

Offering

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Marc Leuthold

A Review by Tanya Hartman



WALKING INTO MARC LEUTHOLD'S EXHIBITION, *Offering*, at the Daum Museum of Art in Sedalia, Missouri, US one is confronted by an enormous, light-filled gallery, its white walls bisected by a line of evocative text quoting Coretta Scott King's description of the effect that one of Martin Luther King's speeches had on his audience. It reads:

I have a dream that my four little children one day will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character....This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning. When we allow freedom to ring from every town and every hamlet from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last!

Free at last! Great God A-mighty, we are free at last!' As Martin ended, there was an awed silence that is the greatest tribute an orator can be paid. And then a tremendous crash of sound as two hundred and fifty thousand people shouted in ecstatic accord with his words. The feeling that they had of oneness and unity was complete. They kept on shouting in one thunderous voice, and for that brief moment the Kingdom of God seemed to have come on earth." (Coretta Scott King, *My Life with MLK, Jr.* pp. 239-240).

This quotation, which is a visual component of the exhibition, is reflected upon in Leuthold's artist's statement. In it, he poses the following questions: "Do even good leaders become part of a dark system that has gradually weakened our country? What can we do to help ourselves? When does it become our duty to take back our government?" His stunning *Offering* is an attempt to "call attention to these questions".





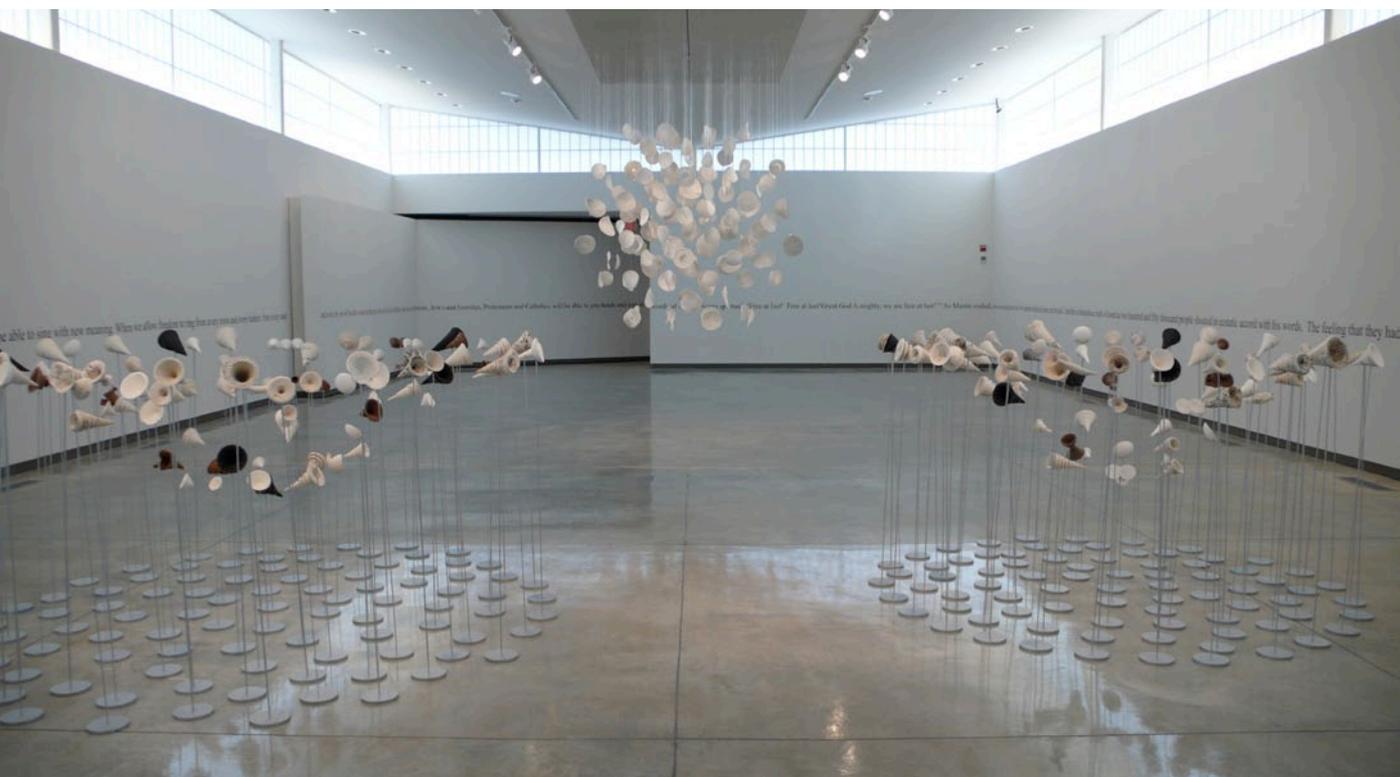
The beauty of the quotation's content is augmented by the fact that the text is stark black against sterile, white walls. In this context, the ordinariness of the colours black and white becomes a metaphor for race, societal dissonance and the urgent hope for harmony that serves as a literal and conceptual frame around the installation.

At the front of the gallery, displayed on polished grey concrete floors that stretch like an ocean of integration between the black of the text and the white of the walls, are two groupings of ceramic shapes. Their forms evoke the loudspeakers of the civil rights movement, or ancient horns used to call martial warnings, funnels, cones, shells or animal's protective tusks. They rest on delicate, linear metal stands that range in height from 24 inches to 50 inches. Made from many different kinds of clay, the coloration of the forms moves subtly from greys, to ochre, to blacks, to browns, suggesting all of the ranges of

pigmentation of human skin.

The artist was inspired to make these forms by an incident that took place during the *Nara* Period in Japan during the 8th century. Leuthold writes, "(I)n 764 AD, as an act of atonement, Empress Shotoku commissioned one million wooden, conically shaped pagoda forms, each containing a scroll of Buddhist scripture called the *Daranikyō sutra* (*Dharani*)...It was believed that this gesture would help a worried people get through bad times."

Leuthold's cones are presented tilting slightly upwards as if looking heavenward. Each is subtly different from the next and yet in aggregate they make, "a diverse group, a population". The simplicity of their forms belies the manifold metaphors that they evoke. A cone resembles a horn, an instrument historically used to call for help. The archangel Gabriel blows his horn on Judgment Day to herald the beginning of change. The Jews sound the traditional *Shofar*,



or Ram's horn, on High Holy Days to announce the start of a period of sacredness and purity. Both interpretations are relevant to the exhibition because the grouping of cones has a distinct figurative poetry suggestive of a grouping of souls, waiting together to be called to the better days described so eloquently in the quotation by Martin Luther King Jr. But the forms of these cones are open and non-literal, thus allowing viewers to dream other meanings into them. When seen as shells, their meaning changes because shells are homes, shields used to protect against the vicissitudes of the ocean's currents. And like shell-dwellers, each human needs a place to be safe from the cultural currents that buffet us. When viewed as funnels the meaning again opens and shifts to express the fact that each person experiences a surfeit of occurrences in a lifetime, which must be taken in slowly, organized and distilled, drop by drop, into the unique narrative that defines who we believe ourselves to be. The forms Leuthold has created also bring to mind the loudspeaker, an image both malevolent (when associated with Police brutality and oppression) and courageous (when connected to demonstrators for Civil Rights).

The fact that there are two groupings of these beautiful, small sculptures augments the theme of binary that infuses the exhibition. Each evocation that the sculptures conjure contains an opposition: the horn calls for positive change and punitive judgment, the shell protects against vulnerability but shields against experience, the funnel organizes but stems the flow, the loudspeaker calls to action but also threatens and cajoles. Just as the text on the wall becomes a visual duality, describing a call for oneness so also is there hope and its opposite within the complex simplicity of these clay shapes.

The surfaces on these clay sculptures are varied. Some are utterly smooth, while others are carved by hand into spiral-like tusks. In many cultures, the spiral connotes the endless repetition of societal error. In Leuthold's sure hands, the carving is both earthy embellishment and calligraphic cipher. Some of the forms interiors have subtle, delicate colours such as purples, blues and yellows, body colours blooming with bruising and mortality. Some look blackened and burned. Some are broken, or mangled. They range in scale from about three inches to 24 inches and sway lightly on their delicate stands. Each 'character' is unique, handmade without a template and yet as a mass they are integrated. In short, these are ceramic portraits of souls, or voices, visual representations of human complexity subtly, beauty and originality. They become representative of what King means when he speaks of human beings being able, one day, to "sing with new meaning". The installation reminds us that each human being is a fragile and novel enterprise, each life a potential song.

A loose group of broken, unglazed white discs hangs from the ceiling of the gallery behind the installation of cones. One may look through the cones to the discs and back again and this visual interplay allows the realization that each group is merely a station along the tracks of a larger visual narrative. Leuthold writes, "Further back

into the space, near the centre of the room hangs a cluster of porcelain discs and shards, roughly 160 pieces. The discs, inspired by Pi discs from Neolithic China, range in diameter from seven to 11 inches and form a roughly spherical cloud. Buried with the dead, the ancient Chinese discs are circular with a hole in the middle. The circle was a symbol of the universe and the hole in the middle was believed to allow the soul of the deceased to pass through and to ascend to the heavens."

Each grouping of cones contains, at its centre, a small, unglazed white double cone that appears to be metamorphosing into a disc. The discs are curled, cracked and uniform in lack of colour, delicate and ethereal, embossed with smaller circles or radiant lines that emanate from a central opening. Each is subtly unique, yet connected to its community in its fragility, lack of coloration and eternity of form.

I have long searched for art that is both political and poetic, filled with flexible ideas rather than static polemic, a practice that stands on its own as pure visual aesthetics with deep layers of connotation and thoughtfulness. In Marc Leuthold's work, I have found just that. Like shells washed up on a complex shore, these discs and cones seem like detritus from the ocean of history. Both disc and cone are eternal shapes with neither beginning nor end that speak to the most fundamental questions posed by both politics and poetry: what came before and what could be, the voices of the many and the hope for souls in unity.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas, US. She has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-Creiff Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.

Marc Leuthold in the studio.

