This exhibition and catalog are dedicated to the memory of Mary Middlebrook, my mother (1921-2012). This will be my first show ever which she won’t attend. She lived 91 years and her love, guidance and encouragement was central to my art expression.

Cover: “BAMBOOZLED”
2012 white marble invested aqua resin, bronze - 12'6" x 15'4" x 5'6"
“BALANCING ACT”

Recent works by David Middlebrook

ARTIST STATEMENT

I would summarize my work in three words; “Make Thought Visible.” If I can imagine it … I love the challenge of trying to create it. This is not at all a new thing for an artist to embark upon, however I frame it with contemporary images of relevance at a time of environmental global consciousness.

Many of my works are describing physical events that could not happen in real time, but stimulate the imagination to ask, “What if?” We do not understand all forces that exist in the universe and I enjoy stimulating the imagination to describe the physical world as a mystery. I love the challenge of deception and distortion of perception. The latest global consequences regarding the health of the planet have brought much attention to the uncertainty of our future. I try to address distortion of physical laws of nature to remind us we cannot take assumed patterns of behavior for granted. Things now more than ever, are not what they appear to be. At the core of my work is the need to express my passion for the world we are leaving our children.

All my work evolves from life experience, observation and previous bodies of work. “Do the work and it will teach you.” Finally, just the beauty of an image, abstract or recognizable, speaks volumes as it entertains and nourishes the mind, the soul and the imagination of those who take the time to see it.
HOW THINGS WORK

The Surrealist Jean Arp dreamed of displaying his biomorphic sculptures in nature, but the venue for most contemporary art, by contrast, is the isolation chamber of the museum’s or gallery’s sterile white cube. Art that has become increasingly indistinguishable from non-art—a pile of dirt on the floor, to name one example, by Robert Morris—loses its identity outside the institutional framework and the discourse of art professionals. Conceptual art, with its emphasis on process and methodology, rather than on what work it performs, asks viewers to become collaborators, not viewers; the “shock of the new” (to use Robert Hughes’ term) has largely replaced aesthetic merit. Not all artists go with the anti-art flow, however. The Bay Area’s David Middlebrook, who describes himself as a thinking “thing-maker,” imbues his sculptures, exquisitely crafted in the traditional materials of wood, stone, and bronze, along with the contemporary addition of polyurethanes, with both serious sociopolitical content and playful wit.

Middlebrook’s compelling synthesis of form and content may come as a refreshing surprise to viewers of contemporary art, but it has deep roots in modernist and even Old Master art. A long career in teaching (San Jose State University), visiting-artist residencies in South Africa and Australia, and making public sculptures all over the world have shaped the Los Gatos sculptor’s vision. Although Middlebrook began showing in San Francisco only recently, at The McLoughlin Gallery in 2011, following a 2010 retrospective at the Triton Museum in Santa Clara, his career has taken off rapidly, his works finding eager collectors, most notably at this summer’s prestigious Art Basel. The works’ appeal to both mind and eye—and hand, if you consider the tactile surfaces—is immediate. The Sacramento art critic David M. Roth, in a SquareCylinder.com review of the Think Things show at The McLoughlin Gallery, characterized Middlebrook, somewhat humorously, but, I think, fairly, as “a surrealist-leaning naturalist ... [whose] gravity-defying displays ... focus our attention on greed, heedless consumption, political hubris, and, most of all, the ecological catastrophe that awaits us.” He praises the “eye-fooling patinas” and “visual sleights of hand that convincingly create the illusion of objects floating impossibly in space.” Witty humor and political content are not antithetical, of course, as the works of other northern California artists, notably UC Davis’s Robert Arneson and Wiliam T. Wiley, prove, so it is particularly fitting that California State University, Sacramento, should be exhibiting Middlebrook’s buoyant yet serious work now.

The medium is the message, Marshall McLuhan wrote in the 1960s, but the medium, however inherently beautiful, does not guarantee aesthetic meaning, i.e., the infusion of matter with thought and emotion. Middlebrook’s virtuosic mastery of techniques and materials combines with his wide-ranging imagination to produce works specific to the materials that he chose;
they’re collaborations between the medium and the responsive, even mediumistic, artist. Their powerful visual impact is succeeded by subtler poetic and intellectual aftershocks. Chalk Talk (2007), for example, comprises two elements: a large bird’s skull with a hyper-elongated beak, surmounting a four-legged bar stool (which may suggest Duchamp’s upturned Bicycle Wheel). Middlebrook sees the bird skull as a future fossil from the global warming mass extinction, and notes that the slate used for the stool dates is composed of organic matter (including apex predators) from the Jurassic Era. Incidentally, Venetian “beak doctors” wore goggled leather bird masks during plague outbreaks, the weird proboscises filled with aromatic herbs. The Tide That Binds (2009), an apricot-wood boat frame, wall-mounted, and stretched with translucent Thai silk, a kind of marine kite, represents the Buddha's spiritual quest. King of Things and Queen of Time (both 2010) are male and female totem figures—Adam and Eve—composed of stacked disparate elements defying gravity, and fooling the eye: bronze simulates rubber tire tread and twisted rope in King, and birch wood in Queen, with its aluminum bird’s-egg head, held by upraised branches, conjuring Munch’s The Scream. This year has been marked by intense creativity. Bamboozled (2012), a huge seedpod-like boat atop bamboo stilts or legs, is a technical as well as imaginative tour de force, the legs fashioned from bronze, and the boat, from marble-impregnated resin; it’s inspired by America’s reliance on Asian imports and the current recession. Congress (2012), a pair of tobacco pipes, kissing, bowl to bowl, in the sinuous shape of rising smoke, perfectly mimics the finish of briar wood, and indicts, in Middlebrook’s words, “the stagnant houses of Congress sucking each other’s smoke without introducing fresh ideas or air.” Generation Gap (2012) in the form of a large, rusted safety pin, its point broken off, imperfectly field-repaired with a shiny new one, expresses the artist’s concern about the loss of practical skills in the computer age, as students spend more time in online role-playing games than playing with materials and developing “old-school skill sets.”

Complementing Middlebrook’s technical expertise are his imagination and discipline. The art critic Suzi Gablik once outlined the logic behind Rene Magritte’s Surrealist visual paradoxes. Every painting, she said, was the solution to a problem; for example, the “problem of the egg,” in Magritte’s words, was solved in Elective Affinities by the colossal egg confined within a birdcage. David Middlebrook, too, is a problem-solver, employing his considerable skill set to embody his ideas. He believes that art must delight, entertain, inform, and stimulate thought; the aesthetic appeal of his work makes his “business of criticizing everything” palatable. Middlebrook’s memorable, ingenious objects do real work in the real world.

DeWitt Cheng
“THE TIDES THAT BIND”  
2009; maple, apricot wood, Thai silk - 9' W x 18” H x 24” D

This work represents an 18th century Thai river boat as a translucent vessel. It harkens to the lifelong journey of the Buddhist faith seeking the light.

“BAMBOOZLED” detail  
facing page

This piece was inspired by Treasury Secretary Tim Guitner when he said, “Asia has us underwater” in 2008. The white cardboard boat breaking through the “Bamboo Curtain” symbolizes the outsourcing of jobs, culture and economy to the Far East. The gold oar is the money and greed that drives this system.
“GOLDEN GIRLS”
2012; cast bronze, Douglas fir - 57” H x 14” W x 14” D

“THORN OF PLENTY”
facing page, 2012; basalt, pallet wood, bronze - 77” H x 39” W x 24” D
“THORN OF PLENTY” detail

“GOLDEN GIRLS” detail

“KING OF THINGS” detail

“KING OF THINGS”

facing page, 2010; cast bronze, aluminum, Indian marble, cast epoxy - 70”H x 22”W x 24”D
"CONGRESS" detail

detail of bronze patina

"CONGRESS"
facing page, 2012; cast bronze, basalt - 79" H x 18" W x 18" D

This piece graphically illustrates the stagnant two houses of Congress. This old boys club sucking each other’s smoke, without introducing fresh air or ideas. They both get cancer.
“PAPER TRAIL”
2012; clay-infused resin, wood veneer, cast bronze - 53” H x 36” W x 36” D

“QUEEN OF TIME”
facing page, 2012; cast bronze, resin wood knot, 45 rpm records - 76” H x 33” W x 28” D
“QUEEN OF TIME” details
“CHALK TALK”  
2006; cast bronze, blackboard slate, steel  
49” H x 72” W x 24” D

The stool is made of blackboard slate which was formed in the Jurassic period when the dinosaurs died. The large ibis bird skull is a future archeological find implying T-rex scale will return after the next great extinction due to global warming. Today’s scientists working on these predictions work on blackboards, thus “Chalk Talk.”
The carved wooden comb represents the number of “old growth trees” that have been cut for purposes of adornment, i.e., furniture, paneling, decor. The one comb tine left is a branch that represents the 1½% of old growth trees that are remaining, the best lungs of the planet.
“GENERATION GAP”
2012; cast aluminum 43” W x 16” H x 3.5” D

The casual and temporary joining of old school and new wave technology on a safety pin, an object used for temporary repair. A visual symbol of the digital and generational divide.

“PAPER TRAIL” detail of inlaid veneer
“OUT OF AFRICA”
2012; baltic matte, resin 78” W x 40” H x 13” D

Picasso’s work and surrealist can be traced back to African art in the early days of the 19th century.

“INCIDENTAL INCUBATOR”
facing page, 2010; cast bronze, aluminum 8’ H x 36” W x 36” D

The egg has been calculated to be the size of six billion embryos or the population of the planet. Unintentionally throw in the garbage by the three classes; rich, poor and middle class.
CAREER SUMMARY

David Middlebrook is an artist who traces his roots to ceramics and who has evolved to become a professional sculptor specializing in site-specific work, public and private commissions, and smaller sculptural elements. He was born and raised in Jackson, Michigan and went on to earn his M.F.A from the University of Iowa in 1970. He burst into the art world and quickly became an inspiring pioneer in a ceramic art movement that was gaining momentum in the late 1970’s. He accepted a teaching position at San Jose State University in 1974, relocated to California and has maintained a studio in the hills of south bay Los Gatos ever since. David has had several transforming experiences that have molded him into the artist he is today. In 1980, he gathered his family and moved to the northern tip of Australia where he held the post of visiting artist at the University of Darwin. And then in 1982 he took a similar position at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Both experiences were 1-year excursions and allowed David to explore these two remarkable countries. His travels put him in direct contact with the respective native cultures of each country and their unique artistic vision of life. This exposure proved to be quite influential in terms of content as the primitive aesthetic continues to find its way into David’s work to this day.

As a master of ceramics and all its applications, for years David had struggled with the instability of the material and found many of its characteristics to be limiting. In 1983 he traveled to Northern Italy and discovered stone and it changed his approach to art forever. Since that trip, he has maintained a professional relationship with a studio in Pietrasanta, Italy. The availability of virtually every stone in the world, a thousand years of experience and tradition in stone and their specialized technology to fabricate, make this Italian resource an invaluable asset. In addition to the 2 trips he makes to Italy each year, David maintains his status as Associate Director of Fine Arts at SJSU, which affords him the use of the university foundry for his bronze work.

Over the last 20 years, David Middlebrook has evolved as an artist and become a master of materials. His work today involves a broad range of stone, marble and bronze with dimensions ranging from 50 lbs. to 50 tons. He has established himself as a specialist in large-scale site-specific work. These projects have fostered collaborations with architects, design professionals, developers and contractors. He has completed approximately 50 public and private works of this nature, many of which were nationally-awarded competition commissions.

Having established his career as a sculptor of ceramic works during the Bay Area Funk Movement, South Bay artist David Middlebrook now focuses on creating large-scale stone and bronze sculptures for public and private art collections. As the past Associate Director of Fine Arts for San Jose State University, he inspired countless aspiring artists with his dynamic works that seem to defy gravity and challenge the laws of physics in the world in which we live. His sculptures possess a visual playfulness that is balanced by the artist’s political critique as he examines current economic and environmental affairs. These narratives are born from the preservation and stewardship of our planet; emphasizing and celebrating all that is precious in this world, Middlebrook pays tribute to Duchamp, Brancusi and Magritte.

“I speak through objects and in doing so I make thought visible. First and foremost, the piece has to work visually in form, color and composition. Each piece is harmoniously assembled combining objects with no prior association, thus inviting the viewer to think/ponder, “How does this work?” explains Middlebrook.

Looking at art is an eye opening experience. “When you look at my art you want to know more. I want my work to leave its audience with inquiry, evoking questions like, “What does this mean and how is this made?” I enjoy creating work that transcends the viewer’s preference, thus, challenging and altering their preconceived thoughts,” states Middlebrook. Each individual conceptualizes the work uniquely through personal association. The variation of these interpretations is refreshingly imaginative.

Art is entertainment. It nurtures our minds, our visual and emotional needs, and personal history. Art feeds our curiosity, if we are open to it. It enables us to have a relationship with the artist, his concepts and the history behind the work. When encountering a piece of art composed of familiar image, color and texture, a personal connection is immediately bridged between artist and observer. In this way, Middlebrook creates a history with his work. Middlebrook believes that real artists are ordinary people with extra-ordinary ideas.
BIography
David Middlebrook
Lives and works in Los Gatos, California

EDUCATION
B.A. Albion College, Michigan, M.A. & M.F.A University of Iowa

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES
Associate Director of Fine Arts, School of Art and Design, 1993-2010 Head of Sculpture. Professor at San Jose State University, San Jose, California. 1974-2010 Visiting Artist/Resident Member, Bottega Versilisi, Pietra Santa, Italy. Permanent sculpture residency for execution of large-scale, marble and stone work. (24 resident visits since 1983)
Visiting Resident Artist (selected): Notre Dame University, Mills College, California (1977), Ohio State University, Ohio, Australian Arts Council, Australia (1980), University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa (1983)

UPCOMING EVENTS
2013 Solo Show Installation, Johannesburg, South Africa
2014 "20th Anniversary Commemorative Bracero Commission", France

50 SOLO SHOWS INCLUDING
2010-2011 "100 BIBLICAL SUBJECTS" (selected), Trinity College Chapel, Dublin, Ireland
2010 Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, California
2009 "Arts and the Environment", Quay Gallery, San Francisco, California
2008 Mac Fine Art, Miami Basel International Art Fair, Miami, Florida
2006 "New Works, Brenda Taylor Gallery, New York, New York"
1992 "Earth Abides", Contemporary Wing, San Jose Museum of Art, California. One-year installation Quantum Corporation. San Jose, California
1990 "Hillside Sculpture Site Art", Hiestand Museum, Oxford, Ohio
1989-88 "American Jewish Cultural Center, Jerusalem, Israel"
1987 Kyle Belding Gallery, Denver, Colorado
1986 Marilyn Butler Fine Art, Scottsdale, Arizona
1985 "Arts and the Environment", Quay Gallery, San Francisco, California
1984 "Drawings and Paintings", Quay Gallery, San Francisco, California
1981 "Tribute to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur L. Loraine" (selected), San Francisco, California
1979 "Joshua Wedgwood Memorial Invitational", American Museum of Ceramic Art, Los Angeles County, California
1978 "City of Santa Clara Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition" (selected), San Jose, California
1976 "National Endowment for the Arts" (selected), San Jose, California

AWARDS
1977 1st prize City of Santa Clara Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition

PUBLICATIONS: (selected list)

Over 100 workshops and lectures worldwide including:
Australia, South Africa, Italy, England, Bangkok, and over 50 American universities including; RI School of Design, Alfred University, Cranbrook, Scripps, Notre Dame, University of M.I., Ohio State, LSU, and Art Institutes of Chicago, S.F., Kansas City, L.A.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
San Jose Museum of Art, NYC Museum of Art and Design, Kentucky Arts Commission Touring Collection, Davenport Municipal Gallery, Iowa. Dublin Arts Council, Dublin, Ohio, Cedar Rapids Art Center, IA, DeAnza College, Cupertino, CA
San Jose International Airport, CA, Fujiitsu Corporation, Westin Hotel, Palo Alto, CA, Sydney Australia, Sunnyvale, CA
Heritage Bank, San Jose, CA, Continental Bank, Rockland, IL, McDonald’s, Inc.
Chicago, IL, Cadence Corporation, San Jose, CA
Amrath, San Jose, CA, City of Sunnyvale, CA, City of Sacramento, CA, City of Santa Cruz, CA, City of Davis, CA, City of Folsom, CA, City of Kent (Seattle), WA, State of Colorado, University of Iowa, University of Washington, Arizona State University, University of Kansas
Winona State College, MN, Pueblo Community College, Pueblo, Colorado, County of Milwaukee, WI

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS, PARTIAL LIST
Bob & Jan Fenwick, Los Altos, CA
Rosemary & Ted Buttner, Sunol, CA
Ken & Shari Sweeney, Gilroy, CA
Carol and Kurt Peterson, Palm Springs, CA
Dr. Donald Head Estate, Saratoga, CA
Dr. Andreas and Kasthina Neuer, Dortmund, Germany
Stephan A. Jansen Friedrichshafen, Germany
Anne Mandenoff and Guy de Vleeschouwer Brussels, Belgium
Siefel & Howard Maubauh S.F., CA

CREDITS
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The essay “How Things Work” - DeWitt Cheng
Phil Hitchcock, director, CSUS University Library Gallery
FinishLine Print Specialists - Shingle Springs, CA
California State University, Sacramento
Joan McLoughlin of The McLoughlin Gallery, San Francisco
“Art making involves personal reflection.”

photo taken by artist in Chicago while looking at “Sky Mirror” by Anish Kapoor

“As we develop greater knowledge and technology allowing us to unravel the mysteries of our universe, we must also evolve our consciousness and sensitivity to the fragile nature of this delicate balance. It is my view that the long-term stewardship of this planet will be equally the responsibility of our poets and scientists to preserve our children’s inheritance.”