

# RIOT MATERIAL

ART. WORD. THOUGHT.

## *Cloud Nine* Soars at Torrance Art Museum

Reviewed by Genie Davis    OCTOBER 17, 2018

It would be difficult to imagine a more ethereal, haunting, and prescient exhibition than *Cloud Nine*. Danial Nord's solo project contains elements that are both seemingly mystical and sci-fi; it's wonderfully unique, a merging of technology and sculptural art that reflects both the exhibition's meaning, and how it is shaped.

Life-sized, translucent figures are positioned in a semi-circle in a darkened gallery. Each is a distinct character, emotionally resonant and identifiable. They glow with life – and with tech, activated by their smartphones as both internal and external light.

In approach and subject, Nord tackles the thorny issue of technology, and how it can change us and even destroy us. The characters are detached from each other individually – much as we are, caught up as we may be in the virtual world of our phones and computers rather than in real-life human interaction.



Danial Nord's *Cloud Nine*, Installation View

The sculptures consist of figures of a Businessman, Gunman, Mother, space Alien, and Illegal, all deeply involved in the mobile devices they carry, which physically controls their illumination as well. The illumination comes from new processes that Nord shaped, transforming video selected for each character into computer-driven LED light. The businessman follows a changing stock ticker, for example. He flickers as the ticker changes.



Nord relates “The project’s characters came out of the news and social media. The concept began to take form after the 2016 elections; each character was driven by news events. For example, the gunman was built after the Parkland shooting. The characters were a way for me to process and personify what was going on, events, news, rhetoric, biases, and hate that made no sense.”

According to Nord, the figures together comprise a microcosm of what he terms “our crazy world. I was able to work through complicated feelings with these life-sized creatures – much like a child given dolls in a psychologist’s office, and asked to act out a story that reveals their psychosis.”

Indeed, as beautiful as these works are, the transparent bodies that expose their insides, as well as objects that Nord has linked to their personae

serve as “the battlegrounds or stages where this drama plays out. The video sources that drive their illumination are part of each character’s backstory and their lifeblood — translated to light via my system of computerized LEDs, and coursing through their bodies.” Technology, in short, is in their DNA – and ours.

Nord makes strong use of the complex relationship people develop between media – whether its mass media or social media — and the body itself. The physiology of the effects of the information that we receive, and our reactions to it, Nord says, triggers chemical reactions in our bodies that dictate how we act and feel. It lights us up, it shuts us down.

According to the artist “Media physically permeates us — and the sculptures — literally. We become it. The sculptures are the personification of the media they receive.”

Viewed in the dark, the luminosity of Nord's creatures becomes otherworldly, and while a soft hum of media-driven sound infuses the exhibition space, the figures' silence is meant to, and successfully does, parallel that of human beings deeply engrossed in their own cell-phone communications.

Along with current events and media, Nord was also in part inspired by time spent in his father's science labs as a young child. His father was an experimental neurophysiologist. Viewers can see that generational sense of the experimental, of scientific approach, in Nord's art. And, having experienced childhood health issues that involved hospital time spent in an oxygen tent, that has impacted his art and his world view as well, he explains. "That time spent looking through plastic and thinking about his body, feeling vulnerable had a lasting impact," he says.



More than anything else, the exhibition is an outgrowth of our world today and that world as Nord sees it. "*Cloud Nine* is a synthesis of everything that I've experienced in life till now. I try to invest wholly in each project, as if it were my final work."

And to create these sculptures, Nord certainly did invest. He innovated a method of fire-casting clear polycarbonate sheets onto hand-built sand molds, creating the molds in part while kneeling in the sand on local beaches.

"I have been developing a system of transforming video/media into malleable illumination for sculpture since 2009, when I received a grant for Artistic Innovation from the Center for Cultural Innovation," he says. "Along with that came the need to develop translucent forms and ways of diffusing, housing, and controlling the LED/video light. I have been fascinated with vacuforms' transparent packaging for many years," he asserts.

He visited a vacuform plant, but found the process was too slick and prohibitive to fit his needs; it wasn't until he received a residency in the Gulf of Mexico in 2015, that he began making the large sand molds on the beach, and torching plastic sheets to create the translucent figurative shapes.



“The burns, wrinkles, and malformations became integral and very human parts of the ‘skin,’” he says.

The sand itself, and perhaps the locations in which Nord worked to create, seems to have infused the work with a kind of oceanic quality in several ways. The muted purples and whites and greys in terms of the LED lights, the shifting changes in those colors, and even the waves of technology-driven illumination that are ever shifting, have a tidal pull and rhythm. The viewer may feel adrift with these works, as if floating through space.

There is also a mutability to the sculptures, perhaps viewed as a way in which humans have adapted to and become nearly one with technology; or perhaps referring to the ways in which we can still be open to change, to a more positive

transformation, and a brighter, more involved future.

“Working on my hands and knees, making things from, well, a kind of dirt — sand — is incredibly basic and powerful in its simplicity. Being in the sun for hours, sometimes feeling almost heat-stroke-delirious, that initial work, making the body parts, comes out of a simpler state of being, away from communications and trappings of the studio,” Nord describes his process. “It takes on the essence of its surroundings: the ocean. Inside the sculptures is coastal flotsam and jetsam, sticks and stones, collected from shorelines. The plastic that I use to capture the forms both conforms to the environment and violates it. The man-made polymer material contradicts nature.”

Combining that nature-driven work with sophisticated electronics and computers, something strange happens, Nord attests, calling it “an unlikely fusion of disparate elements and contradictions. High and low tech intertwined. Sand — silica — is refined to make the silicon that is the basis for our computers. This reflects the play of materials to the interconnection of opposites, natural and synthetic. The coastal environment is the platform where it begins.”

Following his time in the Gulf of Mexico, Nord relocated his process to his San Pedro studio and Cabrillo Beach, where he also began to use clay and armatures with the sand, creating more elaborate 3D shapes, such as the gun one of the figures holds.

Nord says of his work that the process has grown out of everything he's done before as an artist. The cumulative power of that work is easy for viewers to experience. It literally hums through the circuitry of the art, and pulses through its light; it is also spiritual, a transcendent experience to be alone in the gallery with these almost-human, almost-ghost-like figures.

"I want people to go in and feel something strong. The reactions to the work at the opening were palpable. I want to hear others' stories about the work." He adds

"I want to offer a feeling that people haven't had before in their interactions with art; I want to connect in a special way, with diverse viewers."

*Dae-Bak Super Cool*, also at TAM and running through November 10<sup>th</sup>, makes a strong partner to Nord's evocative work. Curated by Heeseon Choi and Max Presneill, the group show of sculpture, paintings, and mixed media brings the museum together with the Korean Cultural Center Los Angeles. The exhibition showcases Korean and Korean American artists that are reconfiguring their and our cultural and artistic aesthetic to reflect technology and contemporary design from a Korean perspective, one that is in its own way deeply influenced by the global connections today's technology has achieved.

