



2015

Ejecta

Anthony Cervino

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Ejecta

Description

Co-authored with artist Anthony Cervino, this book was produced on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name at CulturalDC's Flashpoint Gallery in Washington, DC. The book is comprised of several curatorial essays as well as fictional and personal reflections, and an in-depth interview to examine issues of parenthood, professional successes, personal tragedies, and larger art-historical contexts.

Keywords

CulturalDC, Flashpoint Gallery, parenthood, success, tragedy

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | Art and Design | Contemporary Art | Sculpture

**CHAPTER
ONE**

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EJECTA



The Ejecta (detail)

wood, linen, glass,
found and made
objects

2015

24" x 48" x 36"

EJECTA

In volcanology and geology the ejecta is the matter thrown from the explosive events surrounding volcanic eruptions or meteor impacts. This term, taken for the title of the multi-part installation (*The Ejecta*) and for the exhibition as a whole (*Ejecta*), is also an apt metaphor for an active studio practice. During process-driven creative investigations, the collateral art often is as revealing and significant as the object of determined making. This private and isolated nature of artmaking also can be understood as a metaphorically masturbatory act; the affinity of *Ejecta* with ejaculation is not

accidental. The exhibition began with the thought of how the self-pleasing process of creating is brought into fraught balance with others' desires, expectations, and commendation. In considering this concern about external recognition and conventional notions of success, Anthony Cervino and I were also drawn to how *Ejecta* implies the word *reject*, the antithesis of accomplishment. This project, in one incarnation, was intended to posture fame and prosperity and to mediate between self-perceived mediocrity and evidence of sincere effort. As conversation and collaboration evolved over the past two years, an innate earnestness took hold to anchor the exhibition and book in our shared sense of morality, ambition, vulnerability, and affection.

Cannibalization of older sculptures to make new art is a regular practice in Cervino's studio. Some of the works in *Ejecta* have already been "well-digested," but, this process has not been about displaying failures or trying to recoup losses. All of the objects are the results of rigorous editing and extensive labor. As curator of this exhibition, I have the challenge of not considering *Ejecta* as a retrospective, as an archive, nor simply as an artist's body of recent work. The interconnected project (both the installation and this book) results from a considered and perhaps impossible attempt to put in context aspects of my husband's identity

(as husband, father, artist, teacher), as made and understood by him, but curated by or filtered through me. Together, we did not select objects according to a theme or coherent narrative, but the exhibited sculptures were made, remade, and considered anew to reflect a collaborative act, a temporal complexity, and a discursive approach to self-portraiture. Until now, we never have shared so determinedly the processes of writing and making.

Because of the reflective and personal nature of the exhibition, it reveals a tangled timeline of art-historical citations, more private experiences, and works from Cervino's nearly twenty-year-long career. Of course, the exhibition and this book reflect us, as husband and wife, father and mother to our two children, artist and art historian, but the allusions rarely are so discreetly individual that other influences and intersections can't be discerned. For example, Cervino's longtime references to toys, boyhood play, and model kit parts in his oeuvre (since 2001 and seen here) finds a sort of parentage in artistic "fathers"—Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Chris Burden, Joseph Beuys, and Tom Sachs (the latter perhaps more like an enviable older brother than "father")—who model a successful straddling of formal concerns with resonant subject matter. Like these predecessors, Cervino's relationship to objects is neither solely abstract nor overtly sentimental. But,

fatherhood is indeed personal, as he examines his own identity as a parent and his relationship to his own father, who is figured obliquely (and absently) in the form of his desk in *Folie à deux*.

The reconfigured works in this exhibition are culled from specific moments in Cervino's career. *At Once Was I* (2008-2015), for example, was first exhibited in the Flashpoint Gallery in 2008. It is now displayed in the crate in which it has been stored for the past seven years. Echoing this crate-cum-frame, the long line of cases through the center of the gallery (collectively titled *The Ejecta*) look like seemingly utilitarian plywood crates from the outside. But, these glass-topped boxes are lined beautifully in linen and are evocative of museum display in an approximation of art-world success. They take Joseph Beuys' vitrines as their inspiration, as Cervino's cases contain both found and made objects of personal significance, are arranged with great attention to spatial rhythms, and paradoxically connote both relics and waste.

In one of these crate-cases, Cervino again elusively depicts his relationship with his father. As a boy, Cervino's father started to read the Hardy Boys book *The Secret of Skull Mountain* to him, but never finished the story. Over the past year, Cervino collected over a dozen copies of this volume, then spread them in a single row and layered wooden shims between each book.

Cervino cast a single, solid bronze copy to anchor the splayed stack; its carefully applied patina mimics and abstracts the color of its readymade, mass-reproduced, and worn referent. The display of these books—with shims that look like arrows shot *en masse*, under an authoritatively heavy and relatively precious bronze weight, and protected by a glass lid like Snow White’s coffin—suggest a defensive posturing and roughly allude to the thrills promised by the book’s cover. The bronze book and careful stacking partially obscure the cover illustration, but Joe Hardy, one of the book’s protagonists, still can be seen holding a human skull in one hand and protecting himself from a falling rock with the other arm. Here, Joe stands in as an idealized surrogate for Cervino himself; he evokes a boyhood longing for adventure and is rewarded with a heroic, satisfying conclusion. Cervino’s story, in contrast, started with a father’s forgetfulness or neglect and ended with eventual estrangement. Rather than simply illustrating the climax of this Hardy Boys narrative, the depiction of a figure holding a skull evokes a familiar motif in the history of art and signifies a weightier contemplation of the transience of life. Taken as a potent symbol for Cervino, this book embodies and also wards against the passage of time and a father’s deliberate absence.

Each case in *The Ejecta* is arranged with different compositional cadences and narrative evocations. In one, a green, compressed-oxygen tank appears to lie in state alongside a yellow, powder-coated, life-size steel “light saber” and denotes a fallen warrior. It should be noted that the color and shape of the “light saber” specifically emulates the one held by the toy action-figure of Luke Skywalker (c. 1978), not the “real” light saber of the popular *Star Wars* films. Another display with a matte black-painted slide carousel (one part of an older sculpture by Cervino), along with other objects including a black-painted pipe and a found women’s urinal, offers a formal engagement with light and dark, volume and void, shape and line, as well as a subtle nod to Duchampian humor and the readymade. The tableaux conform to the conventions of museum display, like natural history specimens or historical artifacts. Moreover, they don’t resonate merely as souvenirs with specific ties to personal memories. The logic of Cervino’s iconography is bound first to interests in form, and second to a kind of auratic presence, a sense that the sculptures hold an elusively indexical relationship to a person, an experience, or more generally, to the past.

The structure of this book reflects the purposeful eclecticism of the overall installation. Three of the essays that follow specifically examine sculpture included in the exhibition and attempt to decode their ambiguities. Other chapters, “An Exchange, Parts I and II,” demonstrate the intensely personal nature of this collaboration and its intersection with our professional identities. Cervino’s “Fable of Kuntry Mouse” provides a tongue-in-cheek morality tale, and a photo-essay conveys the materiality and methods of his studio practice. This book is not intended to be a straightforward exhibition catalogue (a record of the gallery installation), nor does it provide any linear narrative. Rather, it is curatorial and confessional, a complement to the diverse components of *Ejecta*.