



"SMALL TOTEMS"

2011

Mitchell Confer

MIXED MEDIA

34" x 6" x 6"

PHOTO: COURTESY THE MCLOUGHLIN GALLERY

SAN FRANCISCO

Mitchell Confer: "kōr sam-pels" at The McLoughlin Gallery

Core samples are cylindrical drill samples of rock or soil that are used to analyze geological strata. For Bay Area artist Mitchell Confer, however, the term means something less scientific and more symbolic. To most viewers, his colorful, ornate totemic sculptures, either standing on wooden or stone bases, or hanging horizontally, suggest totems, scrolls or prayer wheels; for the artist, they're also human surrogates. The breaks and discontinuities in their patterns reflect momentous, life-changing events (just as in geology), but they also connote assimilation and continuity, and even the transcendence afforded by art: the passage of the transient and specific into the eternal and abstract.

Confer's evolution from realism to symbolism coincides with his exploration of digital media—and his own, serious illness. A multi-talented artist, illustrator, artist, teacher, traveler and photographer (who, incidentally, documented the entire length of the Berlin Wall in 1990), Confer took up digital photography a decade ago, producing several series of prints depicting the urban environment as simplified and flattened, but always spatially decipherable. Selections from these series are featured here: from the *Landscape* series, three *Shipyards* prints and *Red Roofs*, with its splayed playing-card San Francisco houses (million-dollar "little boxes," to quote Malvina Reynolds' satirical folk song); from the *Cityscape* series, *Dancing Under the Star* and *Red Canyon* with their respective star and sun simulacra sitting atop architecture jumbled and compressed by a telephoto lens; and, from the *Freeway* series, *South San Francisco*, a swooping panoramic view from below of the merger of two freeway overpasses, one straight and one curved, where a pair of diamond-shaped traffic signs instructs drivers to merge, the grayed-out arrows exactly mimicking the roadways' forms. For the sculptures, Confer used abstract prints derived from travel photos. Details of architecture and textiles were copied and rotated, using the Fibonacci sequence found in plants, seashells, antlers. These beautiful, intricate, kaleidoscopic patterns, culture merged with nature, make the case that human artifacts can be meaningful even without mythological pretexts, and that art is long, though life is short.

—DEWITT CHENG