



**CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'** 'Endless Gathering Lull,' by Sarah Smith, is one of the pieces on display at the de Saisset Museum's new 'Gold Rush' exhibit.

## 'The Gold Rush' highlights California's promise and failings

BY JOHN FLYNN

**S**ITTING AT THE edge of the American frontier, California has long been viewed as a land of milk and honey. The Spanish sought mythical cities in the region, but settled for the "saved" souls and forced labor of Native Americans. The 49ers risked life and limb, crossing the Great Plains and braving the journey around Cape Horn in pursuit of gold.

Most recently, techno-utopians have flocked to Silicon Valley and packed themselves into rented garages,

hoping to write some code worthy of a repatee-laden biopic.

But California's promise has always been undercut by a far less glamorous reality. For each Golden State success story, there are dozens of tales of failure and aborted attempts at reinvention. In their new exhibit, "The Gold Rush," the de Saisset Museum hopes to capture this duality.

"This is not a linear historical exhibition," says curator Chris Sicut. "The artists are presenting timeless issues of the Gold Rush—hope, aspiration, greed, violence and racism. If we've learned anything from the original Gold Rush, it's that few did well. So let us not forget that is still happening today."

The Gold Rush created California as we know it. Two years after the precious

metal's 1948 discovery at Sutter's Mill, more than 300,000 mostly American and Chinese non-natives filled the state. This influx of population and wealth fast-tracked California to statehood. And by the end of the rush, some \$2 billion in today's dollars would be plucked from the Earth.

But compared to the value of the natural resources and new markets, which sprung up in the wake of the rush, that's a paltry sum. Levi Strauss, the era's most famous entrepreneur, now has his name on the \$1.3 billion stadium hosting the golden anniversary of the Super Bowl. Though the exhibit radiates amber tones, Sicut eschews works that glamourize the metal itself.

"I didn't want to seek gold. The gold is California," he says. "It's not an object. It's a place. So you could say water is gold. California water is very important. Or maybe the dirt in California is the real gold."

But the state's wealth produced some seamy side effects. As the precious metal became rarer, economic troubles

led to anti-immigrant sentiment and exploitative labor practices. Named after an immigrant labor slur, *Coolie* by Jonathan Fung is an installation of eight antique sewing machines stitching swaths of red silk. The red represents bloodshed exemplified by events like the Chinese Massacre of 1871 when a mob of 500 white men lynched 19 immigrants in Los Angeles' Chinatown.

The work also speaks to spiritual bloodshed. Callous capitalists recorded astronomical profits while keeping their laborers in squalor. The haunting hum of sewing machines scores the piece and the number eight—symbolic for infinity—prompts the realization that the clothes I'm wearing right now are made under the same conditions.

Elsewhere in the exhibit, Glenn Kaino's striking *The Bridge* depicts a suspended string of muscled arms. The cast appendage belongs to San Jose State alumni Tommie Smith, the black, fist-raising champion of the 200 meter dash in the 1968 Olympics. Kaino considers the image's meaning that still persists in the ongoing struggle for racial equality, but manifests in new ways—like when Black Lives Matter activist Deray Mckesson sends a fist emoji as a solidarity symbol to select Twitter users.

In the same room, Sicut has placed *Not Yet Titled* by Alma Allen. Leaning delicately against the ceiling, the work abstracts our state's outline in a loping 12-foot arc that thickens and flattens like poured water.

Allen's choice of heavy bronze gives the piece its rigid form, but strengthens gravity's toppling tug. It's an accurate state portrait. California's documented history stretches back only a few hundred years. The dirt and water that made the state so valuable have become more scarce. Despite our young state's promising beginning, its lasting legacy teeters between becoming a pioneering constant of plenty or a cautionary footnote about greed.

"The moment we see something precarious, the mind gets tickled," Sicut says. "You're like, 'Is it going to fall?' And I hope we look at ourselves in that way: Are we going to fall? Or are we going to rise to the occasion?"

THRU MAR 13 11 AM-4 PM	THE GOLD RUSH
FREE	De Saisset Museum, Santa Clara