

Ry Rocklen, "Desert Lenses"

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For someone so often pegged as a 21st century Duchampian, Ry Rocklen is quite adept at giving his reclaimed real-world icons a new make-over. The mundane found forms Rocklen adopts are not so much transplanted to the gallery as laboriously remade and recontextualized, often with playful substitutions of material, scale and implied value. If the works verge on the uncanny, that's entirely by design, and there's something very satisfying, and in their restrained way even exhilarating, about encountering objects so humble and familiar reflected back to us in ways that are surprising, strange and revelatory.



Ry Rocklen, "Rocky Sunday," 2026, ceramic, glaze, glaze decal, 10 1/2 x 10 1/2 x 5".
All images courtesy of Wilding Cran Gallery.

A Los Angeles native, Rocklen attended CalArts, UCLA and USC in turn. Among his mentors was Charles Ray, whose emphasis on perception and shrewd experiments in scale, material and monumentality find enthusiastic resonance in Rocklen's own work. A veteran of the Whitney Biennial and the Hammer's Made in LA survey, Rocklen joined the creative exodus to Joshua Tree in 2020 after the birth of his son and the start of the pandemic. That High Desert environment palpably infuses this striking new body of work, which is aptly titled "Desert Lenses."

Art writers often tend to valorize the act of seeing, and appreciate artwork that does the same, perhaps because it aligns the artist's process with that of the critic (see John Berger's famed essay collection "About Looking" and Peter Schjedaahl's "Let's See"). And while Rocklen is very much a maker of objects, he's also a keen observer of the reality around him, as these new object-photo-hybrids make clear. Yet the "Desert Lenses" he evokes in these works are not just physical objects but extensions of a desert-dweller's state-of-mind. Each of the central objects in this trove refracts the natural landscape through reclaimed icons of manmade detritus. His chosen objects present themselves as the flotsam and jetsam of a hardy subset of humanity that ventured out to the fringes of the desert, to the end of the line, leaving these tattered discards behind them. One might argue that the displacement examined here is not just that of these forlorn objects placed in the rarified air of the gallery, but of humanity itself in this stark natural environment.



Ry Rocklen, "99 and Sunny," 2024, ceramic glaze, glaze decal, 9 3/4 x 11 x 6".

At the heart of the show are five compact ceramic sculptures coated with photographic glaze decals depicting distressed objects with views of the High Desert visible through their frames. With their unexpected shapes, each one provides a distinctive armature through which to view and reflect back their surroundings. All together a witty, photo-ceramic, trompe l'oeil tour de force, each one is its own unique aesthetic salvage project and viewing portal to the absent desert landscape.

The illusion is disrupted on the back of each work, which, left open, reveals the piece to be a ceramic vessel, holding within it cast sand-colored ceramic elements gathered from the desert, including sticks, stones and the spindly skeletal remains of cacti, lending the works the elegiac air of reliquaries or memento mori.

“Steps to Bone-Dry” is cut in the prismatic zigzag structure of a drying rack, with each diagonal angle offering a distinct POV. “Rocky Sunday” depicts the desert scenery through the sensuous curves of a wood and wicker rocking chair. “99 and Sunny” offers the familiar trapezoidal form of an appropriated shopping cart, set in the middle of the desert because ... why not? “Rolling Stone” skews the perspective, giving us a burned-out car adorned with a shattered guitar that is set on end like a pylon. A cast ceramic ukulele rests peacefully inside. While “Slice of Life” depicts the rectangular shell of a graffitied, abandoned RV tagged with the word “Think,” propped inside are several slices of white bread, as if it was a boxy toaster.

Cleverly conceived and meticulously composed, each form is its own eclectic abject avatar. Yet the structures he conjures are not just formal devices. As in previous works, Rocklen frames the shambolic reality of life within geometric forms (in this case highly distressed ones), as if demonstrating the inability of modernism’s rigid strictures to contain the messy sprawl of Rocklen’s humanity and the world around it.



Ry Rocklen, “Steps to Bone-Dry,” 2026, ceramic, glaze, glaze decal, 15 1/2 x 11 1/4 x 5 1/2”.



Ry Rocklen, “Slice of Life,” 2026, ceramic, glaze, glaze decal, 5 x 15 1/4 x 5”.

Set along the gallery walls are nine sculpted socks: four made of cast aluminum, bigger than life; and five smaller ones made of downy white molded paper. Depicting real socks worn by Rocklen's family members, the works amount to a sort of diary. Like the large aluminum crackers (including Ritz and Goldfish) in his last show, they adopt banal symbols of utility and comfort from daily life and monumentalize them, challenging viewers to embrace their elevation.

Of course, that high-low dynamic has been playing out vigorously for over a century, punctuated by the emergence of Pop Art with Walter Hopps' pioneering 1962 group show "New Paintings of Common Objects" at the Pasadena Art Museum. One might well call Rocklen's artworks new sculptures of common objects. As aesthetic icons they exude all the stuffy sophistication of, say, a urinal, or a Campbell's soup can, or a bright red life-sized toy firetruck, but without the snark and winking irony, replacing them with a more sincere and fond familiarity.



Ry Rocklen, "Large Pedal 2," 2026, aluminum, 10 1/2 x 6 3/4".

During the last years of my mother's life, I often read poems to her as she lay in bed. Among the poems I kept on short rotation was one by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, titled "An Ode to My Socks." Describing a favorite pair of hand-woven socks, the poem is notable for its lyrical but unpretentious celebration of the mundane joys and textures of daily life. Rocklen's ode to his family's socks displays a similar lack of pretense. At once subversive and serious, public and personal, their ambiguous stance is key to their charm. Beneficent or banal? The lessons from the Buddha's laundry basket are never simple. I'm sure Neruda would get it, and that's good enough for me.

George Melrod has written hundreds of articles on contemporary art and culture for such publications as ARTnews, Art in America, World Art, American Ceramics, Details, and Vogue, among others. In the 1990s, he was the New York critic for Sculpture magazine and wrote a regular contemporary art column for Art & Antiques, for whom he worked as a Contributing Editor. A native New Yorker, he moved to LA in 1998, and has since contributed to websites such as Artercritical and Artillery Magazine. From 2007-2017 he served as editor-in-chief of art ltd. magazine.