



CAHUILLA

Sculpture by
Lewis deSoto

CAHUILLA

Project by Lewis deSoto
Essay by Nick Stone

Published by sotolux press ©2006



Installation View: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut

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360 Lb.-ft. One Ton Mash-up

Lewis deSoto's Cahuilla is a product of the surreal, poetic simultaneity found in dreams, a manifestation in three gleaming dimensions of the rhizomatic "and... and... and..." idiom which Deleuze and Guattari declared muscular enough to wrestle with ontology itself. One imagines a dreamer's breathless description to a bemused companion upon awakening: "It was an enormous truck, painted with the colors of the desert... and it was also kind of a giant dollar bill, with the same lettering and symbols that money has... and it was also a casino – there was a woven craps table on the back and I could see the slot machine lights and hear the dealers... and at the same time, the dealers' voices were chanting in Cahuilla... it was unbelievable." Too, like a dream, Cahuilla is a vehicle capable of taking its passenger on a ride that is both sensual and conceptual; many of the components in its sequence of familiar forms are themselves transitive, stealthily piloted by an interior significance. In elements ranging from luxurious aluminum customizations to traditional beaded and woven motifs and a hybridized soundtrack, deSoto refers to a singular convergence of indigeneous tradition, newfound economic prosperity, a distinctly regional form of reified self-expression and the practical needs of desert survival.



Cahuilla indirectly reflects the history of the Cahuilla people, which since the early nineteenth century has been marked by a patient, pragmatic self-determinism. The tribe's definition of survival has never excluded non-native forms or methods. As missionaries, settlers and surveyors poured into their land, Cahuilla people learned to cultivate new crops and raise new animals, encouraging their children to learn Spanish and then English. In the 1950s, the tribe's traditional ceremonial house was sacrificed: the Cahuilla set fire to the house, releasing it to the sky in pillars of smoke. If this house was a locus of identity, its immolation represented a widespread recognition that, more than ever before, an adaptive identity was an unavoidable necessity. New languages, machines and other systems have been consistently and ingeniously absorbed into the tribe's existential flux. The combinatory dynamic of deSoto's *Cahuilla* represents, on the highly compressed level of a single totemic object, an analogous process of creative integration.

The tributary of Cahuilla history that informs both *Cahuilla's* sheer expense and its various casino- and currency-inspired details is tribal gaming, a phenomenon which began in October of 1980 with a dramatic police raid on the Cabazon band's fledgling Desert Oasis Casino (hence deSoto's choice of a 1981 GMC Pickup model as *Cahuilla's* foundation). Revenues from gaming have contributed almost single-handedly to an economic sovereignty crucial to the sustenance of the Cahuilla and other tribes, serving as both a powerful antidote to poverty and a buffer against relentless sabotage by hostile neighbors and government agents. The pride of prosperity is channeled in *Cahuilla* through the Southern California car culture idiom of luxurious, flashy customization. Typically employed to articulate an individual driver's status and style, the custom touches on *Cahuilla* are unorthodox in their references to disparate phenomena and multiple generations. The tonneau cover literally weaves together the geometry of a modern craps table with ancient Cahuilla glyphs of eagles and snakes. Likewise, the work's soundtrack, a seamless and otherworldly blend of Cahuilla casino noise and traditional tribal chants, reflects an artistic sensibility informed by the audio "mash-ups" that are unique to the digital age: homemade mixes in which recordings by the most unlikely combinations of artists collide in gleefully unauthorized harmony.



CAHUILLA emblem design, cast aluminum and resin



CAHUILLA

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Mason's eye within Tee Pee emblem

Such heterogeneity is a recurring theme for deSoto: Cahuilla embodies, in what is perhaps its most ambitious and refined manifestation to date, an integrated mode of expression which the artist has been exploring for decades. In “Mapping Paradise,” Rebecca Solnit discusses deSoto’s installations, sculpture and mixed-media work in terms of a critical resistance to the European-born, modernist opposition between an organic, untouched Paradise and an artificial, technologically achieved Utopia, a duality which balances on a fulcrum of “embedded belief in some kind of a fall, whether it be from Eden or into suburbia.” Solnit draws a parallel with postmodernism’s pet binary of signifier and signified, that alienated tête-à-tête in which the fabricated, unnatural symbolic appears to aim a volley of names and models across an impossibly vast chasm, toward the unreachable territory of the “raw, neutral material” of the real. In contrast, Solnit sees in deSoto’s oeuvre a current of conceptual harmony to which neither modernist nor postmodernist binaries are relevant. The objects and relationships in his work are neither “merely metaphorical [nor] representational and therefore which cannot be replaced or dissected – ‘elements of inexplicability and of wonder’” in the face of which binary constructions stammer and wilt into obsolescence. It is telling that the Judeo-Christian story of the world’s creation is couched in the terminology of dualism – the neutral void of nature, shaped by the hand

of a monolithic creator – while both the Cahuilla creation myth (and Cahuilla history itself) display a more pluralistic, rhizomatic mode of development, wherein culture emerges from the interaction and conjunction of a multiplicity of brethren and languages. The latter model is echoed in the disregard for such distinctions as high and low, corporate and tribal, or form and function implied by *Cahuilla's* mash-up of custom car culture, heady casino glitz and handworked tribal craft. Beyond fusion or conciliation, *Cahuilla* posits in a very real and tangible way the simultaneous and fully incorporated existence of both its constituent parts and their disparate sources: the contemporary poetics of an ancient people, cruising down an endless desert road in an impossibly perfect truck.

Nick Stone

Sources:

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Tr. Massumi, Brian, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987: p. 25

Solnit, Rebecca, "Mapping Paradise," *Pé Túkmiyat, Pé Túkmiyat* (Exhibition Catalog), San Jose Museum of Art, 1991: pp. 19 – 26



Interior view

Beadwork by Jeanne Gonzales



Woven upholstery design is based on border engraving of a U.S. 100 dollar bill.

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Three quarter rear view



Tonneau cover

Jacquard tapestry published by Magnolia
Editions, Oakland, California



Tonneau Cover detail

Design is based on craps table pattern with
Cahuilla basket design motifs

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The Golden State



Bumper sticker



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