a week. So he is quite knowledgeable about current movements in art in the city. But a deeper understanding is made clear if we start to recognize just how local Giordano is. His generalities are usually backed by local particulars, making him an artist of specificity and close intent. His father, a representative of an Italian-American culture not so prominent now, is important to him, just as Newburgh itself, its tradition of industry and troubled current existence, present a necessary backdrop for someone in need of a geography he can call his own. If place and family play important roles in Giordano's creativity, it is also clear that he is walking along a new path, in conjunction with modernism but also looking into the future. No one can attempt the future in art without using the past and making it his own in a personal sense. Giordano has done that wonderfully well.

DANIEL GIORDANO

MASS MOCA

Love From Vicki Island

February 4–December 1, 2023

North Adams,
Massachusetts

Museum of
Contemporary Art

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

