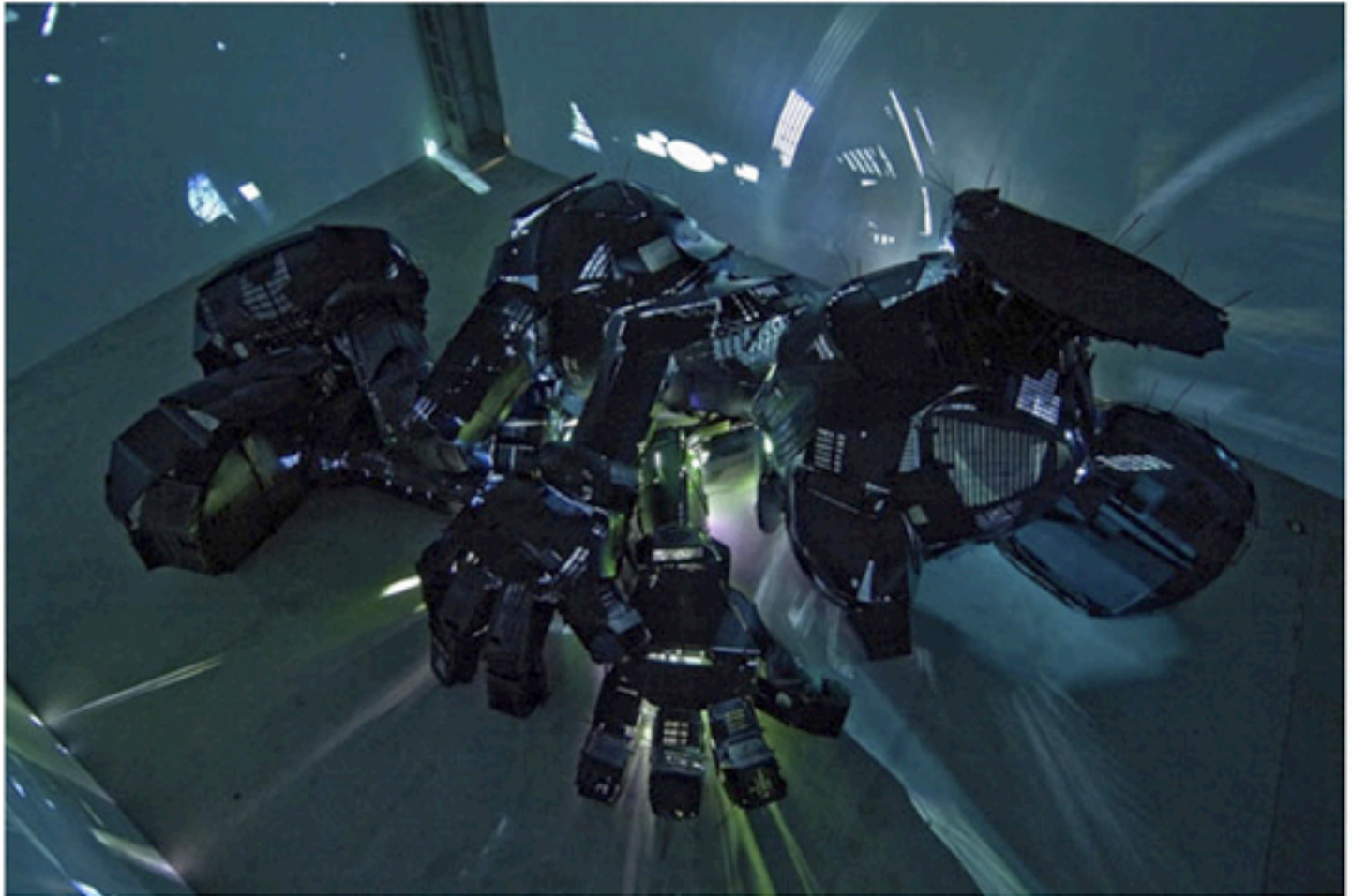


## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Danial Nord's Monstrous Mouse

by Holly Willis

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State of the Art | Photo by Gene Ogami

"I'm back to reality," says LA media artist Danial Nord as he explains his arduous struggle with the 18-gauge fence wire that forms the armature for the body of a hapless Mickey Mouse who lays dead or passed out on the floor of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Art Park.

Nord is among the artists who received City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowships last year, with the mandate that he push his work in a new direction. For Nord, whose recent work has focused on video art and installation, that new direction meant leaving the digital realm and returning to the physical. "I was building this big cumbersome thing in my studio, twisting the wire to the point of carpal tunnel, and watching this sphere evolve that was just the same as the one I might have been rotating on the computer," he says. "It was absolutely fascinating to be reverting back to the old school thing. It was really rewarding."

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Nord's COLA project, titled *State of the Art*, consists of a large sculptural rendition of the famous Disney character meticulously constructed from the black plastic backs of discarded television sets. Nord has placed projectors, mirrors and lights in and around the structure; fragmented sounds of children singing *The Mickey Mouse Club* theme song bombard you as you enter the dark room in the gallery and step carefully toward the black structure sprawled across the floor.

When you first move past the black velvet curtain covering the doorway, it's nearly impossible to see anything due to the darkness. You stand, waiting for your eyes to adjust, listening to the fractured sounds and cheerful drumbeats of the militaristic theme song that loops over and over, creating an eerie, jingoistic chant.

Gradually the shape begins to emerge, and you realize that you're standing alongside a massive icon of American pop culture, now sadly toppled and lifeless. *State of the Art* is at once a commentary on the state of media art, built so often on the critical interrogation of popular media and the disassembly of its materials and infrastructures, and a riff on America itself, an unconscious, plastic, gutted giant, its triumphs echoing mechanically from a now almost forgotten past.

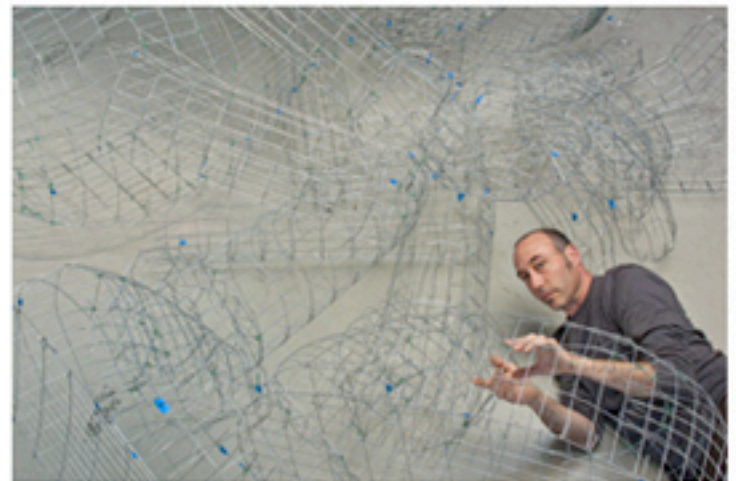
Nord says the project began with the black plastic material, which he found entirely compelling due to its durability and the intriguing qualities of the ventilation slits. "I had made sculptures with television sets before," he says, "but I wanted to use just this one part. I wanted to create a monstrous sculpture with radiant light that was also a byproduct."

Nord spent several weeks roaming LA streets and alleys looking for discarded TVs while waiting to get permission to visit one of the city's hazardous waste disposal sites. "It's like purgatory for electronics," he says of the center. "It's like a huge airplane hangar with trucks from all over LA driving in with truckloads of electronics. Guys stand along a line disassembling them with screw guns, sorting the components, and then throwing what's left in these huge bins. The sound is incredible, and there is the dust coming up with light filtering through it." Nord likens the scene to that of a Dante-esque hell, but perhaps more visceral was the experience of seeing so much waste. "Our culture is about buying new things rather than fixing what's old or broken, but it's not fathomable how many tons of waste a day are produced," he says.



While you can't tell in the darkness of the gallery, the body of the Mickey Mouse figure is very precisely modeled, with large scraps of hard plastic bolted carefully together. "My goal was to stay faithful to the pieces of television and I tried to use all the biggest possible pieces," says Nord. "This meant laying out an entire parking lot of pieces, analyzing them, and figuring out how to cut them up." The cutting was particularly unpleasant, Nord says, due to the awful smell of burning plastic. "This was a byproduct that did *not* make me happy."

Nord's background includes a stint as a successful fashion designer, and he's worked in animation, motion graphics and visual design. After a residency at the Santa Fe Arts Institute several years ago, Nord realized that he wanted to focus on media art. "It was a pivotal moment," he says. "I realized that I did not need to live in New York; that I was going to grow old and bitter if I didn't develop this other voice; that that there was a lot of fun to be had that I was not having."



Danial Nord twisting wire | Photo by Grant Mudford

So Nord moved to Los Angeles with his wife, artist Fran Siegel, bought a building in San Pedro, and now works and lives in the space, creating media art projects that unite his fascination with aesthetic form and a critical agenda that centers on being able to give voice to contemporary culture and politics.

"One of the reasons that I started experimenting in this way was because I didn't have a voice. We can tweet and we can click 'like' but we're not saying that much. We don't often have a chance to work through anger and frustration in our daily communication." Nord's *State of the Art* gives voice to some of that anger and frustration, but with a surprising degree of empathy. Mickey's wretched state is at once mournful and monstrous, but definitely leaves open the opportunity for imagining new possibilities.

*The COLA show is on view through July 3, 2011, and the gallery is open Thursday - Sunday, noon - 5:00 p.m.*