

# ARTFORUM

## Steven Claydon

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firstsite  
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British artist Steven Claydon's comprehensive solo show "Culpable Earth" invests the artist's interests in tradition and ethnography with a contemporary approach to museum display. The exhibition, his first major solo show in the UK, reads as a contemporary retelling of a forgotten or unknown history. It is one filled with bearded men, ambiguous pseudomachinery, and quizzical artifacts.

Taking center stage in the exhibition is *The passage of differentiated substance* (all works 2012) - a large, carlike combination of wheels, I beams, and an antique-looking barrel with a cast of a face protruding from its surface. The work suggests items salvaged from the past, yet on closer inspection, their immaculate condition and industrial origins contradict these initial impressions, placing them instead in an uneasy relationship with the present. (The face, it turns out, is that of Alfred Wallace, the naturalist who proposed a theory of evolution independently of Charles Darwin.) Raised up as it is on a custom-made plinth, like many of the other sculptural works here, this one makes clear that methods of display are integral to the work itself. The similarly constructed *Confections in orbit* (mailbox, spider, gumdrop) simultaneously hosts a number of unusual objects on its sides and surfaces, and subsumes the apparatus used in their display as part of the work. By presenting these items in close-to-familiar ways, Claydon seems to be suggesting we ascertain their "unknown" cultural value - as if we were witness to a collection of curiosities pillaged on a trip to a far-off land.

The reappearing motif of a bearded man populates a number of the works on view - mostly grotesquely in the two-headed *Convolute*, a yellowed, semitransparent sculpture made of resin and other materials, and most elegantly in *Who conjured you out of the clay?*, in which a gray, bearded gent's head and shoulders sit on top of an immaculate red cube, itself atop a monstrous mound of clay. Claydon himself wears a beard, so these works seem to keep the artist's presence ever near. But geometrical figures like the cube or square are also recurrent, as is the idea of the pixel, cited in the title of the aluminum-brick piece *London Pixels Array* and the digital print *Photon Pixel*. This breaking down of materials, in relation to digital technology, draws the traditional or faux-antiquated aspects of the works together with connotations of early-1990's computer gaming. Here, Claydon pairs the degradation of materials and images with the optimism of developing technologies, reinventing the pixel to new ends.

The sculptural video installation *The Earth at Work*, which consists of four monitors facing outward from inside a cubic frame, is an explicit reference to similar themes: Sequentially moving from monitor to monitor, a video depicting the production of ceramics out of clay underscores ideas of primitive manufacturing. “Culpable Earth,” the show’s title, coupled with the ideas of labor that the works evoke, suggests a world responsible for its own making, one that returns ideas of manufacture to a human scale, if only to remind us of contemporary industry’s origins. Craft, fabrication, and production align with Claydon’s sculptural concerns, and although “sculpture” is paramount to his practice, his mixing of contemporary contexts with those that suggest some “otherness” defamiliarizes his subject matter enough to isolate his fantasy narratives, making them even more real in the present tense.

- Steven Cairns