

Cosmogonic Tattoos

Special exhibition location: Second floor of the
Museum

Kelsey Museum of Archaeology

434 South State Street

Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Please do not remove from the Museum.



Jim Cogswell—Cosmogonic Tattoos

Cosmogonic Tattoos is a two-site public window installation on the glass walls of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, based entirely on objects found in their two collections. This gallery exhibition is a portal to the process of designing that project and a link to the objects in the museums upon which the project was based.

Cosmogonies are our explanations for how our world

came to be. They reflect our assumptions about the fundamental nature of the universe. They inflect our values and help determine how we behave in the world, how we think of who we are as a species, as a society, as individuals. Through collection, curation, and display our museums narrate the objects they contain to also make statements about how we see ourselves. I am tattooing the exteriors of these two museums with images of what is found inside, reframing the stories they tell about who we are and how we came to be who we are. In doing so, I am calling attention to the mutability of the objects within—across time and space, between materials, geographies, and institutions. I am proposing the museum as a fictive space built on coincidence and personal narrative, the chance layering of objects and representations subject to the reflections and curiosities of viewers, as well as the obsessions of our current predicaments.

The story of the objects gathered in these and all museums is a story not only of displaced things but also

of displaced peoples. The installation at the Kelsey and UMMA is intended as a single continuously unfolding narrative that includes the gap between the two buildings, a gap evoked by my series of transmission towers and the march of refugees between. I want that distance to speak to us— about migration and exile, loss and longing; about objects that were looted, exchanged, and destroyed in the movement of peoples through history; about sagas of trade, conquest, appropriation, and plunder. Hands changing hands, shaping histories we tell ourselves in order to somehow comprehend it all.

Jim Cogswell

Arthur F. Thurnau Professor

U–M Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design



Objects

I have spent many hours of this project drawing objects in this collection. Without physically handling an artifact, I am probing details and relationships that a more passive stance would miss. I am searching for a view from which I can most effectively explore what I find most striking about it, the curious detail, the narrative implied in its physical proximity to another object, its resemblance to objects elsewhere, the enigma of its presence here.

I am particularly attentive to the human presence at the other end of this process, the laborer who fashioned it, made present through traces of brush, tool, and hand on its surfaces. I am also absorbing its fragility, a thing wounded by the violence of history, defaced by natural disaster, reshaped through the normal course of physical decay. Each object testifies to unknowable acts that have fragmented, excised, and displaced it within a pool of artificially clear light inside a temperature controlled vitrine, framed by a carefully weighed explanatory text, redeployed among objects gathered from unimaginably different circumstances. Each object is further qualified, profoundly, by my utter inability to comprehend the ritual purposes, power relations, or quotidian circumstances for which it was originally intended.

Jim Cogswell

Graphite and shellac ink on mylar

2015-2017



Recollection

After drawing them, I can call each of the objects I examine to mind. Their shape, color, size, and accumulation of detail are now part of my visual memory bank. In that impalpable, unstable mental space they become subject to further distortion, decay, and hybridization. In recollection I sequence them differently, in variable combinations, finding similarities and differences in response to unpredictable stimuli. Curators

narrate these objects through a given set of organizational strategies. I narrate them through another, using reorganization as a tool for opening their fragmentary narratives to the imaginations of viewers.

Jim Cogswell

Walnut ink, sumi ink, and inkjet print on paper

2016-2017



Constraints

All of my artistic decisions are constrained by the materials that I use and the context they will inhabit. Like a poet with a verse form, wedding myself to craft is a contract with making. Material constraints are a form of inheritance. The weight, shape, color, surfaces and spaces that come through other hands to me have their own histories, their own borrowings and internal logic. Constraints are an acknowledgement of collective realities and expectations that we all share. Material

constraints give me responsibilities that I must tend to, duties that keep me busy enough to be surprised when unintended consequences emerge unexpectedly. My research is not driven purely by the rational, the will or the intellect. It emerges from a constantly shifting balance of conscious and unconscious elements that cannot be entirely controlled or predicted. In all of my experience as a maker, the constraints are where the creativity is born.

Jim Cogswell

Gelatin silver prints (Contact prints from cliché verre negatives on mylar with ink)

2016-2017



Making

As an artist, I live to make things, especially through the forming of materials with my own hands in the tangible, physical space within which I experience my own body and which I understand my self to inhabit.

I use making as a form of thinking.

Making for me is a way of learning about the world and a way of learning about myself, a way of situating myself in the world among others. My making is essentially an investigative practice. What I make is the residue.

What I make is always inflected by others, by what has transpired moments or millennia in the past, in the constantly slipping Now that we inhabit together.



Borrowing

Cultures develop through acts of integration. They thrive by borrowing from one another. Both the borrowed objects and societies involved are altered in that transaction. Museum collections are a register of those transactions, while also exerting unacknowledged power of how we perceive the conflicting philosophical, religious, and political cosmologies embedded in the objects they

gather. My project comments on museum collections to get at a larger issue, which is the mutability of all objects and meanings. The collected objects in museums are only one small piece of objects.

1. Siren Capital

Limestone

Roman Period (2nd Century BC or later)

L. Blaich purchase 1969. KM 1969.6.1

2. Kylix with Palmette Design

Clay, Attic black figurine

625-600 BC

Puteoli, Italy. G. De Criscio collection. KM 1083



Value

How can archaeological objects constitute a listening post to the hopes and constraints of those who made them, used them, lost them, plundered them; those who found cultural value in them, and those who link them to their own personal priorities and agendas? How do their stories implicate us? How do we find ourselves in them?

1. Broom

Palm Fiber

Roman Period (1st-4th century AD)

Karanis, Egypt. UM Excavations 1824-1935. KM 10851

2. Shouldered Lekythos with Departure Scene

Clay, Attic black figure

6th century BC

Attica, Greece. Dr. M. D'Ooge. KM 29221

3. Pelike

Clay, South Italian red figure

Late 5th-early 4th century BC

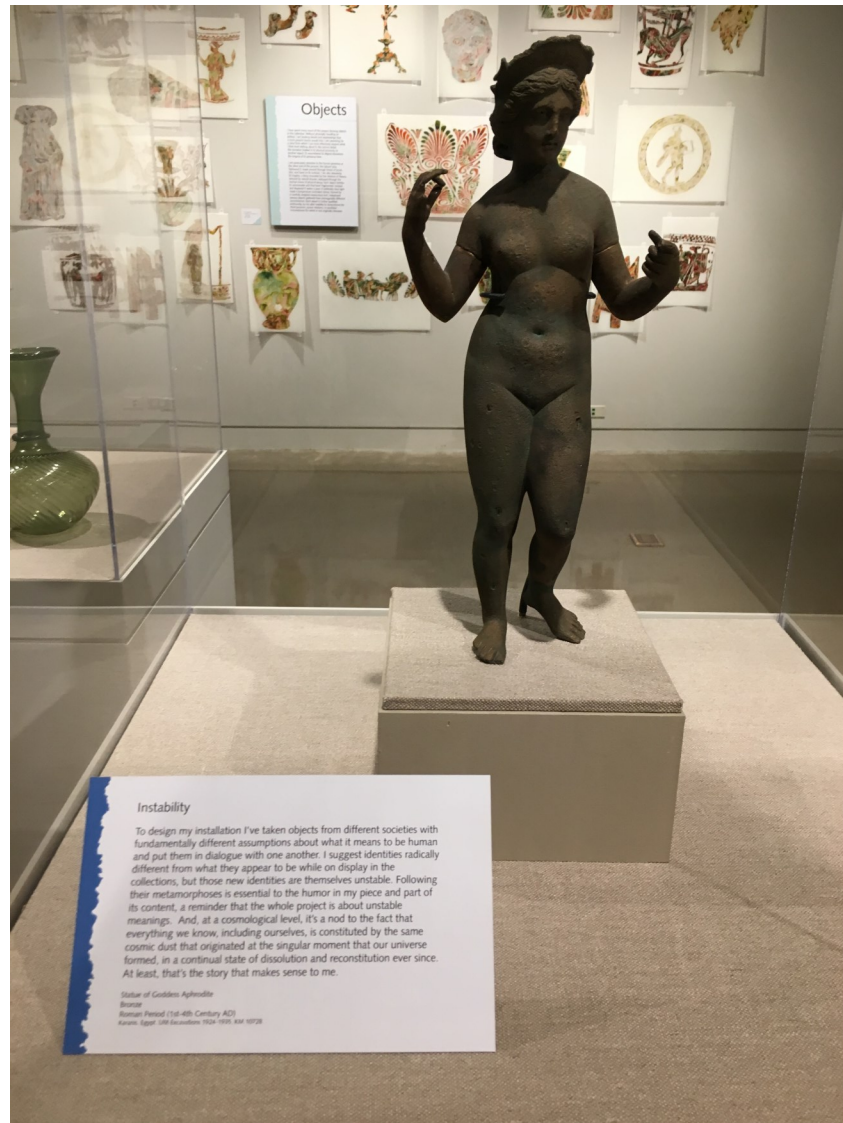
Greece. A. Pattengill gift. KM 24588

4. Shouldered Lekythos with Herakles Battling Cretan Bull

Clay, Attic black figure

6th century BC

Greece. Dr. M. D'Ooge gift. KM 29170



Instability

To design my installation I've taken objects from different societies with fundamentally different assumptions about what it means to be human and put them in dialogue with one another. I suggest identities radically different from what they appear to be while on display in the

collections, but those new identities are themselves unstable. Following their metamorphoses is essential to the humor in my piece and part of its content, a reminder that the whole project is about unstable meanings. And, at a cosmological level, it's a nod to the fact that everything we know, including ourselves, is constituted by the same cosmic dust that originated at the singular moment that our universe formed, in a continual state of dissolution and reconstitution ever since. At least, that's the story that makes sense to me.

Statue of Goddess Aphrodite

Bronze

Roman Period (1st-4th Century AD)

Karanis, Egypt. UM Excavations 1924-1925. KM 10728



Transformation

My intent for this project is not simply to catalog the fragments from societies that I am studying, ancient and modern, but to imaginatively transform them, constructing a work of fiction based on scrupulous attention to the evidence. As my knowledge of these objects deepens, I alter their narratives by re-contextualizing them, molding their images to new

materials and new constraints, in doing so, hinting at the fragmentary nature of historical memory and the imagination by which we narrate it to ourselves.

1. Conical Lamp

Glass

Roman Period (1st-4th century AD)

Karanis, Egypt. UM Excavations 1924-1935. KM 5929

2. Stand

Wood

Roman Period (1st-4th century AD)

Karanis, Egypt. UM Excavations 1924-1935. KM 3633

3. Flask

Glass, free-blown neck, mold-blown and twisted body with trailed decoration

Roman Period (1st-2nd century AD)

Karanis, Egypt. UM Excavations 1924-1935. KM 5944



Inspire. Transform. Communicate.

Inspire.

Transform.

Communicate.

Create your own transformative work based on the artifacts in the collections of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and University of Michigan Museum of Art.

Color in, draw out, explore, and expand.

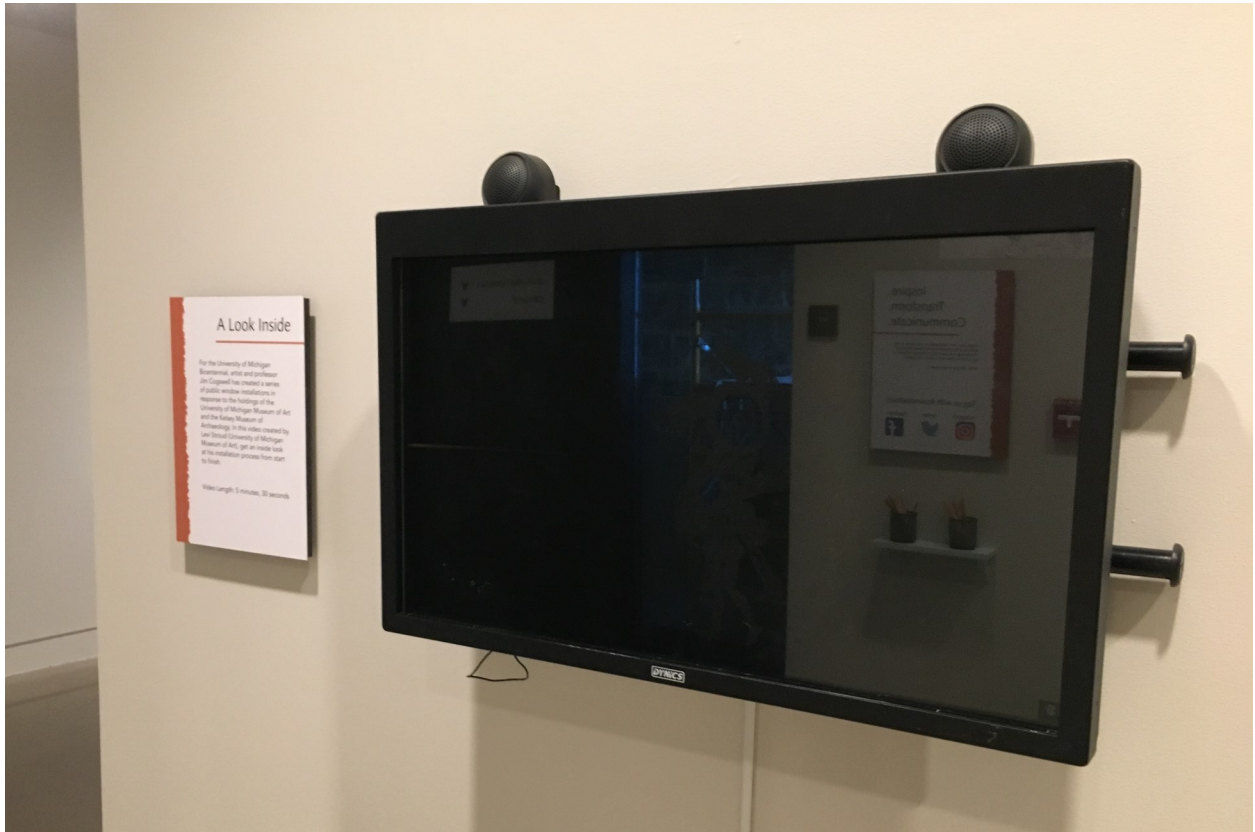
What will you communicate?

Tag us with #cosmotattoos

instagram

twitter

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A Look Inside

For the University of Michigan Bicentennial, artist and professor Jim Cogswell has created a series of public window installations in response to the holdings of the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. In this video created by Levi Stroud (University of Michigan Museum of Art), get an inside look at his installation process from start to finish.

Video Length: 5 minutes, 30 seconds



Acknowledgments

The joys and insights this project have brought me are a product of the network of human relationships through which it has been realized. I could never have done this alone. That would be neither humanly possible nor desirable. It is, after all, an exploration of humans constructing a world together.

Cosmogonic Tattoos was initiated in memorable conversations with Terry Wilfong who first encouraged me to propose a project for the Kelsey and who has supported it through multiple stages of development. I was constantly nourished by studio visits and stimulating dialogue with Terry, and with Catherine Brown, Karl Daubman, Laura De Becker, Elaine Gazda, Daniel Herwitz, Dawn Johnson, David Porter, Christopher Ratte, Margaret Root, Ray Silverman, Carla Sinopoli, Laurie Talalay, Maryann Wilkinson, and Claire Zimmerman, and by informative exchanges with many others, most notably my Fellows cohort at the Institute for the Humanities. My excitement at doing a project with the Kelsey was first prompted by reading Leonard Barkan's *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*. I am grateful to Leonard for his friendship and support, as well as the intellectual challenges he has constantly thrown my way through his work.

I extend my sincere thanks to the entire Kelsey Museum

staff for their enthusiastic contributions to this project. I am especially grateful to Associate Director Dawn Johnson for insightful leadership, a keen eye, and a firm hand on the rudder. And to Sebastián Encina, Julia Falkovitch-Khain, Michelle Fontenot, Paul Koob, Scott Meier, Sarah Mullersman, Cathy Person, Emily Pierattini, Carrie Roberts, and Lisa Rozek.

I am grateful to former University of Michigan Museum of Art Director Joe Rosa (now Director at the Frye Art Museum, Seattle) for inviting me to extend this project to include UMMA. The exchange of objects between UMMA and the Kelsey became the core of my design and the key to its content. At UMMA, I am especially grateful to Matthew Casadonte and Todd Berenz for their adept installation assistance, and to Kristian Cho, Roberta Gilboe, Katharine Derosier, Dustin Dewitt, Pamela Reister, Ruth Slavin, Nettie Tiso, Bruce Glazier, David Lawrence, and to Interim Director Kathryn Huss for their support. My conversations with Associate Curator of African Art Laura De Becker were amazing

and very helpful.

I appreciate the indulgence and good humor of the security staff at both museums during my lingering visits and long hours of installation.

I relied upon Stamps undergraduate Victoria Essex for many essential tasks over the past two years, and Sam Bertin before her. MFA student Jon Verney's brilliant hunch that my ink paintings on mylar could be used as darkroom negatives led to my calling upon Stamps undergraduate Sarah Posner's darkroom expertise to print all of the photographs in this exhibit. My sincere gratitude to them all.

My thanks to Patrick Young and to colleague David Turnley for their brilliant photography and to Levi Stroud for his video documentation. Karl Longstreth generously made available the facilities of the Clark Library for us. Mary Alice Bankert has provided support and encouragement throughout the process. I can hardly

believe my good fortune that sister-in-law and fellow artist Margaret Couch Cogswell volunteered a month of her time to help me with the Kelsey installation.

A catalog for this project is being realized through the extraordinary contributions of my colleague at the Stamps School Professor Franc Nunoo-Quarcoo, from whom I always learn so much. I am profoundly grateful to Franc and to the other contributors to that publication: Karl Daubmann, Daniel Herwitz, Kathryn Huss, Stamps School Dean Guna Nadarajan, Christopher Ratté, Ray Silverman, Terry Wilfong, MaryAnn Wilkinson, Claire Zimmerman, and our editor Lisa Bessette.

This project could not have become a reality without the creativity, skill, and persistence of Dave Michalak of Imagecrafters, Inc. who fabricated all of my adhesive vinyl designs. I am grateful to him and to the team at Imagecrafters, Vickie Peterson and Katlan Michalak, for our twelve years of work together.

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If you have any questions or comments regarding this Large Print Guide, please contact Sarah Mullersman: mullersm@umich.edu or 734-647-4167

We appreciated your feedback!