

Moving Past Paint in California Art



Alex Rasmussen, *Day and Night*, 2022, anodized aluminum. (Photo courtesy of Sullivan Goss)

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By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**

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Using aluminum and skateboards for a Golden State aesthetic

LAST month I wrote about [Storm King](#), the art center in the Hudson Valley in New York dedicated to outdoor sculpture. I loved it. I realized then that I hadn't profiled a living, breathing, working sculptor, so today I'll write about Alex Rasmussen, a Santa Barbara sculptor who works in aluminum.

Michelangelo, Bernini, Canova, and Rodin are famous, but sculpture is a special taste, since it's heavy, takes space, and isn't thought about in terms of a palette the way painting is. When I was in Santa Barbara a few weeks ago, I visited Rasmussen (b. 1964) in his studio. I'd seen photographs of his work at [Lotusland](#), installed in one of its many fabulous gardens. It's metal, but it looked like a waterfall from the sky.

Rasmussen is a case study in inventive, contemporary sculpture. He sculpts not stone or wood or plaster or wax or bronze or concrete but aluminum, and he knows it well. I'm drawn to unorthodox materials — no human or animal waste, however — and wanted to see and learn more. He's a third-generation owner of a local company that's a cutting-edge designer and maker of multicolor anodized aluminum furniture, consoles for audio equipment too rarefied for a country mouse like me to fathom, and elements such as towel bars for yachts, cabinets for Hermès, and sensitive medical equipment.

Rasmussen, then, comes from a commercial manufacturing background, which I like, and arrived at design and art from that point. He also didn't start thinking of himself as an artist until a few years ago. I like that as well. He brings to his art, as Whistler said, a lifetime of experience.

I first saw his work in the metallic flesh at his dealer's in Santa Barbara. Sullivan Goss, across the street from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, is the secret sauce in advancing the visual arts in Santa Barbara. At the dealer's gallery, I saw a wall-mounted Rasmussen sculpture called *Night and Day*. It's a diptych, a single work of art in two pieces. I'd call one piece a nocturne, which is a night scene but more. A nocturne captures the ineffable qualities of nighttime, its stillness, silence, and mystery. It's the time for sleep and dreams. It's protective, womb-like. And it offers its own concept of depth. Whistler, Munch, Childe Hassam, Winslow Homer, Frederic Remington, Edward Steichen, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and many other artists painted nocturnes.

Rasmussen's nocturne wall sculpture is 16 by 16 inches. Later, at his studio, I saw a larger triptych version. It's midnight blue with a matte finish that gives it touches of gray. He starts with a computer, conceiving and then designing the sculpture. Rasmussen is drawing not with paper and chalk or ink or wash but with new technology. Once he gets the design he wants, a computer cuts it on a solid block of aluminum. After polishing it by hand to get the reflectivity he wants, he dyes it. The finished material undulates like taffeta or, apt for Santa Barbara, like ocean waves. The sculpture I saw at Sullivan Goss, I decided, is both a nocturne and a seascape.



Aluminum by the hunk, before engineers, designers, manufacturers, and artists transform it.

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Aluminum is the most abundant material on God’s green earth, which might very well be called God’s lustrous silver-white, corrosion-resistant, non-magnetic, tensile, and non-ferrous earth. It’s ubiquitous. I think of it as an industrial material, especially for the airplane industry, where its light weight enhances aerodynamics.

It’s used for ships, too, because, in salt water, it resists corrosion. The capstone of the Washington Monument is made of aluminum. The material makes for an effective lightning rod. There’s aluminum foil, of course, soda and beer cans, cookware, laptops, and smart phones.

Aeronautics manufacturing is still a big California industry, though hobbled by Sacramento’s hostility to business. Hughes Electronics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop, and now private space-travel companies help define the place as much as palm trees, beaches, and movie stars do. People still think California is an ultramodern, cutting-edge place, snazzy and sleek. Rasmussen’s sculpture seems very much to spring from that heritage.

Aluminum is porous and accepts dyes with gusto, and that’s part of the magic. Light penetrates the pores and bounces back, not as sparkle but as a subtle sheen. It creates the look of a thin glaze and seems Venetian. Of course, Venice doesn’t lack for sea. The effects of light on rippling water stimulated how artists such as Titian and Tintoretto painted. In Rasmussen’s work, light is as much a material as dye and metal are. When his nocturne is seen in natural light, the peaks and valleys on the surface animate it, and light is always changing, so the work of art is always changing.



Alex Rasmussen, *Vivo Sonhando*, 2024, anodized aluminum. (Photo courtesy of Sawyer Tautz)

Rasmussen makes outdoor sculptures with aluminum’s natural color, too. Light plays with them. In nature, the sculptures are assertively manmade — like a column of a Greek temple — yet as light works its way on the aluminum material, it looks diaphanous, or like melting butter, or a sulky gray. These works reflect clouds,

sunrises, and sunsets. That's very California. The Light and Space movement — think James Turrell and Peter Alexander — began in California and plays with the viewer's perception of light on translucent or reflective materials. It can be very sensuous.

In Ye Olde Vermont, where I live, sun is a cameo actor — onstage, offstage for long stretches of the year but crisp in the fall, when it partners with red and yellow leaves, and then we have our green mountains and snow that stays white. I'd like to see Rasmussen's work on display here, but I think at night, in a dining room, in candlelight, his nocturne would evoke a swathed odalisque and look very beautiful.

Now, to return to the intrigue of unorthodox materials — years ago, I worked on an exhibition called *Over and Over*, a group show mostly of sculpture made from things such as plastic straws, used heroin bags, and magic-marker caps. Not only were the materials unusual but the artists obsessively worked with them, gathering them and manipulating them to make art that was both manic and beautiful. While I was at Sullivan Goss, Rasmussen's dealer, I saw and liked the work of Inga Guzyte (b. 1984). I wouldn't call her use of materials obsessive, but her portraits, made from used skateboard decks, are odd, material-wise, and arresting. Like Rasmussen's aluminum sculpture, her art is very California.



Inga Guzyte, *California Poppy (Patssi Valdez)*, 2020, recycled skateboards. (Photo courtesy of Sullivan Goss)

Guzyte's genre is marquetry and as old as high-end furniture. In marquetry, bits of stone, wood, glass, or metal are cut thinly and applied to a surface to make intricate, colorful designs. Last year, I reviewed the [work of Alison Elizabeth Taylor](#), who also specializes in marquetry. I look at marquetry as Italian. Today's marquetry descends from the Studiolo in the Ducal Palace in Urbino, made from wood, and Florentine *pietra dura* furniture from the 1600s made with onyx, lapis lazuli, variegated marble, mother-of-pearl, and obsidian.

Guzyte, a Lithuanian immigrant living in Santa Barbara, starts with old skateboards. The decks where feet twist and turn are made from rock maple, which is dense and strong and that comes, in an irony given that

skateboarding is so linked to California, from forests in Canada, near the Great Lakes or Maine. It's tough wood from cold climates. Decks can also be made from bamboo, birch, or fiberglass. Guzyte slices and dices and pieces bits together to make portraits. She incorporates scuffs in her designs.

Skateboarding started in California as sidewalk surfing and a fun activity for surfers when the waves went flat. Skateboards soon became surfaces for personal expression and idiosyncratic design. So, with skateboards a California thing, as indigenous as flowering milkweed and desert willow, I wasn't shocked to see an enterprising local artist harvesting them for new art forms. Guzyte mixes her own passion for skateboarding and a passion for woodworking in a fresh, ingratiating way.



Inga Guzyte, *California Poppy (Patssi Valdez)*, 2020, recycled skateboards. (Photo courtesy of Sullivan Goss)

I first saw her work at the Outwin portrait triennial at the 2021 National Portrait Gallery in Washington but didn't write about it because I was of two minds. It's buoyant and sassy, which I like, but it has too-cute touches like flower headdresses and birds, which I don't, at least not in a surfeit. And, to be honest, I needed to get beyond feeling troubled over liking art made from skateboards. Seeing her work again, I've decided I like it a lot. It's splashy, but that's California, too.

Guzyte likes to portray teenage-girl heroes, among them, alas, the lunatic charlatan Greta Thunberg. Another subject, Amanda Gorman, is the young writer who recited one of her poems at the 2021 Biden inauguration. It's very tender. Her portrait of artist Patssi Valdez, based on a photograph, starts with her smiling face, which Guzyte surrounds with a headdress of orange, red, blue, and yellow flowers. Her face is framed with cascading blue-green palm fronds.

I hope Gorman escaped the inauguration without a presidential sniff.

Guzyte has also portrayed Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Southern Californians do love celebrities, and Guzyte's portraits are hagiographic, like religious icons. I'd like to see her portray heroes of everyday life, or try a full-length portrait or a portrait of a man. Just stay clear of keffiyehs, a perfectly fine garment ruined by hateful, sinister people.

Back to Sullivan Goss. The art market is the golden thread that runs through American culture. It's got lots of moving parts, among them art fairs, the auction houses, and artists selling their own work. But dealers are often the knight in shining armor for the artist and for local culture.

Sullivan Goss has a mantra: We curate, we exhibit, we research, we publish, we sell, and we buy. That's the best description of the ideal art dealer I've ever read. They do more, too. An individual artist might be a cauldron of dysfunction, but a good dealer steadies and guides. A good dealer works with buyers and collectors when they're shoppers. Many start uncertain and afraid. An artist without a dealer might think of himself as free to follow his own muse, but he's also free to starve. A good dealer is a critic, advocate, connoisseur, priest, and sugar daddy. Lots of dealers keep lots of artists afloat between big sales.

Sullivan Goss is very much part of Santa Barbara's cultural flourishing. It started as an art-and-architecture specialty bookstore, but, by 2000, the writing was on the wall that the future of book-selling was on the computer screen. There was a supply of good local artists and a demand as Santa Barbara attracted new, year-round homeowners and part-timers, all wanting a Santa Barbara look and none wanting for spare cash. Sullivan Goss found a niche but also a calling. Its owner, Nathan Vonk, the gallery director Jeremy Tessmer, and two curators, Susan Bush and Lauren Wilson, have been essential in building a community of artists, collectors, and connoisseurs.

Santa Barbara is a classy place. Good taste, I'll add, isn't new to it but part of its history. A while ago, I reviewed *As It Turns Out*, a biography of Edie Sedgwick, Andy Warhol's partner in Pop Art. She grew up in Santa Barbara, but her family was ultra-WASP and ultra-New England. Starting in the 1910s and through the '40s, bluebloods from the Northeast sent their black sheep to Santa Barbara, with a lifetime remittance pledged. There, misfits and malcontents could talk to their favorite cactus all they wanted without embarrassing the rest of the clan. Sedgwick's parents — her father was crazy — landed in Santa Barbara on that basis. The Sussexes, the Duke of Dolts and the Duchess of Gimme Dinero, revived this exile tradition.



Exterior view of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse. (Public domain/via Wikimedia)

So Santa Barbara has a heritage of New England eccentricity. Being a New England eccentric myself, I can say we kindle good taste wherever we land. After the 1925 earthquake, which dismantled lots of fuddy-duddy Victorian homes and businesses, Santa Barbarans rebuilt in Mission Revival style. The Santa Barbara mission church was built around 1820 in what I'd call Escorial style. Partially wrecked in the earthquake, it still was a style icon, was rebuilt, and is, today, the oldest continuing Roman Catholic parish in California. Santa Barbara still has the unified, pleasing look of Andalusia-by-the-Sea.



De Forest was key to bringing Near Eastern design to America. **Left:** Lockwood de Forest, chair, c. 1882–85, brass over teak. **Right:** Lockwood de Forest in a Greek costume in Greece, c. 1870s. (Public

Pivotal, too, was Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), a WASP prince from New York, acolyte of Frederic Church and Louis Comfort Tiffany, international traveler, painter, and pioneer of Orientalist design in America. He came to Santa Barbara in 1902 not because he fell from grace but because he liked the weather. De Forest, who was the treasurer of the National Academy of Design and whose brother was president of the Met, set a tone not of snob culture or imported New York culture but of good taste and love of quality. He helped the art museum get off the ground. His son was an esteemed Santa Barbara landscape designer.

In a “what might have been” story, the nascent movie industry seemed to be growing in Santa Barbara at the same time that it began to stir in what would become Hollywood. The biz might very well have blossomed in Santa Barbara rather than in parts south, but town fathers said, “Get outta here,” politely. They heard the local furniture stores were getting orders for a brand of seating called the casting couch.

So Santa Barbara culture is more tuned to Lotusland than Tinsel Town, though the city has an impressive film festival and lots of movie people live there. Does the place exist in a bubble? I’d say no. Sullivan Goss is the town’s premiere art dealer, but there are many others who also build awareness of local artists and generate enthusiasm for them. We live in a big, glorious country. Quality art is to be found everywhere, using materials and styles that come from local history and heritage.



Lockwood de Forest, *Rocky Maine Shore with Spotty Clouds*, 1877, oil on artist’s card stock. (Photo courtesy of Sullivan Goss)

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SteveinMA  11h

"qualities of nighttime, its stillness, silence, and mystery"

Many of my favorite memories of my backcountry travels in desert country are of nights of wild winds, tattered clouds hiding and revealing stars, of half-seen coyotes skulking among the creosote bushes; or are they just creosote bushes?

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artboy  12h

My biased tendency is to see California-based art as generally slick and commercial. It can be strong and compelling for that reason, but at the same time facile and disposable. Not being fair here, since I confess to not having seen Rasmussen's work in person, but in fact finding it very seductive indeed.

I appreciate the praise for good art dealers; too often they're depicted and considered rapacious abusers of the artworld and artists, lacking in ethics. They are like human beings in general: some good, some bad. You want to associate with the good ones. They can be champions.

Thanks for educating us about Santa Barbara; the closing with the modest de Forest painting is sweet: it's a non-pretentious little gem.

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