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Tarnished Beauty

The de Saisset Museum, a modest building located in the middle of Santa Clara University, blends in with the rest of the beautiful architecture on campus. With two large banners flanking the main entrance, you can easily spot the museum on your daily walk to and from class. As you enter the museum today, you can't help but notice the familiar glimmer of the universally recognized precious metal, Gold. Right as you enter the front doors, you are greeted by golden leaves that are attached to the walls and flow with the breeze that pursues you into the building. Presently, *The Gold Rush* exhibit, on display through March 13, aims to draw attention to the many symbolisms that gold has donned in American society throughout history, especially in regards to the developmental effects it has had on California. The exhibit features work from nationally and internationally recognized artists, and combines the use of contemporary art with historical objects to portray the different symbolic meanings that gold embodies.

One of the most notable pieces within the exhibit is also the one that you are most likely to overlook if you were to hastily pass in and out of the gallery room. *Enxurrada (Flood)*, a polished brass sculpture by Vanderlei Lopes, is one of the artist's three pieces in the exhibit. Hiding in the corner, the brass appears to be "gold" flowing from a hole in the wall and puddling across the floor. Ripples cascade through the solid, in a funneling shape that gives the illusion that it is flowing back underneath the wall a few feet from where it pours out. Light reflects off

of the solid liquid, sending a torrent of reflections up the wall, like that of rippling water, permanently frozen in time. The piece is accompanied by two similar bronze sculptures placed throughout the exhibit. *Ralo (Drain)*, is a golden grate surrounded by a puddle beginning to flow down the drain. The last piece, *O Pintor (The Painter)*, appears as yet another golden puddle, in which there is a shoe print, and from which leads a series of diminishing shoe prints as if the gold were paint, and gradually dried as the painter walked away. The use of these curious, awe-inspiring sculptures alludes to the era of the Gold Rush of California, in which time there were rumors of roads paved with gold, that helped entice the masses to uproot their lives and venture to the “Golden State” in hopes of easy riches.

Bronze pennies, tarnished and old, scatter the floor of the exhibit. At first, one might think that they are out of place, especially amidst the presence of the beautiful gold that comprises most of the other pieces. However, upon closer inspection, one will notice that all of the pennies are heads up, every single one of them. A placard on the wall identifies the pennies as *Lucky Penny Pick-Up* by Ry Rocklen. Accompanying the title is a quote from Dame Shirley that explains how “Gold mining is Nature’s great lottery scheme.” With this fact, and the idea of the lucky penny, the purpose for this piece becomes very apparent, as it demonstrates the truth behind the Gold Rush; it was a game of luck, and not everyone who joined became rich.

In a step away from the allusions to the Gold Rush of the 1800’s, the piece entitled *Bridge* by Glenn Kaino brings you to a more modern perspective of gold. In *Bridge*, a series of 30 forearms clenched into fists hang from the ceiling, each made of fiberglass, steel, wire, and gold paint. They are all aligned and parallel, each connected to the ceiling with two cables. Standing in the middle of the room, the fists point towards you and form an arcing shape as the arms are gradually set higher and higher until they level out at the top. Lights above the rope

bridge-like structure cause shadows to cast down from each slat-like arm, at a series of angles, doubling the apparent number of arms that are present. Upon closer inspection, you will realize that all of the arms are of the same cast, which is confirmed in the description to the side of the piece. In fact, Kaino created *Bridge* using a cast of former Olympian gold medalist Tommie Smith, who was a supporter and symbol of the Black Power movement. In this piece, the gold is symbolic of both the achievement and the message for which it stood for in this moment: a step for solidarity and human rights.

Contrasting greatly to the glorious sheen of the majority of the exhibit are two sculpted heads made of bronze by Julian Hoeber. The heads both appear a sickly brownish gold color. Each contain great detail in the face, but are both misshapen and flawed. One has holes riddled all about the head, while the other has gashes all around, as if someone scraped their front teeth through clay, and with each gash, the scraped surface curls up at one end. Each of the faces are grisly in appearance, similar to a zombie, as if they are decaying. The two heads display a sickness in the head related to the precious metal, which could be present in the form of greed. They stand out in the middle of the room, and while observing the rest of the exhibit, you cannot help but continually notice these eerie heads, as they appear almost like a warning of the repercussions of becoming consumed by gold.

The very recognizable image of the American flag is present on one of the walls of the exhibit in the piece titled *Triple Bombed Flag* by Andrew Schoultz. The flag is wrapped tightly around a frame like a canvas, and the front of the flag is painted gold. On the one inch sides, however, the colors stay true to the normal image we are accustomed to. Throughout the gold side, there are what appears to be randomly shaped golden streaks, protruding out from the surface, and radiating from the center of the flag, where there is a large golden lump. Beside the

flag, is a placard with a song parodying “My Country Tis of Thee” with a satirical version highlighting the worst aspects of America. The opening line reads “My country tis of thee, Sweet land of felony, Of thee I sing—” instantly challenging the virtues of America. The song then goes on to include historical illusions including: the Salem Witch trials, maltreatment of Quakers, and the mob being above the law. The piece and the song beside it suggest that America is not the virtuous country it portrays itself to be, but that instead, it is driven by a lust for money and thieving, further exemplified by the central position of the golden lump on the flag.

In the exhibit, several pieces work in combination to strip away the luxury and beauty of gold. A collection of photos hangs neatly on the wall depicting black miners, all hunched over and toiling in the heat of the day as sweat glistens on their bare backs. These four photos, by David Pace, reveal the arduous labor that it takes to mine the gold. A recreation of a factory-like setting by Jonathan Fung gives more insight as to the working conditions of the period of the Gold Rush. Titled *Coolie*, the piece is named after the slang for unskilled Asian workers tricked into forced labor and prostitution. It allows the viewer to visualize the dingy, dimly lit environment, which these workers were forced to contend with each day. The two pieces reveal the horrid conditions to work in, as well as the racist, sexist treatment brought about by the presence of gold.

Finally, the most striking piece in the exhibit is one that actually brings you into the art. A perfect circle of gold, several feet in diameter glimmers magnificently on the wall. The top half of the disc is reflective, with metal flakes standing out in the paint, and subtle lines scored horizontally every few inches. This half resembles the look of a silicon wafer used in making computer processors if you have ever seen one. The bottom half on the other hand, is a frosted

gold, which gradually turns to an almost burnt red at the bottom. *Lumina Moon Gold Mandala*, by Miya Ando seems to pull the viewer into the piece due to its reflective quality. As you look at the piece, you will likely recognize your figure in the work, but only that. Standing at a regular distance of a couple feet away, you will not be able to recognize facial features and in a sense, you lose yourself in the gold. While your reflection is surrounded in riches, you are not recognizable as the same person.

Overall, the exhibit combines a variety of mediums, and art pieces that contrast greatly to each other, and reveal the multiple symbolisms that gold has acquired over the course of this country's development. From the glory of gold that coincides with the Gold Rush and the American Dream, to the truth of how rare it was to be successful; from its presence in the Black Power movement, to the greed and harsh prejudiced behavior that followed the metal, gold has seen both the best and the worst of America, even being the cause for some of these aspects. This is further demonstrated by the abundance of bronze in the exhibit, which, gold-like in appearance, can reveal its beauty, but also its darker side in the tarnished aspects of the art. It certainly reveals the dual sided nature of the valued metal, and how deeply it can cut, despite its quality of being soft.