



## ART REVIEW: - Michael McGillis at Public Pool

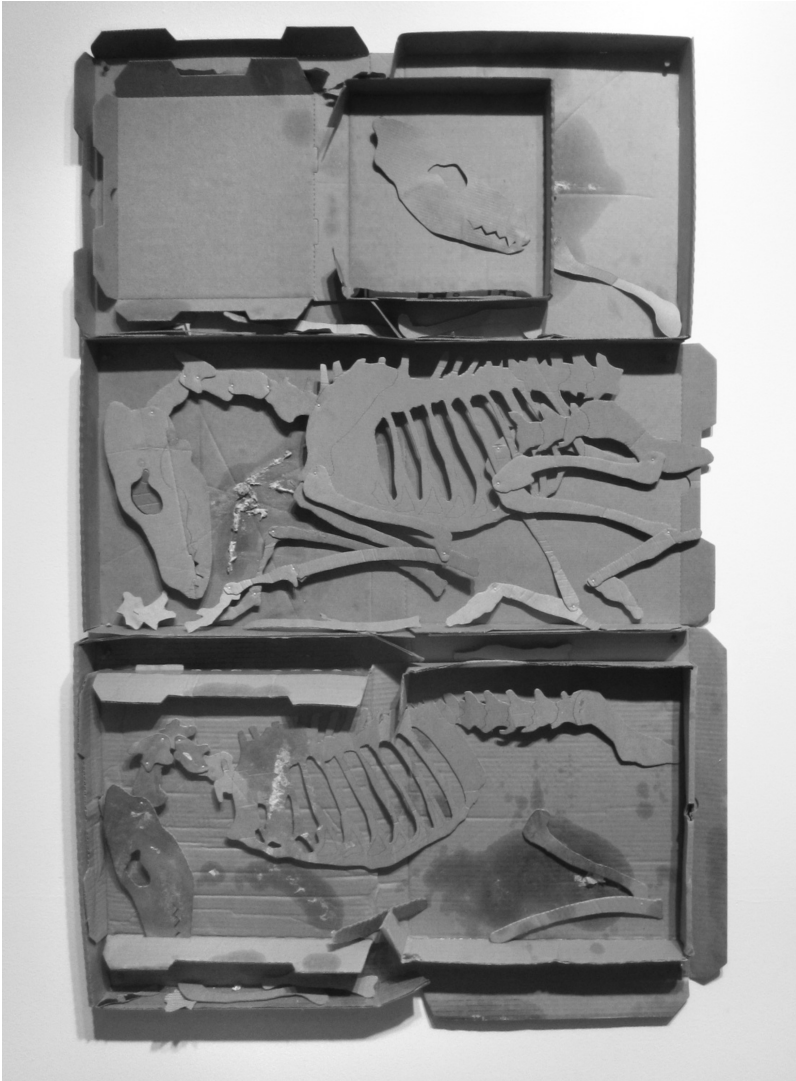
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*by John Corso*

Michael McGillis has established a strong international exhibition record based on an oeuvre of site-specific, typically outdoor sculptures. In the summer of 2012, McGillis used Hamtramck's alternative art space, Public Pool, to experiment with an evolving multipart installation. One component of the installation offered a pointed critique of environmental neglect.

The artist chose to use his slot at Public Pool to depart from his recognizable body of work, which tends toward updated earthworks and minimalist aesthetics. The installation consisted of three interlocking sculptural components: the storefront, a series of large wood and cardboard containers, and independent sculptures situated within the space. As the exhibition progressed, new components would appear, lending an accretionary aspect to the work.

By far, the sculptural objects—above all a bas relief of coyote bones made of greasy pizza cartons—constituted the most important accomplishments of the show. If the conceptual artist Gabriel Orozco were to make a maquette study of Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, it might look like the object McGillis calls *Ossuary for the American Jackal*. The enigmatic object (whose title lends no assistance) melds Surrealism and postmodern conceptualism. Three adjoining, opened pizza



Michael McGillis, *Ossuary for an American Jackal*, 2012.

boxes reference the curiosity cabinet, but they do so with unexpected materials. Melted cheese sticks to the discarded pizza boxes, which McGillis trash-picked. (One wonders if the cheesy strings will ossify, too, or merely rot over.) Within the bottom two pizza-cabinets lie cardboard coyote “bones,” which

look like skeletal kits one might find at a natural history museum gift shop. McGillis cuts the bones and pencils in some details of the vertebral articulations and skull sutures. The skeletons appear to be incomplete, resembling the piecemeal skeletons on display at natural history museums. The top box contains only a skull.

The bones and skulls function like a *vanitas*. But rather than a traditional Christian warning about the fleeting nature of worldly life, McGillis indicts our damaging ecological record as hastening that inevitable end to which we all must come. The materials (consumer waste that we would expect to see at a landfill) suggest that our relentless production of goods and packaging will prematurely bury us.

McGillis placed several fabricated coyote forms in Public Pool's storefront and in select areas of the gallery. He manufactures these forms by sculpting a wooden model and overlaying it with sheets of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) fiber. He then vacuums those sheets to the positive mold, yielding a



Michael McGillis, *In a Better Place Now*, 2012 -

plastic coyote shell. The final product lacks an indication of its handmade origins; it seems as if a factory—not an individual artist—produced this product. Though the coyote sculptures are beautiful when illuminated at night, especially at the unraveling plastic seams, they are not compelling within the distractions of the installation.

My complaint with the show lies in what I suspect is inexperience in adapting a laudable portfolio of outdoor works to interior environmental installation. Three rectangular free-standing crates reference shipping containers, their collective volumes equal to the international standard container size. The three open crates are filled with reeds collected from Detroit's Belle Isle park, scavenged cardboard shipping boxes (including another cutout skeleton), and other refuse. These vignettes don't work well as an installed environment because they neither take aesthetic advantage of the minimalist technique of repetition, nor do they manipulate their materials with the skill of a Merz installation. They also fail to transform the space around them into a meaningful walkway (like Bruce Nauman, for example). Instead, they obstruct the viewer's ambulation in the gallery without using this obstruction to generate added significance. Despite the shortcomings of his installed vignettes, McGillis knows how to make suggestive, iconic objects, and it will be exciting to follow his career as he leverages his sculptural and site-specific talents into holistic indoor installations.