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### All that Glitters...is Probably Pyrite

Among the many romanticized moments of United States history, none resonate with Californians as strongly as our very own Gold Rush. We practically idolize it: the California state motto is “Eureka,” our state route signs are displayed on a spade-shaped shield, our state has earned the nickname “the golden state,” and even has its football and basketball teams named to honor the Gold Rush. However, in more recent years, many people have begun to recognize that the Gold Rush was not the romantic adventure depicted in history books. Supporting the true reality of the movement is the *Gold Rush* exhibition, currently displayed at the de Saisset Museum through March 13 at Santa Clara University—just in time for Super Bowl 50. Each piece of this exhibition craftily conveys dark emotional meaning in an ironic gild of gold.

Two pieces currently on display, both named *Untitled* by Julian Hoeber, perfectly demonstrate this irony. The pieces seem to act conjointly, telling the story of a bad situation getting worse over time. The piece that seems to come ‘first’ in this ‘story’ is a head, roughly normal in size that appears as though it is melting. The mouth is beginning to cave in on itself, and the left eye has dropped down the figure’s cheek bone. Scattered across the bald scalp of the figure are small dents that look as if they are melting and about to give way to form more holes. From a few feet back, the character looks despondent as the very youth of his face is liquefying. To the side, an excerpt of a quote by Frank Leslie reads “I have had always the fortune or

misfortune, during my travels through California, to witness scenes of blood, which are, in fact, very frequent in this country.” Already one can see, quite blatantly, that life for Gold Rush fortune-seekers was quite dangerous. The second piece to this ‘story’ adds onto the threat of physical danger by presenting the threat of psychological degradation. Once again, the piece is a human head. This time, however, the head is shot through with holes. The bullets have penetrated the skull’s vibrant gold gild and have reached the head’s hollow center. The man’s eyes are loosely shut and his mouth remains the slightest bit ajar. His head is rolled back but it seems as though he is almost being pulled forward—like the rest of the man’s unseen body is moving. With this small leap of imagination, it appears as though the figure is wandering, almost lusting aimlessly for something— as if he is a gold-crazed zombie. For this piece, the caption reads, “Now indeed a heavy gloom hung around us. The destroyer seemed to let loose upon our camp. Who would go next?”. This caption describes a far more imminent danger than that of the first. Whereas the first quote warned about physical harm, this quote warns of a danger far more sinister—gold fever. Who would go next? Who would be the next person to allow the lust for gold to subdue their minds and cause harm to those surrounding them? However, in concurrence with the theme of this exhibit, both pieces are ironically cased in gold. Were it not for gold’s pleasant glimmer, the skull would be left bare to reveal its true, horrific undertone. There is so much evil that is implied by these sculptures, and yet we associate gold with riches, prosperity, and even happiness—rather than the corruption it so often brings. Perhaps the artist is trying to insinuate the folly in hailing the Gold Rush as a rich, pleasant piece of history.

An equally disturbing piece called *Lumina Moon Gold Mandala* by Miya Ando, depicts danger and hopelessness in a far less direct nature. This piece is simply a large gold disc. Its diameter is roughly the width of an average door, making it large but not overbearing. The top

half of the disc is reflective and covered in a glistening bright gold. The shimmer from this half is so bright, that any objects within its frame of reflection are dimmed significantly, leaving behind only a dark, indiscriminate shadow. The latter half of the disc is painted in a dark brown color that contrasts with the top half. Unlike its shimmering counterpart, the dark half of the disc is too murky to reflect anything. Next to the piece is quote from Dame Shirely, a gold miner, who writes “I am too tired to write...The midnight moon is looking wonderingly at the cabin window, and the river has a sleepy murmur that impels me irresistibly bedward” (de Saisset Museum). Paired with the art, this quote becomes quite eerie. The reflections seem as though they can mimic any generic person. Therefore, every viewer will see a familiar, yet unique reflection in the top half. However, the bottom, because of its dull disposition, appears the same to everyone. Together, the two halves convey a feeling of drowning—as though the viewer’s figure is being swallowed by the murky landscape. It elicits a feeling of inescapable exhaustion from whomever views it. This piece operates much like the sirens of Greek mythology: it attracts you with its glistening exterior, then reveals its true nature when you wander too close.

A final piece named *Drain* by Vanderlei Lopes is unlike the others because it acknowledges the concept of remorse. Whereas the first two pieces reveal the degradation of the logical mind and the third demonstrates the futility of having hope once on the frontier, “*Drain*” suggests that venturing to California in the first place was a bad idea. The piece itself is a simple floor drain coated in gold. The lights from above shine on the gold, which, in turn, reflects upon the wall to give the piece the impression of movement. The gold truly looks like water sinking into a drain. Above the piece is a poem titled the “Honest Miner’s Song,” which reads, “I’m thinking of the better days, before I left my home; before my brain with gold was crazed, and I began to roam.” Based on this quote, the piece being displayed is symbolically showing a

miner's dreams going down the drain, all for the false promise of gold and prosperity. In addition, it also references the corruptive effect gold can have on the mind. The unique realization the viewer gains from this piece is that if the miners expressed their opinions honestly, it would be clear that none of them wanted to be there—that the Gold Rush was more of a nightmare than a dream.

The *Gold Rush* exhibit currently being held at the de Saisset Museum is a truly enlightening experience that conveys a great deal of emotion through otherwise simple pieces. Each piece has a dark, yet humorous irony to it. The exhibit engages the viewer to find the hidden meaning concerning the Gold Rush within its pieces, which is far more enjoyable than reading a historian's article that practically tells the reader how to feel about the event. Should you find yourself on Santa Clara campus anytime soon, I promise that any visit to the exhibit, no matter how short, is well worth its cost in time.