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A Golden History

As I slowly pull open the heavy doors, the first thing I see entering the Santa Clara University de Saisset Museum is a multitude of small, golden squares of soft paper fluttering in the afternoon sunlight. This 3-D wall decoration, I discover, is an installation in the exhibition titled *Gold Rush*, which will be on display until March 13, 2016 in the university's museum that is open to the public and free of charge. The exhibit is a medley of different artists whose pieces incorporate some aspect of golden material—there are small spools of golden thread as well as golden busts as large as a human head. “*Gold Rush* encourages us to reconsider the symbolism of gold in our society, especially in light of its transformative role in California’s history,” reads a light gold caption beneath the exhibit’s title. The caption points out the eagerly anticipated Super Bowl taking place in the city of Santa Clara this February: “Often considered the ‘golden anniversary,’ the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl provides an opportune moment to explore the impact and cultural association with gold in this region.” The installation strategically takes advantage of the upcoming golden anniversary as a way to connect students and members of the Santa Clara community to the history of gold and its diverse role in art. Gold is of huge importance to California because of the 1848-1855 California Gold Rush—thousands and thousands of people travelled from every continent to pan for gold

after the material was uncovered in the north. This was a promising time when ordinary families had a shot at the ideal “California Dream.” Not everyone was successful, however, as interpreted in some of the art in *Gold Rush*. Many of the pieces discuss interpretations of the Gold Rush in their captions, reaching past the aesthetic and towards a greater social commentary, as art commonly does. However, it is the convergence of glimmering gold and the educational explanation that distinguishes this exhibit.

The initial soothing atmosphere catalyzed by the soft papers in the entryway is abandoned as viewers explore the exhibit. Two rooms are filled with everything from brick, fabric, and oil on canvas to fiberglass, steel, and wire. The spacious rooms allow for artwork to be spread out on the walls, engendering a capacious feeling as one walks around the perimeter. Directly across from the entrance is a giant drawing of a bird in the wild. The artist’s caption relays that the piece is done in metal leaf, washes, ink, and pencil on paper. Pencil? Stooping closer to the paper, I notice light pencil shading around the bird’s wings. *Endless Gathering Lull* is filled with an elegant golden wash that makes the piece look luxurious despite the pencil lines. In contrast with this elegant wall piece is a golden bust of a deformed face. It appears that fingers have dug into the sculpture’s forehead, cheeks, and chin—there are jagged bumps around the head and pieces of the mouth have been removed. It is a gruesome sight. Unlike either of these works is a large, circular mirror that sits at eye level. Half of the circle has a vibrant yellow-golden tint and half is a murky light pink that does not reflect my image. The museum’s ceiling lights that cast shadows across the floor illuminate small, glimmering specs. The combination of these

mediums in one room feels extraterrestrial—the shimmering bird, the grisly bust, the sun-like mirror. The aesthetic is captivating.

The exhibit calls upon viewers to look in every direction—on the walls to see the paintings, on the ceilings to see a golden reflection, and on the floor to see a strewn path of pennies. Yes, a *path of pennies*. Ry Rocklen's 2005 *Lucky Penny Pick-Up* is an elegant, yet seemingly simple display of pennies placed heads-up on the room's hardwood floor. Juxtaposing the ceiling-high, snake-like, golden installation towering directly above the pennies on the ground, I was originally unimpressed by the copper. Pennies are commonplace, especially when on the ground. Rocklen is known for transforming everyday items into art, his most famous piece being a couch made out of trophies. Despite my initial indifference towards the display, I was surprised by Rocklen's caption for the piece as well as the multitude of Abraham Lincoln profiles when I took a closer look. Rocklen quotes Dame Shirley, "Gold mining is Nature's great lottery scheme. A man may work in a claim for many months, and be poorer at the end of the time than when he commenced; or he may 'take out' thousands in a few hours." The shiny, rose-gold pieces simulate the Gold Rush that Shirley is describing—what looks like specks of gold in the dirt, or in this case, on the hardwood floor, may be deceptively promising and worth very little. On the other hand, pennies can yield a great sum of money if routinely collected. However, the face-up pennies mock the Gold Rush. The work is titled, *Lucky Penny Pick-Up*, referencing the well-known superstition that picking up a face-up penny will bring good fortune. If you believe in this superstition, imagine coming across Rocklen's installation. There is immense opportunity for good fortune. For many,

finding gold during the Rush was a similar process. Although the travel and mining was exciting and full of hope, there was no assurance that one would become rich off of their findings. Likewise, picking a penny off the ground does not guarantee good fortune—it is a superstition that brings about illegitimate confidence. Between the illnesses, harsh environments, loneliness, and scarcity of gold in some areas, the life of a miner was not glamorous or lucky. Rocklen's installation reminds viewers of how frustrating it must have been to pan for gold and how quickly propaganda about the lifestyle tricked plenty of hopeful people.

Gold plates, paints, and fabrics are easy to find in our consumer world. The image of gold has been replicated so many times it is hard to imagine the importance that gold used to hold in Northern California just 160 years ago. *Gold Rush* attempts to retrieve that appreciation and, for example, remind Santa Clara University football fans *why* a 50th anniversary is considered golden... unique, rare, miraculous, and remarkable. However, the history of the California Gold Rush is not all cheerful and golden. Great amounts of pain and time were dedicated to the excavation of gold. The common theme of gold unifies the exhibit's pieces and lends the community a much-needed historical reminder.