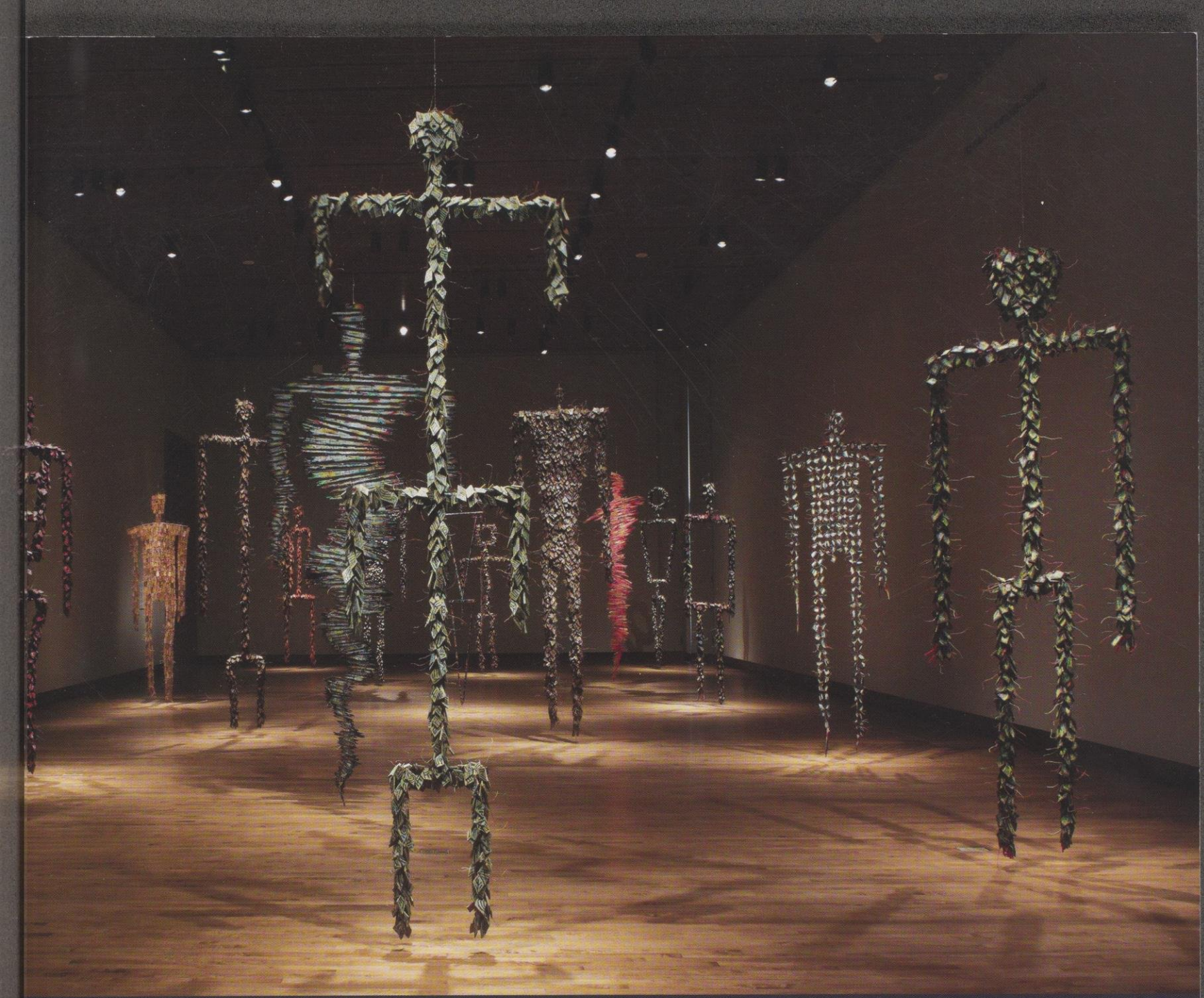
Michael Lucero : Interlude, 1978-1979 (May 10 through August 18, 2013).

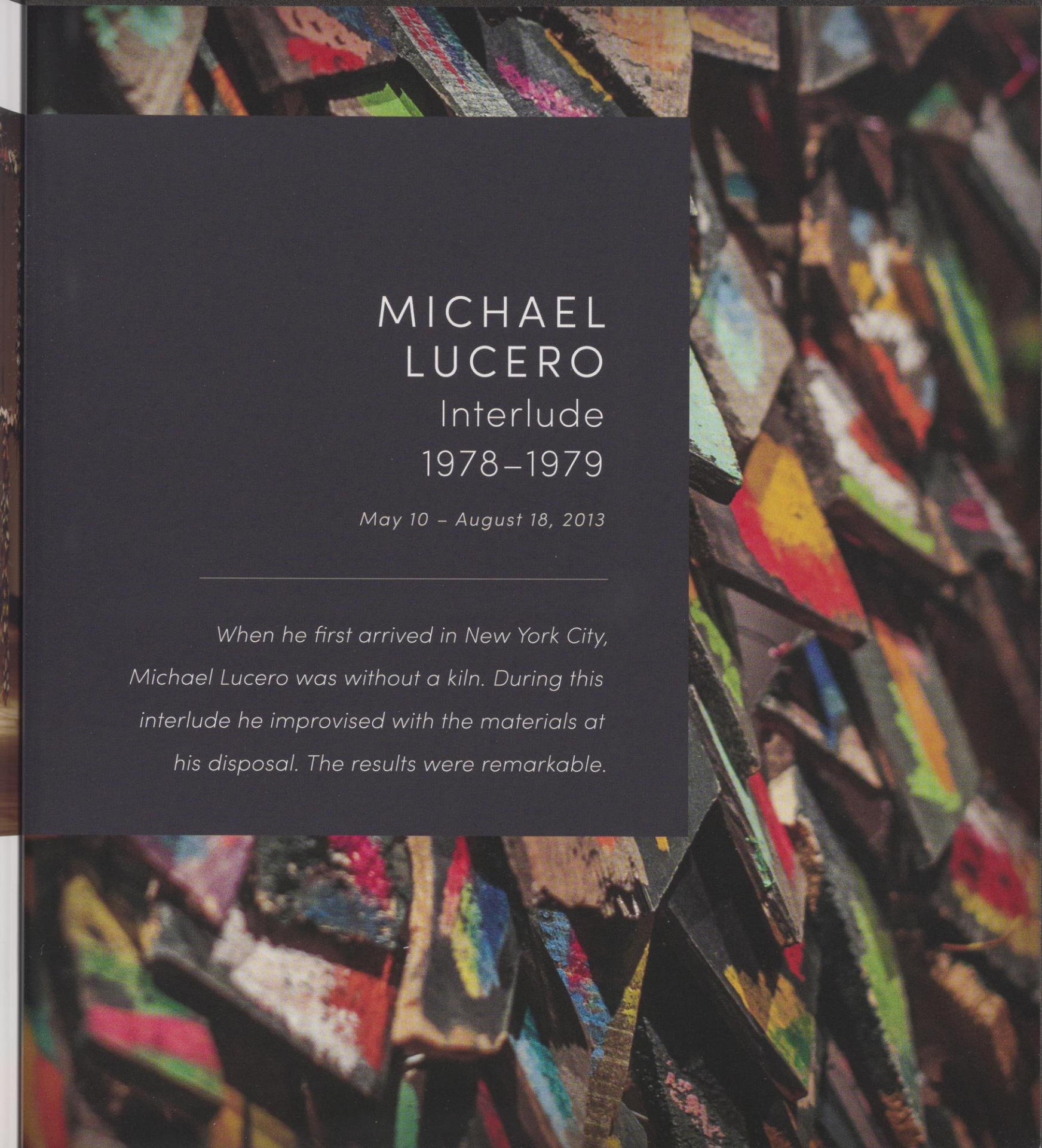
Panczenko, Russell

Madison, Wisconsin: Chazen Museum of Art, 2013



MICHAEL LUCERO
INTERLUDE 1978–1979

MAY 10 *through* AUGUST 18, 2013



MICHAEL LUCERO

Interlude 1978–1979

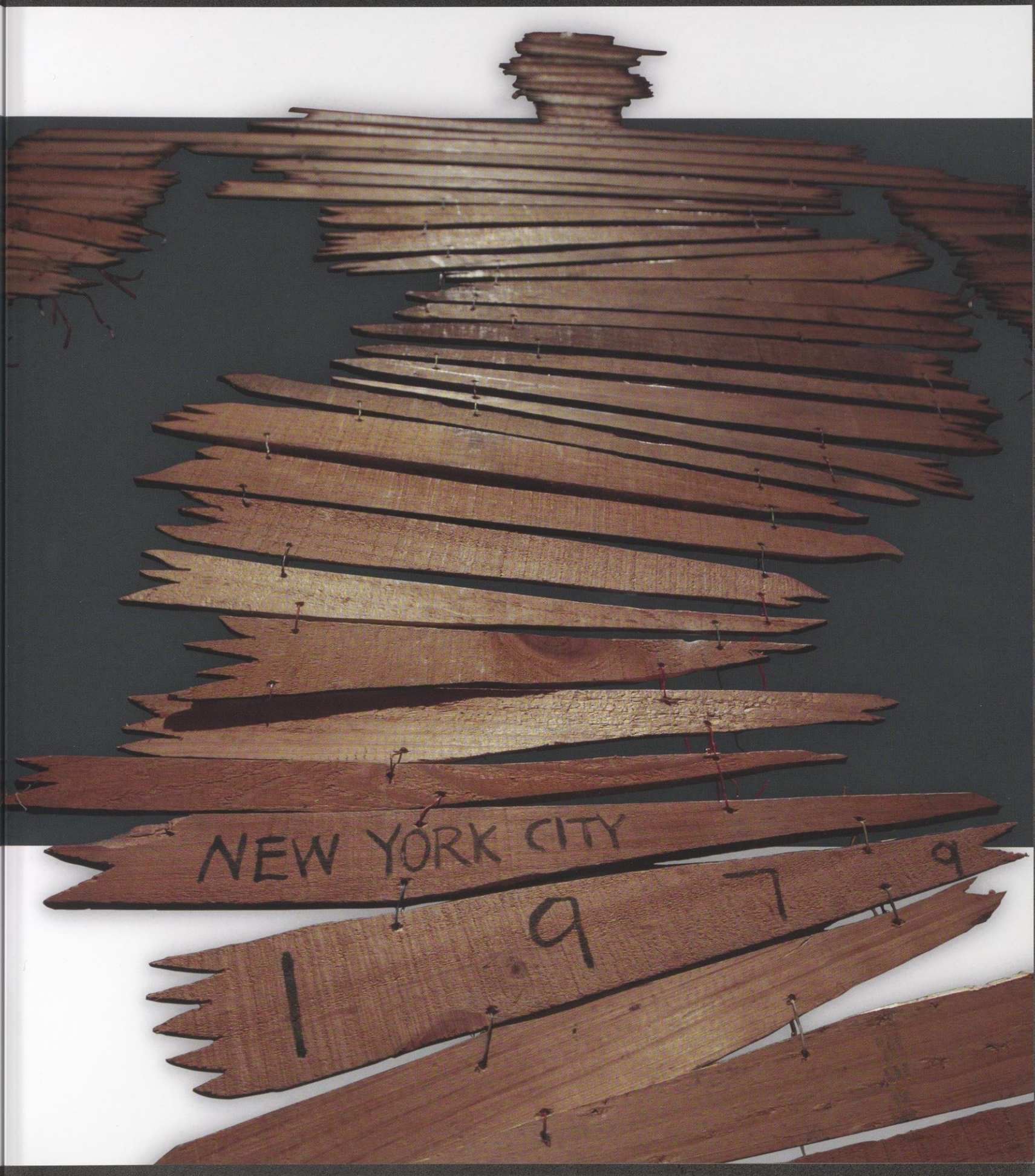
May 10 – August 18, 2013

When he first arrived in New York City, Michael Lucero was without a kiln. During this interlude he improvised with the materials at his disposal. The results were remarkable.

MICHAEL LUCERO
INTERLUDE 1978-1979

by Russell Panczenko

Michael Lucero is one of America's best known and respected artists in the clay medium. Over the years, his work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions and publications. A particularly significant event was the 1996 exhibition organized by Mark Leach at the Mint Museum in North Carolina. This exhibition, which subsequently traveled to a number of major museums around the country and was accompanied by a scholarly and well-illustrated catalog, firmly established Lucero's reputation as a leader in the clay medium. In the catalog, the author mentions a brief interlude in the artist's career during which he strayed away from his beloved medium. Although the work produced during this moment had been largely lost from critical consciousness, a recent act of generosity by Stephen and Pamela Hootkin to the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has happily brought back to light some fascinating treasures of the past.


NEW YORK CITY
1979

MICHAEL LUCERO — INTERLUDE 1978-1979

In 1978, upon completion of his MFA at the University of Washington, Seattle, Michael Lucero moved to New York City. There, he continued the series of larger-than-life human figures that had dominated his work for at least two years. However, without immediate access to a kiln, in 1978–79, he instead constructed a series of seventeen hanging figures from fragments of discarded fruit crates, broom and mop handles, and telephone wire scavenged in the streets of the East Village and Chinatown.

Like the figures in clay, the wood and wire New York figures are monumental in stature, each one somewhere between ten and twelve feet in height. Also, like the clay figures, they do not stand on the floor or on a pedestal. Rather each one is suspended from the ceiling by a wire thin enough to be almost imperceptible.

Figure 1: Invitation for the first showing of the New York 1978-79 figures at the Fine Arts Center at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1980.

Lucero conceived of each figure as an individual sculpture. However, in their first public presentation at the Fine Arts Center at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina (January 16 –February 8, 1980) (fig. 1), the seventeen figures were allocated an entire gallery and installed as a group. The singularity of the subject matter and the artist's experimentation with a new medium lent themselves to such a presentation. Also, as the artist pointed out to me in a recent conversation, he did not work on the figures one at a time. There were several suspended in his studio simultaneously and he would move from one to the other as he saw fit. For him the figures were like members of a family or a tribe and therefore it was appropriate that they should be introduced to the world as a group.

After the exhibition in North Carolina the wooden figures returned to hang in the artist's studio where they remained for a year or two, or until the space was needed for new work. Somewhere during this early period, Dorothy and Herbert Vogel, who were frequent visitors to Lucero's studio, acquired two of the figures. In 2008-09, as part of their *Fifty Works for Fifty States (50x50)* program, the couple donated one of the figures to the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey, and the other to the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Maine (fig. 2).

There the figures were occasionally integrated into displays of permanent collections. However, for the most part they remained in storage. The installation of all seventeen figures was never repeated. And, as Lucero's importance and prestige as a ceramic artist became ever more firmly established, the brief interlude during which he experimented with a different medium disappeared not only from view, but also from most peoples' memories. Most, but not all.

In the fall of 2012, Stephen Hootkin, a connoisseur of contemporary ceramic arts and an avid collector of Lucero's work, asked the artist about the fate of these figures and expressed interest in possibly acquiring one, if they could be located. Upon learning that the artist

Untitled (Pink Figure), 1978-79


F86
REMOVE

still had fifteen of them in storage, Hootkin together with his wife Pamela, committed to all of them sight unseen and immediately offered them to the Chazen Museum of Art at Hootkin's *alma mater* the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It was indeed a generous proposition.

The fifteen figures arrived at the Chazen in April 2012 from a warehouse in Northampton, Massachusetts, where they had been stored. The "sight-unseen" comment above is not as off-the-cuff as it may seem. Few, if any, of the individual figures had ever been photographed and we only knew of one black and white image of the group installation in 1980 taken by the artist himself. Unpacking the sculptures once they arrived in Madison was an exciting rediscovery for all involved.

Figure 2: *Untitled*, n.d., in situ in Portland, Maine.

In spite of having been in a warehouse for several decades, the figures were in relatively good condition, allowing them to be hung up and photographed. The next question to be addressed was that of storage. Given their individual heights of eleven to thirteen feet, the artist suggested that we hang them up as if in a closet. A visiting conservator, on the other hand, recommended laying them flat since hanging would, over time, stress the wires holding them together. Given the museum's prioritization of art preservation, it allocated the necessary square footage in art storage and constructed customized stackable platforms, one for each figure (fig. 3).

It was also decided that one of the figures should be put on view immediately. Selecting one piece out of the fifteen was challenging, however, as there was no isolated spot where it could be hung by itself. Instead it had to be integrated into a densely packed gallery containing a selection of the museum's art holdings of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Wherever the Lucero figure went in Gallery XIII, it would interact visually with several other works on view. Ultimately, *Untitled (Red Twister)* was selected even though it is formally distinct from most of the other Lucero figures—only one other piece in the group, *Untitled (Twister)*, is formally similar. Surprisingly, Lucero's *Untitled (Red Twister)* partnered well with the painting *Untitled*, 1968 by Mark Rothko (Accession No. 1992.190) and Sol IV, 1967 by Richard Anuskiewicz (Accession No. 68.2.3); artists whom one does not normally reference in discussions of Michael Lucero's work. What they all have in common is that the longer one looks at them the more dematerialized they become. The methods of achieving this optical illusion differ from artist to artist: Rothko uses the softness of color and the absence of any clear linear references; Anuskiewicz, on the other hand, uses hard lines, complementary primary colors and geometry. Lucero's two *Twisters* achieve this same visual effect by eschewing clear figural outlines and negating bodily substance. The wooden slats that comprise each figure are spaced in such a way that one sees right through it, hence they become ghostlike; they are both there and not there at the same time.

Figure 3: Michael Lucero (left) and Chazen preparator Jeri Richmond (right) unpack a figure from its custom-made stacked storage platform.

MICHAEL LUCERO — INTERLUDE 1978-1979

Another one of the figures *Untitled (7 inches)* Accession No. 2013.44.5 seems to draw inspiration from jade burial suits (fig. 4) recently discovered in China and published in the popular press. Interestingly, this particular figure is one of only two with any indication of gender. Both have penis. All the others are unequivocally gender neutral. Although, in retrospect, one understands that the *Twisters*, as well as *Untitled (7 inches)*, represent anomalies among the wooden figures of 1978-79, such observations pointed to some of the difficulties that might be encountered trying to think about this group of wooden figures in terms of Lucero's overall *oeuvre*.

The Chazen Accessions Committee approved acceptance of Lucero's figures in November 2012 and shortly afterward it was deemed that an exhibition of all of the figures was the appropriate way to introduce this generous gift to the university and Madison's art community. Furthermore, if one were to exhibit fifteen of them, then why not reunite all seventeen in an installation similar to that of 1980. However, since there were no floor plans or easily decipherable photographs of that installation, it would in essence have to be redesigned at the Chazen by the artist himself.

Figure 4: Jade burial suit with gold ties | Western Han (206 BC- AD 8), Length 182 cm, Width at shoulders 49 cm | Excavated in 1973 from the Han period tomb No. 40 at Bajiaolangcun, Dingxian, Hebei Province.

The question of combining individual works by an artist into an "installation" is an interesting one. Judy Pfaff, for example, when asked to assist in the design of a retrospective exhibition of her work at the Chazen in 2003, assembled individual drawings or prints into installations. These installations, a common phenomenon in Pfaff's exhibitions, in effect become unique, if transitory works of art by the artist. Following the exhibition, Pfaff's individual pieces were dispersed, and the installations would vary from exhibition to exhibition depending on which individual pieces were available. In the case of Lucero's wooden sculptures, given that they were representations of human figures to be contained at the Chazen in a single space, their arrangement could and would suggest a narrative. It was felt that the direction of that narrative implied or otherwise, should be the artist's and not belong to the museum's exhibition designer. In January 2013, Lucero, together with Meghan Mackey, a conservator specializing in contemporary sculpture, were invited to Madison to review the works and consult on the project.

Although the figures were in good condition, a couple of decades lying flat in storage had taken their toll. Ms. Mackey recommended that prior to the exhibition the sculptures be dusted and vacuumed, that the decorative plastic-covered telephone wires be rethreaded where they had come away, that all structural wires be checked to see that they were securely twisted, and that the metal staples that had separated be secured. Also all the figures were to be fitted with new 1/32-inch aircraft cable for hanging from the ceiling prior to being displayed. Kate Wanburg, one of the museum's preparators, implemented the conservator's recommendations in March–April 2013, several weeks prior to the exhibition.

From an art dealer's perspective, a return to a living artist's early work is not particularly desirable, however,

LEFT TO RIGHT: *Untitled (Big Multi-Flat)*, 1978-79; *Untitled (Twister)*, 1979; *Untitled (Pink Figure)*, 1978-79

for the museum curator it is an important learning opportunity. Also, for Lucero, the idea of an exhibition of the early wooden figures was a welcome one. He had long since moved on and, in fact, had not visited the 1978-79 wooden figures for quite some time. On seeing them as they were brought out of their storage bins for examination, he said: "It was as if I had made them yesterday." He wholeheartedly approved the idea of the proposed exhibition with the inclusion of the two figures owned by the other institutions, and agreed to return in early May to direct the installation.

At Lucero's request, a temporary wall was constructed in the Rowland Gallery, where the figures were to be installed so that the visitor would first encounter the installation from a central, frontal viewpoint. For the artist, this was the privileged viewpoint for looking at the installation as a whole. This was the point from which the installation was to be photographed. In regard to the placement and distribution of the individual figures in the gallery space, there was no predetermined floor plan. Rather the artist, for the most part, approached this empirically. Perhaps coincidentally, the figure that was central in this installation—and was the first to be put up in Madison at the artist's request—is also the central figure in the only extant photograph of the earlier installation in North Carolina, even though that photograph shows the room itself on a diagonal (fig. 5).

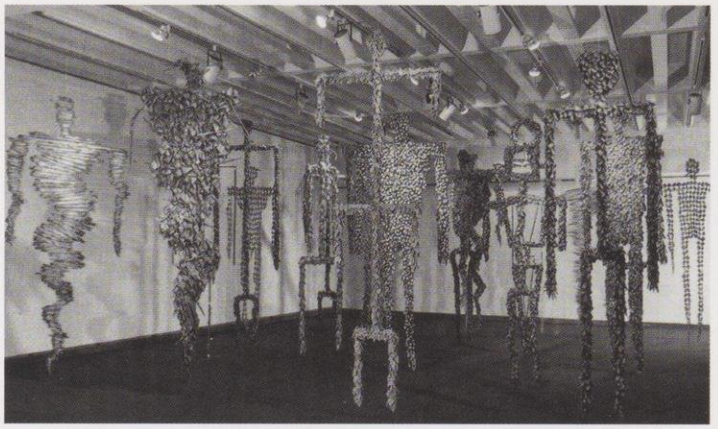


Figure 5: The Interlude figures as they appeared in 1980 at the Fine Arts Center at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The other figures were introduced one at a time from front to back. The only guiding principle, besides the artist's eye, was that formally similar figures not be juxtaposed. Equally important to the artist was the height of each figure from the floor, which was to be no less than one inch and no more than two.

Although the colors applied to the various pieces of wood comprising the figures had remained fresh during their years in storage, the ubiquitous plastic-coated telephone wires that both helped to hold the wood fragments making up each figure together and served as a vital decorative element had been pressed flat. When the pieces were displayed, Lucero insisted that these wires be "fluffed out." The artist's insistence on this factor became quite evident in the exhibition itself. These colorful cilia, for lack of a better term, visually enriched by the spot lighting, effectively extended and interlocked each figure with the surrounding atmosphere of the gallery itself. And, in fact they implied a reaching out, even if a frustrated one, to the other figures contained in the same space.

As one entered the exhibition, which opened May 10, 2013, the silence in the room where the seventeen figures were installed was profound. Even the most seasoned museum visitor lowered his or her voice to a whisper. One felt like an intruder into a congregation of supernatural

beings, a benevolent tribe of giants, awesome and intimidating because of their stillness and monumentality. The installation of the seventeen figures elicited strong emotions. One visitor equated the experience with walking into a cemetery. The visitor definitely felt transported to another place.

Occasional movement of the figures further affected the atmosphere in the room. For the most part, the figures remained motionless, but occasional disruptions in airflow, caused by the movement of visitors or the changing cycles of the HVAC system, made them rotate. They moved slowly. And, after a while, the torque of the wire returned them to their original position. This slight movement evoked the feeling that the figures were somehow alive. One the one hand, the casual slowness of the movement reassured the visitor that these giant figures, into whose space one had entered, were not threatening. On the other hand, since they could move at all, the question of whether or not they could move quickly and aggressively, if they wanted to, lurked in the back of every visitor's mind.

I asked the artist about the sequence of the wooden figures. The intervening three-plus decades were for the most part insurmountable. All he could say was that he worked on many of them simultaneously. However, indulging in a little analytical speculation, one wonders if the seven figures, including the two *Untitled (Twisters)*, that have broad bodies (in five of them, the wooden tiles are extended over a chicken wire mesh) came first. In this regard, they are similar to Lucero's early figures in clay, such as *Untitled (Adam and Eve)*, 1978, and *Untitled (Devil)*, 1977, that were produced before his move to New York. The remaining ten figures are ultimately stick figures; one of them being so minimal as to be composed entirely of broom or mop handles whose surfaces have been decorated with magazine illustrations (*Untitled*, n.d.). Although in this last group the broom handles are densely covered with accretions of broken and painted wooden tiles, they are still basically stick figures. As to why the change, one can perhaps speculate that the stick-figures lent themselves more naturally to appreciation in the round, while the earlier ones were primarily frontal. It is also interesting to note that when Lucero returns to producing the figure in clay, they follow this latter formula, except that the wooden tiles have become "shards."

It is interesting how an artist's choice of words can sometimes get in the way of understanding his/her artistic development. Lucero has always talked about the use of "shards" in his early figurative work making no distinction between the figures such as *Untitled (Hanging Ram)* and *Untitled (Devil)* respectively of 1976 and 1977 that were produced before the interlude of 1978-79 and those produced after, i.e., *Untitled (In Honor of the S.W.)* and *Untitled (The Lizard Slayer)* of 1980. Although Lucero says that both of these groups of clay figures are made up of "shards," in the earlier clay figures the pieces of which they are comprised are not strictly speaking "shards." In Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977, "shards" are: "fragments of pottery vessels found on sites and refuse deposits where pottery-making peoples have lived; a piece or fragment of a brittle substance." In the pre-wooden New York work the "pieces" or "shards" comprising each figure were individually modeled organic forms, often leaves. When Lucero returned to producing his monumental figures in clay, the individual components were no longer realistically modeled, rather, they had become broken pieces of pottery, specifically fabricated as such by the artist.

LEFT TO RIGHT: *Untitled (Black and White)*, 1978–79; *Untitled (Red Twister)*, 1979; *Untitled*, n.d.; *Untitled (Square Chest)*, 1978-79

MICHAEL LUCERO — INTERLUDE 1978-1979

Artists draw inspiration from all kinds of circumstances. During Lucero's visit to Madison in January 2013 to review the wooden figures and see the gallery where they would be installed, I pointed out that there was an adjacent gallery. Rather than leave it fallow, I wondered out loud if there were any drawings in his possession that related to the figures in some way. Two months later, Lucero informed me that he was working on a new series of drawings inspired by "my challenge," and asked if I would consider including some of them in the exhibition. In a relatively brief time he had produced over forty drawings, which, when they arrived, proved to be different from anything that he had done before. Again, like the wooden figures of 1978-79, this body of work allowed some insight into the workings of the artist's mind.

The realization of the wooden figures of 1978-79 was very intense, requiring hours of conceptual thought and physical labor. For a young artist, straight out of school and finding himself in a new and exciting cultural environment, 1978-79 was an intense period of exploration and experimentation. The circumstance of not having a kiln at his immediate disposal probably provided a certain degree of freedom. He had already decided that clay would be his métier but for the moment he could try whatever came to mind.

The drawings done in the spring of 2013, on the other hand, show a degree of spontaneity and a speed of execution that are not found in his wooden figures or, for that matter, in his subsequent clay work. In large measure, this is the difference between a young artist trying to find his way and a mature artist with the confidence of a long record of achievement. However, I would imagine that the specific circumstances of 2013 also engendered a moment of artistic freedom for Lucero. He did not have to self-consciously advance the next step in his career. Instead, he was confronted with an exciting moment from his past, a moment that he was surprised to find "as fresh as when I did them." And, he could not help but remember his primordial fascination with the totemic human figure that had originally inspired him.

All the drawings are on 40 x 28 inch sheets of seamless brown cardboard, a stack of which the artist had acquired some time earlier at an estate sale. He used ordinary objects he found around the house, for example: a sponge, his child's shoe, a plastic butterfly-shaped fly-swatter, the end of a roll of toilet paper, both with and without the paper on it, CDs, etc. He dipped these tools into acrylic ink and dabbed marks on the paper. Each drawing was done quickly and intuitively. The selected medium did not allow otherwise. A drawing either worked for Lucero or it didn't, in which case it was discarded.

The subject of each drawing in this series is the human figure. Most of them depict only one figure; a few, two figures; and fewer still, three. Although Lucero indulged in few moments of radical experimentation in this series—a snowman-like figure composed of three spheres, or one with arms drawn with a rare gestural mark—most of the figures are rigid and stand frontally to the viewer. Some of the figures are decidedly masculine with broad shoulders, bulky physiques, and aggressive postures. Others are humorous and even clown-like. In one the subject seems to be a family: mother, father, and child.

Although a few of the figures in this series resemble the stylized stick figures of the early period, most of them have broad flat torsos, probably because

Stephen and Pam Hootkin with Michael Lucero.

they are decidedly two-dimensional drawings. They are not intended as preparatory drawings for sculpture. This series represents an interesting moment for an artist who spent most of his career producing three-dimensional work.

In six of the drawings Lucero superimposed a second figure over the first by cutting it out. The contrast between the white ground on which the drawing is mounted and the brown paper of the drawing itself gives the secondary figure a strong if ambiguous location in the composition. One is unsure if the secondary figure is inside the drawn figure, an inner skeletal reality so to speak, or some kind of spectral presence standing between the viewer and the drawn figures. The viewer's understanding vacillates back and forth between these two views and does not seem to want to be fixed.

One final work pertaining to this series of drawing needs to be mentioned. Adjacent to the temporary exhibition galleries are the museum's loading dock and receiving area. A door measuring 15 x 9 feet provides passage between the two areas. In the gallery itself the door is surmounted by a hinged wall surface so that it may be used for the display. However, a cherry wood frame clearly demarcates this section and in effect interrupts the continuity of the gallery's display surface. Lucero creatively turned this architectural challenge to his advantage. Asking that the hanging wall surface of this door be painted to match the color of the cardboard sheets on which the drawings were done, he turned the entire door into a monumental site-specific work of art. Over the course of a couple hours, using the same daubing technique as that of the other drawings, he drew two colossal standing figures, which confront the viewer upon entering the gallery from the opposite side of the room (fig. 6, page 21).

Interestingly, Lucero did not want the museum visitor to see the drawings before experiencing the wooden figures. For him the visitor's sequential progress from one to the other was very important. Thus the drawings should perhaps be seen as an afterthought, a kind of nostalgic return to a theme and a time that was particularly meaningful to the artist and his work.

In our commercially driven art world, it is difficult for an artist to digress from an established identity. For a young artist such as Lucero who ascended to stardom very early in his career, experimenting with a new medium is especially problematic. Hence, the relative disappearance of the fascinating wooden figures Lucero produced in 1978-79. Happily, art historians and museum curators, in large measure, are sheltered from the vicissitudes of the art market, and can indulge in intellectual curiosity. The Chazen was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to explore this important interlude in Lucero's ceramic career and perhaps shed some light on the workings of this wonderfully creative artist's mind.

Thank you again to Stephen and Pamela Hootkin for making it all possible.

THE SEVENTEEN FIGURES

MICHAEL LUCERO
INTERLUDE 1978-1979

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Untitled (Exposed Ribs), 1978–79
Wood, paint, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
125 x 39 x 10 in.
2013.44.15

Untitled (Red Twister), 1979
Wood, wire, acrylic wash
120 x 49 x 2 in.
2013.44.11

Untitled (Pink Figure), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
115 x 34 x 5 in.
2013.44.2

Untitled (Homage to JP), 1978–79
Wood, wire, acrylic wash
129 x 38 x 5 in.
2013.44.14

Untitled (Harlequin), 1979
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
114 x 36 x 2 in.
2013.44.8

Untitled (Green Figure), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
120 x 47 x 4 in.
2013.44.1

Untitled (Square Chest), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
108 x 31 x 5 in.
2013.44.4

Untitled (Aqua-Blue Man), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax, acrylic wash
131 x 45 x 4 in.
2013.44.6

Untitled (Big Hips), 1978–79
Wood, wire, acrylic wash
121 x 27 x 5 in.
2013.44.3

Untitled (Black and White), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
127 x 34 x 5 in.
2013.44.9

Untitled (Big Multi-Flat), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
122 x 37 x 5 in.
2013.44.7

Untitled (Orange Figure), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
132 x 40 x 5 in.
2013.44.12

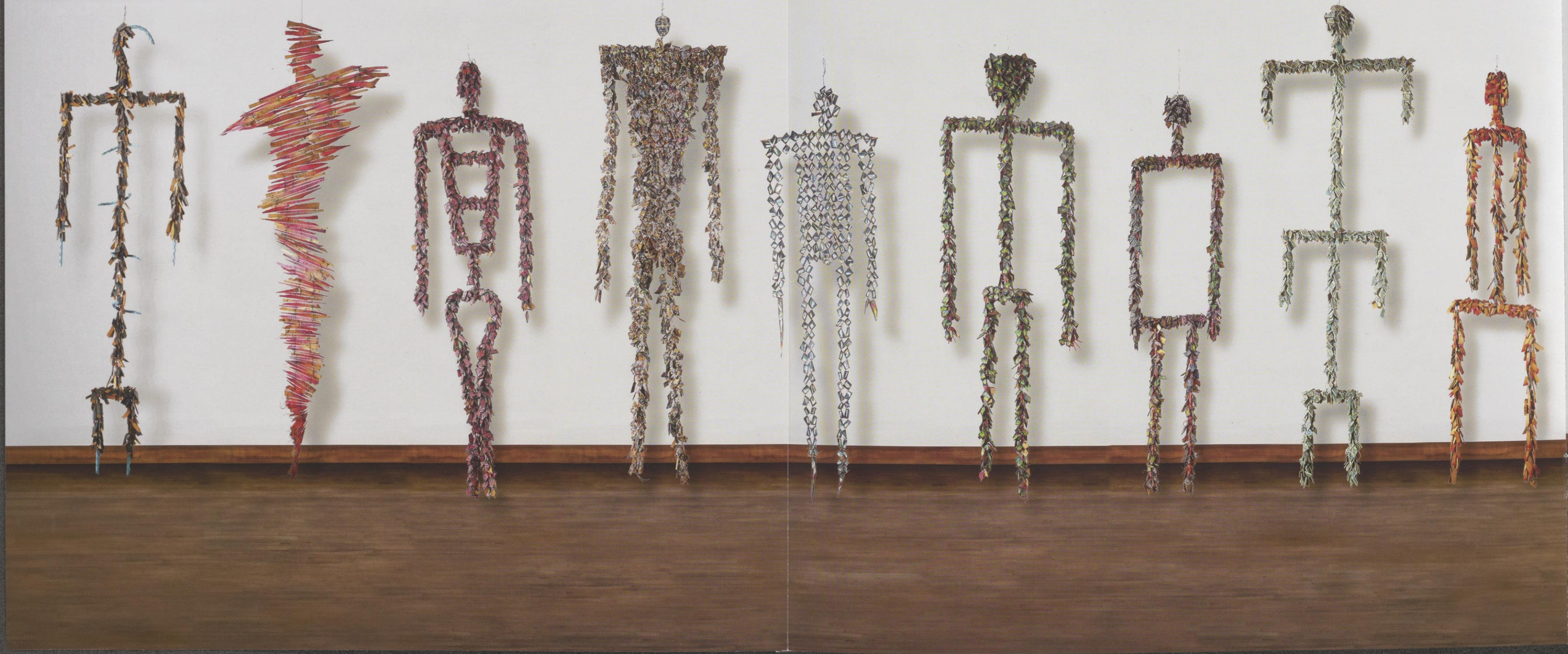
Untitled (7 inches), 1978–79
Wood, wire
107 x 36 x 2 in.
2013.44.5

Untitled (Blue Glow), 1978–79
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
121 x 46 x 4 in.
2013.44.13

Untitled, n.d.
wood, wire, paint
Lent by the Montclair Art Museum, The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection: Fifty Works for Fifty States, a joint initiative of the Trustees of the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection and the National Gallery of Art, with generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2008.12.41

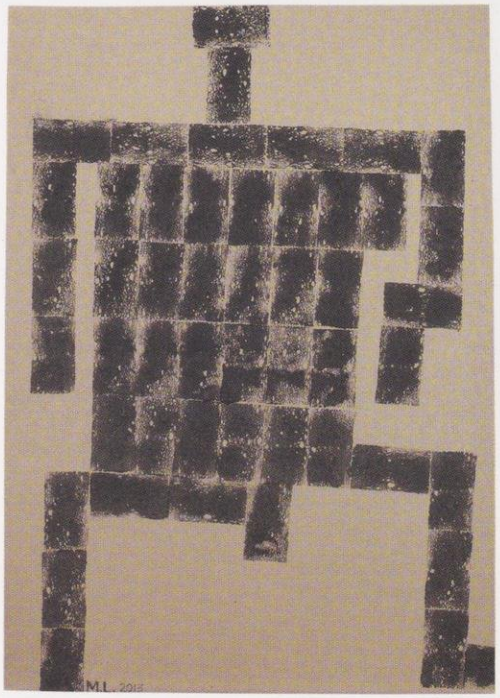
Untitled (Twister), 1979
Wood, wire, wax crayon, acrylic wash
2013.44.10

Untitled, n.d.
Collaged magazine clippings on wooden dowels, metal, electrical wire
Lent by the Portland Museum of Art, The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection: Fifty Works for Fifty States, a joint initiative of the Trustees of the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection and the National Gallery of Art, with generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009.6.23



DRAWINGS

MICHAEL LUCERO
INSTALLATION 2013



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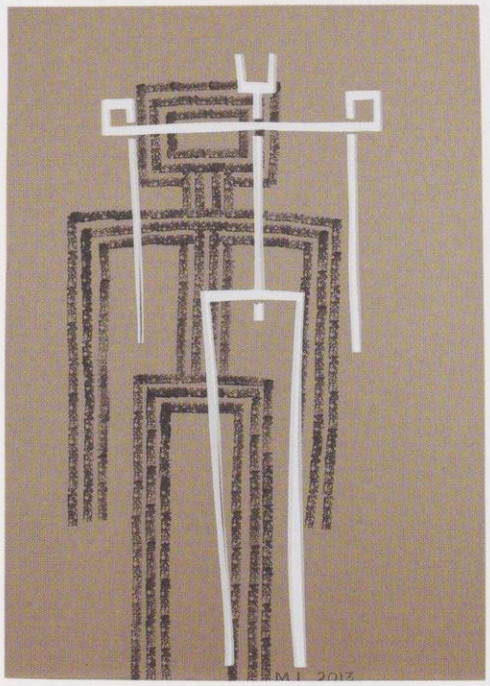

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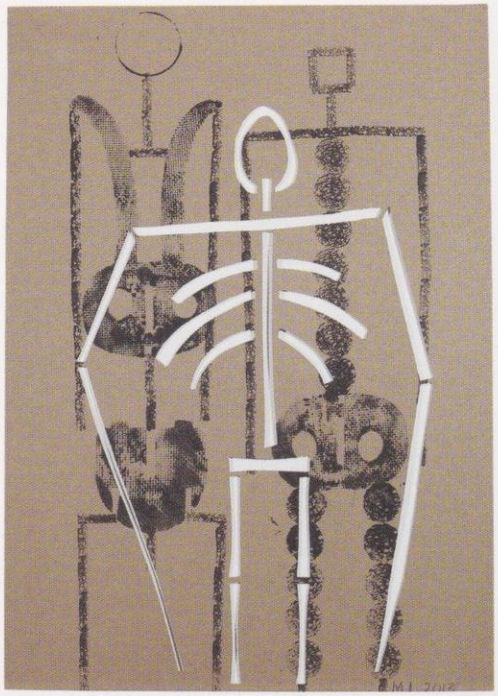

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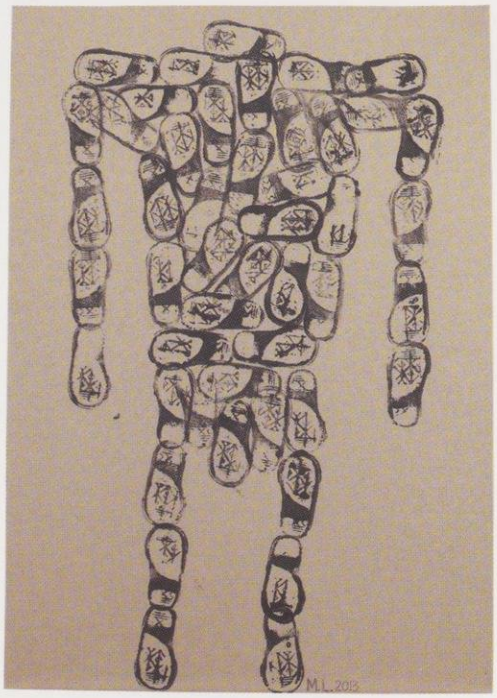
ALL: Michael Lucero (American, b. 1953), *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic on paper, 40 x 28 in., museum funds purchase



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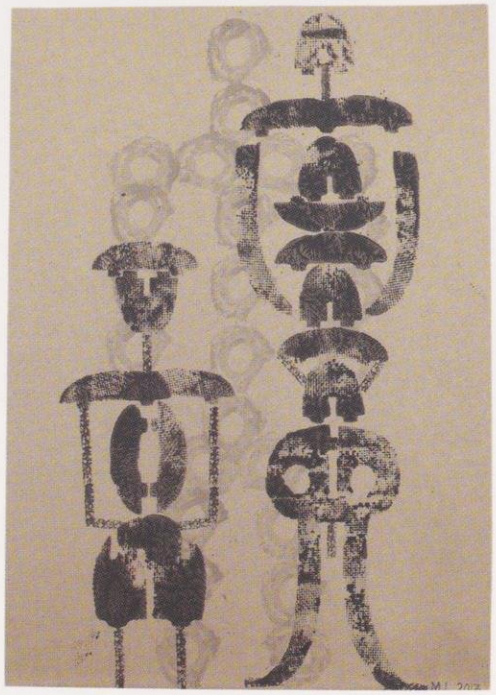

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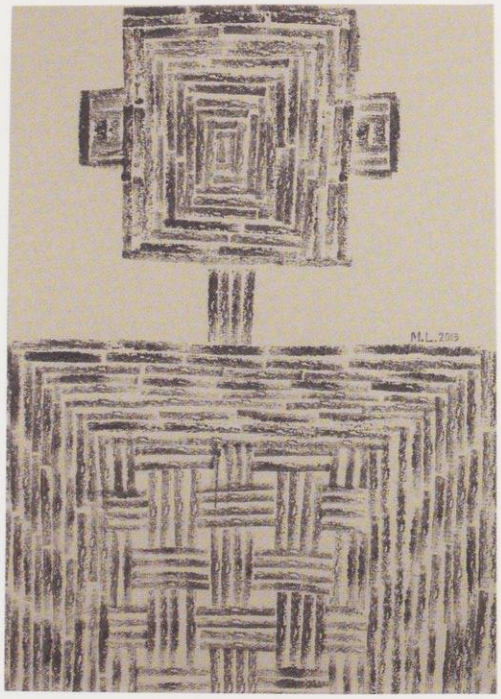
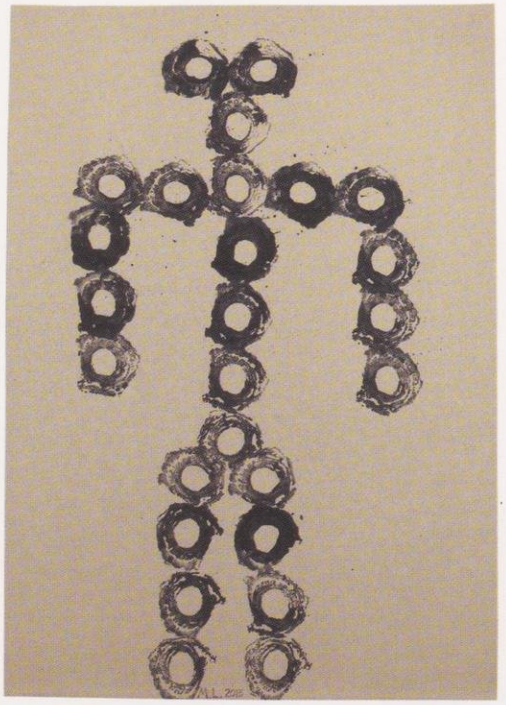


2013.28.7



2013.28.8

ALL: Michael Lucero (American, b. 1953), *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic on paper, 40 x 28 in., museum funds purchase

Figure 6: Lucero's drawings in the Rowland Galleries.

MICHAEL LUCERO INTERVIEW

by Russell Panczenko

MAY 24, 2013

MICHAEL LUCERO INTERVIEW

RUSSELL PANCZENKO: You had been working on clay figures in graduate school at the University of Washington. When you moved to New York City after finishing your MFA, you continued to make figures in 1978 and 1979, but started working in wood. Why did you change materials?

MICHAEL LUCERO: Well, being in New York City and being so inspired by all the garbage on the streets and all the things that were thrown in the garbage, I just began collecting bits and pieces. First off I collected the beautiful broomsticks and mop sticks and everyday garbage. I would pop off the end—the dirty part that was practically brand new, used once in the kitchen and thrown out—and I had this giant barrel in my studio and I would put all these pieces in it. After that I began to make these stick figures, which were very basic and very, very primal with the notion of my continuation with figures. I had reduced it to the bare essence of the figure based on old archetypal drawings of man, of the figure, and thinking about [Carl] Jung and *Man and His Symbols*. Those are the things that I had switched to, after having done more of a narrative figure idea, sort of a recognizable idea with all its features, in anatomically correct proportions.

There were twelve-foot ceilings in my studio and I was making the bare essences of the figure and hoping that I could communicate an idea without having a specific narrative for each figure, but making it more of a collective in terms of the way they related to space and sculpture and to each other and to the viewer. That was my aim after I began to live in New York and to see everything that was different and new for me.

PANCZENKO: How do the wooden figures differ visually from your earlier clay figures?

LUCERO: The material sort of brought on its own information because it was wood and wood felt different than clay. Clay could mimic any other surface or texture. As opposed to the wood—it came with its texture, its own surface. And I had to work with that so it gave a different sensation—this collection of little bits and pieces to total a big, complete figure.

PANCZENKO: When you returned to producing your figures in clay did your experience with the wooden figures affect the appearance of the new work in any way?

LUCERO: I think it did mainly in terms of the pieces coming together to become a whole. That was sort of my idea I began in graduate school and I continued on in New York, and then with the clay [after New York] ... all these little bits of broken pieces that came back together to assemble a whole. That was the difference. Or maybe not the difference but the similarity that united what I had been doing before and what I was doing at that time.

PANCZENKO: Some of your earlier figures have a substance to them. What strikes me about these wooden figures is how they begin to almost dematerialize. Were you looking for a new effect when you turned to the wood?

LUCERO: I think the material really did bring its own potential and feeling and sensation to the work. I always like to have that happen when I use a new material—a new component in my work. I always like to allow it to help me through the work. Materials bring their own information along with them. Clay is a material that has a sort of metaphorical significance to me and I always

wanted it to be an integral part of the idea of the work, which basically began with the idea that I was focusing on clay. When I think of *Adam and Eve* (1978) and making the first clay image—those are the things I was thinking about as a young artist.

As an artist I knew that I loved the clay, and I wanted to make some contribution with that material to the sculpture that I was making. Materials do bring their own information and their symbolism. And the wood ... I was unfamiliar with wood, I was just cutting bits and scraps and pieces that I saw with the fruit crates. The little broken pieces, the slat, all those things, I chopped them back up and put them all back together again. As I told my old professor in grad school, it was Humpy Dumpty, putting something back together again. You know, fixing something, redoing it, making it all over again. That still interests me.

PANCZENKO: This dematerialization of the figure happens particularly in two of them. (*Untitled [Twister]* and *Untitled [Red Twister]*) They are made with slats, there are spaces in between the slats, the edges are very ragged and you can actually see through the figure.

LUCERO: I think that you are right. When I work I have an idea and I want to let it go at some point during the series that I am working on. I want to let it just become its own thing and help it through the process, to an end product or a finished object or a finished sculpture.

When they are hung up, they do take on a whole new thing and they do speak back. The light coming through, the air coming through—those were things that just became, they just happened. It wasn't that I was playing with light or playing with this idea of a ghost. Although I did make a holy ghost in graduate school, which was part of the idea for this early biblical notion of the representation of ideas or spirit. I can hardly remember these things now, but I studied up on a lot of those things—things throughout art history and religious iconography—those are the things that got me going initially. The materials spoke about those things and I thought it was the right thing for me to think about and to make of the material. I am still fascinated by it.

PANCZENKO: One of your very early figures in the Hootkin collection is a smallish kind of half-man, half-goat. It's standing firmly on its two feet. Your later figures are suspended from the ceiling by a single wire. You don't try to anchor the figure but you let it respond gently to the air.

LUCERO: I agree. I began with the little figure, the one called *Pleased to Meet You*. It's a little ram, a personified combination of an animal and a man. Combining the two images/symbols together to make this idea of the ram, of a symbol throughout mythology, of energy and strength and power—all these things at that time were significant to me.

I needed to sort of go through my whole repertoire of images and characters that I was going to be playing with. So I made a number of these little figures. Each one was doing a different thing. Each one was painted or glazed in a different way to symbolize things that I was trying to make sense of. In one case I painted a ram like a tropical fish. Again, combining the poetic, deep meaning, and "deep sea" and the

strength of the ram and all these different things. I had all these corny ideas about that. Then I realized I compacted so much energy into these little figures, and they were standing on a pedestal like a little plant. I had as many hours as I made them. So this is what they were. I decided at that point that I needed to somehow loosen up, to make them more about the process than about all my hours and time in them. I could make them piece by piece and part by part — that would collect together to become this thing in the end.

The hanging ram (*Untitled [Hanging Ram]*, 1976) was the same image [as *Pleased to Meet You*] but I increased the scale and I took it off of its pedestal and hung it up by a wire in my studio, made it out of different material, and collected all these crate parts that I made, and then tied them all together. That was the first breakthrough piece I made. Steve and Pamela Hootkin own that piece. It was the first one of that idea.

The second one was another personification with a bird's nest as a head and the body was a figure—a life-size figure/body that was suspended—all made up of leaves, and it suggested sort of another ghostly idea because it mostly was white. I just continued on this idea. It just grew, and grew, and grew. It spoke back to me and informed me of which direction I needed to go from that point. So one piece led me into the next and the next, and it kept growing and evolving and that's how I moved on from those pieces.

PANCZENKO: Most of the pieces we are talking about now predate your wooden pieces. They are composed out of leaf or cabbage leaf shapes—natural forms—and you shaped each and every one of them and fired them before you assembled them into a figure. In the wooden figures you are using discarded pieces of wood. You've modified them with application of color, cuts and chops, but they are really leftovers. When you return to the ceramic figures, the clay starts looking like broken shards as opposed to formed shapes. Are the shards influenced by your experience with the found wood?

LUCERO: Maybe so. Or maybe the wood was influenced by the earlier shards. I literally made shards because when I made the slats ... OK, they were broken like Indian pottery shards. I had a lot of time to reflect on the idea again: am I going to focus on the material and the metaphor? And the metaphor is a major component in the whole feeling of the piece, the whole idea of the piece. Then I would somehow pay homage to my interest in Greek pottery, my interest in American Indian pottery. And so I sort of made these pieces with that idea in mind. And I sort of painted the shards. I glazed them and fired them like I had collected them. As a kid I did collect a lot of Indian pottery shards. I never made anything with them but I loved to look at them and I loved what they signified to me: the Indian pottery and the Native American things.

When I was a kid my mom and dad used to drive back and forth out to New Mexico and we'd stop at the trading posts and they would always remind me that somebody made all this stuff and it was just beautiful—the Indian weaving and the Indian pottery I could hardly imagine how they could make them, but I was fascinated with that. It just intrigued me to no end.

My early pieces I made in clay after being in New York, I was basically paying homage to those things that I felt had probably greater impact on me than I ever realized. That's when the shard idea—the putting something all back together again—started to make sense to me. I made a number of those pieces [in the style of] Greek pottery or American Indian pottery. Most of those were made of, ironically, porcelain. They were a little different than just earthenware white: you know, clay that was more akin to American Indian pottery. They use indigenous clay, which was basically low fire.

They [didn't have] highly sophisticated, vitreous, glass-like clay bodies that were just so fired and so molten they would become almost like a glass surface. They were stronger than the earthenware. Those things I learned about later. I wasn't really seeking to make a craft association about what things were, or have the material be the dominant force. The material was more symbolically used. It was never really that highly crafted in terms of my virtuosity. I never felt that. I never felt that I was great at it. I just wanted to make an idea and point in that direction, to salute that thing that I felt was powerful.

PANCZENKO: The seventeen wooden figures together in one room, it's a terrific installation. You never turned toward it again. Why not?

LUCERO: I don't know. I just got so involved in that clay and I just got so involved in the making of those ideas—it's taken me a lifetime to decipher what to do with it, to feel its significance, whether I need to continue or stop. I felt like I needed to keep working. I never felt like I was done or I had made the comment or the statement already. I felt like I needed to keep it going. But that's just how it works for me.

PANCZENKO: You had these in storage for many years. How do you feel when you stand there and look at this installation and see the work from your past?

LUCERO: It felt like no time had passed. It was as if I made them yesterday. And they felt as fresh to me now as they did then. And that was what was odd. I fiddled with them, I had to move the little pieces around and pull out the wires to make them come back to life again in your museum. As I did that I thought "Well, it is a lot of work to do this, to bring them back again." But when I finished I thought, "They look as fresh today as they did then." And they didn't strike me as being old at all.

PANCZENKO: It's amazing how you use these little wires and how they extend the figure beyond itself.

LUCERO: Again, those are old recycled telephone wires, which you don't see much anymore. But I got them out of dumpsters in New York. When they renovated loft buildings, they would throw out all these wires. I would go in and get them and cut them up and use them, which was sort of an interesting thing about the whole idea of reconstitution of waste. Like the wood and the recycling—I did it sort of intuitively and naturally. It wasn't a conscious thing. It was just an available material. But it was interesting how they ended up as part of the making, part of the process, part of the honesty of the making, which I guess I was interested in.

When they are installed and when the lights are on, the way they catch the light is just an interesting element to them. It was, even for me, and I always

loved that. The fact that yes, I made it with these wires and the wires were the honest way of attaching them to the armature. There's another kind of energy that they catch and they fill the space up. It's interesting to me.

PANCZENKO: You produced a series of almost 50 drawings to accompany these figures. You hadn't drawn the human figure in that form for quite a while. What was it like to go back and revisit the human figure?

LUCERO: I thought your challenge to me was amazing. Without your suggestion I probably would have never stepped back that far. But it felt really good. It felt really comfortable to me. It was a little bit awkward at first but once I got going I just continued to reduce down, down, down, and to simplify them, thinking about how simple my figures were, the sculptures. It just felt like the simpler it got, the better it felt. I'm more of a compulsive-obsessive: fill all the space, craft it up, mark it up, and show all the energy I have for this. These were a refrain in an interesting way. But it felt like a comfortable way. They're not minimal, but they just felt like they were—the simplicity of them was the right thing to do. It didn't ever feel like I was withholding anything, that I wasn't sharing with anybody. I think that in their simplicity and in their minimal-ness, there's a lot in there and there's a lot of suggestions that one can sort of interact with, and maybe that's the reason. Because a figure is a figure. With few marks a figure becomes a figure. It's suggestive. Whatever it will be, it makes its own and I felt just right about it.

PANCZENKO: To make these drawings you pick up whatever you find: a child's shoe, a sponge, a flyswatter, an old roll of toilet paper, and you use that to make marks. That intrigues me. You have this found material with the wooden figures and again you are using these found materials around you to create art.

LUCERO: Well exactly. In thinking about the primal, the primitive, the simplicity of the earth sculptures—I had to go back and behave almost like a kid in the sense of, you know, like a sponge, or just something available that was so basic. I didn't want to draw them literally with a pencil or a marker. I felt like that would be too—I don't know. I was thinking more about having seen something like David Smith's works on paper in your museum. I was reminded of those. I thought those were beautiful.

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