



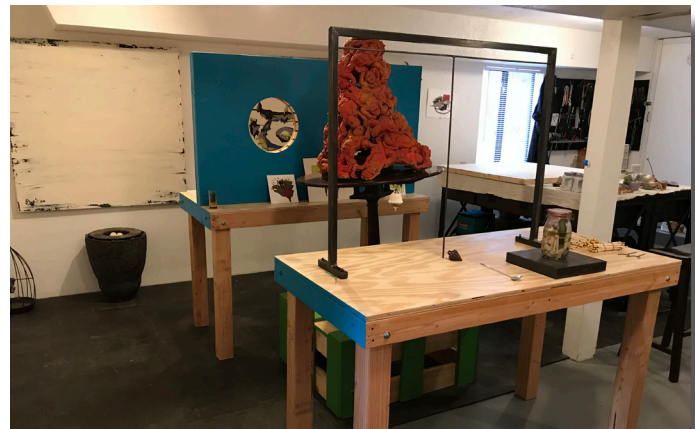
# Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Writing from Mars*, an exhibition by artist Rick Parsons, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from February 2 – May 23, 2018. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.

## MIGRATORY ART

Rick Parsons is a self-described “artist who makes interdisciplinary sculpture” who is interested in material as metaphor. The substances he uses to make his sculptures are as crucial as what the pieces represent – material, for him, isn’t just an armature to hang images on. Materials have qualities and behaviors – even something as rigid as metal does things, and reacts to things, in ways where we can draw analogies to our own living bodies and minds. Rick grew up in Galveston, Texas, on the Gulf Coast, and the refineries in the area left their mark on him – and, perhaps, that industry’s devotion to transforming one thing (crude oil) into another (gasoline, diesel fuel, propane, asphalt, naphtha) has left its traces on his process.

If that seems a bit of a stretch, when you look back on his work, it’s been consistently haunted by Galveston. Rick has always been concerned with a sense of place, the environment, its atmospheres, its toxins. Galveston still throws its shadow afield here, in Nevada, in this body of work, which he’s called “Writing from Mars.” Along with his familiar concerns, there’s an intimate sense of personal history embedded in this work – an address not just to a place, but to a family. There’s an almost memoiristic quality to some of the pieces, which he unpacked a bit during a visit I paid to his studio a few weeks before the show’s opening. All the quotes below come from our conversation.



Rick Parsons’ studio, 2017



Buddha Mound, paint, wood, ceramics, 72”x40”x40”, 2018

### The Buddha Mound

The centerpiece of the show is a mound – it looks like a refuse pile, or maybe a teetering pile of laundry, from a distance. Closer up, you can see it’s like a paralyzed scrum of contorted Buddhas. It hovers somewhere between a cheerleader pyramid and an x-ray of a mass grave. This pivot from something playful to something repellent finds its seeds in a student painting. As Rick explained: “It kind of goes back to a painting I did in undergraduate school. When I first started painting I was figuring out what to paint. I was doing landscape paintings of petrochemical plants. One had this beautiful sunset behind it... petrochemical plants can cast some carbon into the air and create a pretty rich sunset. After I painted it, I realized it could be a sunset, or it could be the plant was on fire. Refineries always have the chance of exploding and we always lived under that fear.”

Rick sculpted one Buddha and then made a press mold to produce clay copies, assembling them in a mountain-like formation, roughly shaped like a large Buddha. I asked him about his connection to Buddhism. “When I went to graduate school, I went to the University of Dallas, which is a Christian-based college, and at that time I found myself living in a Buddhist commune... Someone else who was going to school there said ‘Hey, I’m living in this commune, I think you’d be interested in it.’

And next thing you know I'm living in a Buddhist commune in Dallas. Which sounds weird, but it's still there." He doesn't practice Buddhism, but says he has "Buddhist tendencies." The emptiness at the center of the mound is essential to its meaning – the whole lattice of bodies is stretched over a void, clear as the interior of a clapperless bell. It speaks to "that internal thing in most religions... that hollow form is us. You can kind of place yourself in there."

The table it rests on is an antique table, outfitted with three wheels – it's not a resting place, but a vehicle. This implied mobility has to do with carrying a sense of faith with you as you move through life, and is a response to the recent death of his father. "I lost my father this past year, I lost my mother 15 years ago." Rick talked about the strange feeling of being "orphaned at [age] 48." The wheels aren't just metaphorically decorative – he plans to build a harness for the sculpture, for a performance at an upcoming ceramics conference in Davis, California, where he'll drag it through town and "make a commitment to the piece."

### The Experiment Tables

The two tables that flank the centerpiece are constructed from drawings his paternal grandmother made while she was a student. After his father died, Rick went through the things that were left behind. He says his dad wasn't a hoarder, but at the same time, he never let anything go that was given to him – and among the things Rick found was his grandmother's physics lab book, filled out in 1922. This included drawings of her lab tables, which Rick has used as a sort of blueprint. The delicate drawings show the tables, and the experiments laid out on them: one shows a bar, from which objects are suspended into beakers positioned below. After graduating, Rick's grandmother went on to work for the Santa Fe Railroad for a short while – these forays into science were not something likely to be professionally followed up on at the time, as a woman.

There's something wonderfully unstuck in time about the sculpture – Rick's grandmother starting experiments nearly a century ago, and Rick picking up the thread and continuing them. Of course,



Photometry [Lab Table], paint, wood, steel, ceramics, 72"x60"x30", 2018

the "experiments" taking place on the tables right now aren't quite the same experiments – but what stays the same after a hundred years anyhow? Rick has created clay porcelain "beakers," containing a salt solution, and used clay to mimic the suspended forms shown in the lab book. During this exhibition, doubling as a "salt experiment," salt crystals will adhere to, and grow on, the suspended forms. "Salt is always about transformation. Salt is not a stagnant material. It likes to migrate, so it grows crystals. [The experiments] are based on salt, and its ability to move from one place to another. For me that's a metaphor for life – to move from one place to another."

The result is a piece that actually changes from day to day. "It's not great for selling work, when there's a sense of flux to it. People don't want their art to change, but I want my art to change."

Salt, while speaking to change and transformation (over time, it can break down something as apparently tough as metal), also paradoxically carries rich associations of preservation. Perhaps here, rather than preserving organic materials, it could be preserving an idea, an image, a memory.

“Growing up on the briny shores of the Gulf of Mexico, everything is encrusted in salt... Things on the shore just have salt growing out of them all of the time. The onshore winds that blow during the winter – your houses are covered in salt; your cars are covered in salt.”

The telescope, on the other table, is yet another Galveston reference. “They used to place telescopes on the piers – and really you couldn’t find anything out there except for oil wells. Maybe occasionally a ship.” Here, the sculpted telescope speaks to an attempt to position oneself, to try and find a perspective.

## The Paintings

The paintings are an outgrowth of a recent residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, in Colorado. Rick’s goal for the residency was to show up without any of the tools he’d usually take as a sculptor – he brought a writing table, a record player, some Miles Davis albums, and an empty writing book. During the residency, he’d listen to jazz and free write in the morning (this is where Rick’s title for the show comes from – he didn’t edit himself as he wrote, transcribing whatever came to his mind, as if he was taking down transmissions from another planet. Images and phrases in his writing book later became jumping-off points for his artwork – this Writing from Mars set the stage for much of the work on display). In the afternoon, he made “drip paintings,” pouring paint onto plywood boards laid flat on the floor, letting the paint settle a bit, then tilting the boards to let the colors run into each other, and to drip and spread on the surface. He would usually make three or four passes on the surface before the paintings felt resolved. This method represents “jazz thinking” to him – “doing an action and responding, doing an action and responding.” The more recent paintings for this show are on a larger scale than the ones he made at Anderson Ranch.

The paint is house paint – I asked Rick if, when he went into Home Depot to go through the swatches and make his color choices (one painting has pink, army green, brown and red), they gave him any feedback at the counter. He said no, he wasn’t given any feedback, but – “Well, they gave me a look.”

When I suggested they could be called “spill paintings” as much as “drip paintings,” Rick laughed. For me, beyond the method of the paintings, they visually suggest aerial views of an oil spill, recalling some of the images taken of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Or on a smaller scale, they echo the way gasoline might float on top of water on wet asphalt. Rick admitted they do have “that flat shimmer that oil puts on the Gulf Coast” – but if that image arrived from there, it only came via the route of the subconscious. Like the sculptures, the paintings are way of investigating materials – the viscosity of the paint, the way the edge of one color reacts with its neighbor. “When you start putting the paint on the surface, you’re thinking about the materials, solely. You’re not thinking about anything else.” I left the studio thinking of the paintings as sculptures by other means – sculptures that are only a couple millimeters thick.

## “Over There”

Towards the end of my visit to his studio, I asked Rick what he supposed his father would have thought of the show. Many artists – unless their parents are artists themselves – can end up befuddling their families with their work. Rick said that wouldn’t have been the case with his dad. “I think he’d be really interested in it, and interested in the way I’ve integrated the history in it. He always respected the work that I made, and understood where it was coming from. My parents have always pushed me to be an artist. Which is an odd thing for the Gulf Coast... My mom pushed me to



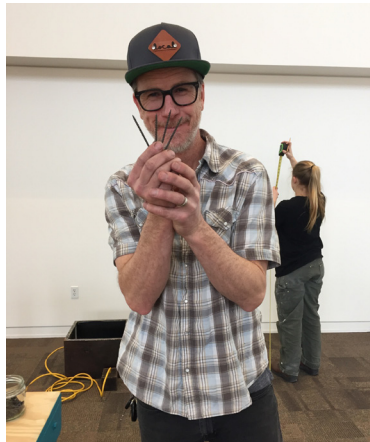
Station #1 [Pink and Green], paint on wood panel, 48"x48"x2", 2017

take painting classes. If I wanted to play sports, I had to [also] take a painting class. So, I was in this class with 60-year-old women doing landscape paintings on the beach, and I was probably 9 or 10.”

He continued, “My dad worked in the petrochemical industry for 35 years and he said he didn’t care what I did as long as I didn’t work over there – and he’d point to the refineries.” Rick made the same grave gesture as he told the story. He didn’t end up working “over there.” But he has brought “over there” with him, to varying degrees, wherever he’s gone.

Ending note: If it seems informal to call Rick by his first name in this essay, I can’t really help it – Rick has been a colleague and friend for the better part of a decade at Sierra Nevada College, where we both teach in the Art Department. He’s a devoted and gifted Professor; I’ve learned quite a bit from him, and am grateful to have been in his artistic and pedagogical orbit. Calling him “Parsons” would have been a formality that I don’t think either of us could stand.

Chris Lanier  
Reno, Nevada  
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Artist Rick Parsons

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