

UrbanGlass

Nate Ricciuto *Subsidence*

Essay and Curation by Zeljka Himbele

On View May 25 - August 26th, 2022

The creative practice of Nate Ricciuto takes a variety of topics as a departure point. It amalgamates the artist's interest in the limits of scientific understanding, science fiction fantasies, and outsider alternative worldviews. The artist's recent investigations have centered on drawing connections between craft production and cultural practices related to themes of conspiracy beliefs, survivalist techniques and isolationist ideologies. Ricciuto is concerned with the notions of self-sufficiency, resourcefulness and security in our contemporary lives and the ways different values become subscribed to them depending on individual endeavors and desires alongside larger cultural, social and political contexts. He interrogates conventional notions of work and productivity and sees technology as a tool for imagining future possibilities. Through a combination of glass with numerous other materials, Ricciuto's objects and installations, via their DIY, handspun and imperfect aesthetics, gain whimsical and surreal qualities, sometimes asking for active participation from the viewer. The artworks merge the elements of various artistic disciplines, such as design, architecture and craft traditions, often repurposing everyday items from our surroundings and putting them in unexpected contexts. They are additionally augmented by visual distortions achieved through the optical qualities of glass elements, movement of their respective parts, as well as different sources and colors of light. The works reveal the artist's interest in the potential of speculation and embracing idealistic and flawed visions of the future, humorously recalling deserted laboratories and experiments gone wrong and lingering between appositeness and absurdity.

Ricciuto's research reverberates the general revival of the 20th century countercultures, New Age healing practices and ancient belief systems. It also echoes recent scholarly interest in the phenomena of conspiracy theories, especially in the field of social psychology, and the ways these narratives are created, disseminated and made appealing. According to many writers, conspiracy theories stem from the earliest days of human history as a specific way of centering evil as the cause of events, versus an objective investigation of reality. Due to a confluence of the Internet, social media, social and political conditions, and vested political interests, they have become prolifically produced and widely present in postmodern mass culture. Because of increased globalization, corporatization and media saturation, conspiracy theories might be described as logical responses to

social anxiety and feelings of fear, powerlessness and confusion linked to uncertainty, alienation, volatility and complexity of 21st century life. The exhibition title, *Subsidence*, metaphorically points to this cognitive dissolution. It has been noticed that the proliferation of conspiracy theories, in different times and places, is linked to trust in fact-gathering institutions which have epistemic functions in human lives. In fact, many of the most recent studies heavily lean on the analysis of a philosopher and political theorist Fredric Jameson, who saw conspiracy theories as expressing a mental inability to see how everything fits together in today's society. In that light, in spite of their simplified nature and undisputed capacity for harmful impact, they do contain a seed of imaginative potential, as a creative, mobilizing response to a "consensus reality" that too often serves to the interests of those in power.

The interactive installation *Bellwether* was presented for the first time in 2021 at the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio. Its main feature is a small structure that Ricciuto constructed by hand out of various pre-made and found elements and into which the artist incorporated glass covered by an invisible conductive coating. Produced by NSG Pilkington Glass, a company which is collaborating with The Arts Commission of Greater Toledo in the Momentum/Intersection artists fellowship program (in which Ricciuto was participating thus gained the access to this particular material), this type of glass is widely used on refrigerators and freezers installed in grocery stores, where current is applied to heat the surfaces and defrost the glass windows of these appliances.

Bellwether makes use of the unique qualities of this glass to create a functional, yet invisible "Faraday cage." Named after Michael Faraday, an English scientist in the fields of electromagnetism and electrochemistry who invented this particular structure in the 1830s, a Faraday cage acts as an enclosure that blocks electromagnetic fields from entering an enclosed space. Such structures, generally constructed from metal sheets or mesh, are widely used in scientific environments during research and experiments, as well as in auto, aviation, clothing and other industries. They are also popular devices, often self-made, among conspiracy theory protagonists looking for protection from 5G technology and government surveillance. In *Bellwether*, the conductive glass coating creates the Faraday cage effect, blocking the omnipresent electromagnetic radiation of cellular, radio and WiFi transmissions. Besides blocking electromagnetic radiation, the work also employs condensation to create a warm and humid interior into which the viewers are invited. Inside the shack, one is immersed in a protective, warm and humid ambiance. On this level, the installation also resembles

a greenhouse, metaphorically pointing to growth, healing and rejuvenation, while also, according to the artist, asking us to explore our own “paranoid sentiments and fantasies of isolation, self-reliance, and escape.” Closer inspection of the shack’s surfaces reveals more visual clues for readings of *Bellwether*. There are printed pages attached to the structure’s bottom from *Shelter*, a countercultural architectural DIY publication from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The design of Ricciuto’s shack was in fact taken from this publication, and echoes a dedication to pre-industrial construction methods, promotion of sustainable living and appreciation for makeshift, off-the-grid structures. Viewers also find an image of opposing staircases on one of the glass surfaces. The image, also employed in *Ambiguous Figure* (2009), another work in the exhibition, is commonly called Schroeder’s Stairs. It presents an optical illusion of stairs that can also be seen as upside down – a two-dimensional image offering two opposing three-dimensional shapes. Besides pointing to fallibility of images, its ambiguity also emblematically speaks about relativity as well as interconnectedness of ascending and descending, growth and decline, pointing to the meditative aspect of the installation. Next to *Bellwether*, there is a video loop, *Primer Proving Ground* (2017-2022), a series of videos recalling instructional YouTube videos, as well as the educational TV series *MythBusters*, which shows the artist’s experiments with various materials, movement and sounds.

The most recent installation featured in the exhibition is titled *Two Points on a Curved Surface* (2022). It is a rendition of a room interior on a platform. The piece is surmounted by a hand-cut camouflage tarp, while a LED grow light, which simulates the full spectrum of light from the sun, illuminates the whole composition, contributing to its surreal quality. The metallic platform that grounds the installation has a triangular shape, referencing the basic building element - a triangle - used by Buckminster Fuller in creating his Dymaxion map – a flat world map that attempts to preserve the actual shapes and sizes of all the continents which are notoriously distorted when represented on conventional map projections of the globe. As in his other installations, Ricciuto takes the elements of familiar spaces and objects to disrupt them with the unfamiliar. The room features a personal protective sleeping enclosure (recalling the Faraday cage), aluminum foil, beer bottles and a strange spherical glass object that resembles a middle-school student’s project gone awry. This object approximates homemade optical experiments that seek to prove the flatness of Earth by measuring the angle of sunlight, which is frequently employed by “flat-Earth” conspiracy theorists. The installation thus engages two completely different views of a “flat Earth” – one scientific, the other one speculative – hinting to both the positive qualities of imagination and its potential slippages into

delusion or disorientation. Similar ambivalence is embedded in *Interloper* (2016) the earliest artwork in the exhibition. Surrounded by textured plaster, glass lenses and light emanating from the background, a mannequin head wears kaleidoscopic binoculars strapped to its face. The device is simultaneously reminiscent of imaginative possibilities of this common childhood amusement and the deceptive potential of illusion and spectacle in creating one's worldview.

Other Voices (2020) is an installation consisting of prefabricated, modular metal tubes, which together with a few wooden elements serve as stands or points of suspension for various objects, several of them cast in glass. The glass objects are inspired by pseudoscientific contraptions that frequently employ foil, which conspiracy theorists have made to protect themselves from government surveillance, such as the stereotypical aluminum foil hat. These objects look like dubious, half-baked experiments, challenging the usual perception of artistic glass objects as precious and masterly executed. Some of the objects in the installation are simple renditions of scientific instruments, such as a small flask filled with a colored alcoholic liquid. This liquid is in fact commonly used in production of levels, transforming a common object into a home-made level. The other objects resemble antennas and biological specimens. The installation, lit by a diffuse yellow light, displays the artist's casual and playful approach to putting things together; while a closer look reveals meticulous and precise execution of the work's individual elements. Balancing concrete forms and abstract shapes, Other Voices invites the audience to engage with the unknown; to walk through the installation and explore it. As in the other works in the exhibition, the medium of glass, inserted in various ways into the structure, uses the material's inherent seductive qualities to engage the viewer with wonder and curiosity.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nate Ricciuto is a multidisciplinary artist whose work envisions design, architecture, and craft as existing in the odd space between technology and fantasy. He holds a BFA from Ohio State University (2008), and an MFA from Tyler School of Art and Architecture (2015). Nate has been an Emerging Artist in Residence at Pilchuck Glass School, and a Creative Glass Center of America Fellow at WheatonArts. He was a recipient of the 2021 Momentum Fellowship from the Toledo Museum of Art, the 2020 Saxe Emerging Artist Award from the Glass Art Society, and has received two Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council (2017 & 2021). Nate lives in Columbus, OH, where he is an Instructor and Glass Program Coordinator at Columbus College of Art and Design.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Zeljka Himbele is a curator based in New York City and the 2022 UrbanGlass Curator-at-Large. Originally from Croatia, where she worked for several years at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, she graduated from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, US. From 2008-2010 she worked at the Contemporary Art Department of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, working on a series of solo and group exhibitions for New Media Gallery. She frequently collaborates with numerous national and international exhibition venues.

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Interloper, 2016

Front surface mirror, wood, glass, aluminum, epoxy,
structo-lite, mixed media

\$5,600

NATE RICCIUTO

Bellwether, 2021

Conductive glass panels, radio, aluminum,
environmental controls, mixed media

\$25,000

NATE RICCIUTO

Primer Proving Ground, 2017-2022

Digital video

\$200

NATE RICCIUTO

Ambiguous Figure, 2019

Mirror, UV cured digital print, mixed media

\$4,000

NATE RICCIUTO

Interloper, 2016

Front surface mirror, wood, glass, aluminum, epoxy,
structo-lite, mixed media

\$5,600

NATE RICCIUTO

Two Points on a Curved Surface, 2022

Glass, water, wire mesh, aluminum foil, cedar, nylon
tarp, LED light, mixed media

\$12,000

NATE RICCIUTO

Other Voices, 2020

Glass, aluminum, speed rail fittings, LED and
fluorescent light, mixed media

\$16,000

NATE RICCIUTO

Active Pool Triptych, 2018

Mirror, UV cured inkjet print on board, glass, peephole
lens, mixed media