

Michael Parker's Steam Work - Interview

By Elicia Epstein
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I shed my shoes, leggings and shirt, and looked around me to watch a few others do the same. Kneeling down, I crept under the giant egg and climbed slowly into the hot, wet and cavernous space above me.

My hands brushed the sweaty knees of my friend as I patted around in the dark to find a seat. Eventually finding a spot, I relaxed back into the cool, wet wall of the egg, closed my eyes and inhaled the aromas of fresh lavender and sage. It felt distinctly inappropriate to be only in my underwear and bra in a public San Francisco art gallery, but then again, the space had been transformed. It was no longer Southern Exposure (SoEx), the Mission District space home to the bay-area arts non-

profit of the same name. It was now the dwelling of artist Michael Parker's *Steam Work*. Parker's installation is multifaceted; the piece involves a winding, suspended ceramic waterfall that feeds human-sized dipping tubs, hydrations stations, cups for drinking from, floor cushions, and finally, a giant, mirrored steam egg allowing visitors to sit with strangers, steam in essential oils and sweat. *Steam Work* was at the Southern Exposure gallery earlier this spring. There were weekly public Drop-In Steams as well as Steam and Sound Nights for the duration of the exhibition.

The piece was the first solo exhibition north of Los Angeles for Michael Parker, whose works frequently involve sculpture, installation and group experience. Parker studied Studio Art as an undergraduate at Pomona College, and went on to get his MFA at the USC's Roski School of Fine Art in 2009. He currently teaches sculpture at California State University, Long Beach, and his other recent projects include *Juicework* at Human Resources in Los Angeles, and *The Unfinished* along the LA River at The Bowtie Project. After a few rounds of steaming and dipping, I sat down with Parker to ask him a few questions about *Steam Work* and the concepts behind it.

EE: Can you start by talking generally about this project and your inspirations for it?

MP: *Steam Work* is my new show at Southern Exposure Gallery, a non-profit arts space in the Mission district. It's a neighborhood in San Francisco that has changed a lot in the last 20 years. It had historically been an artist-heavy place and now it's super tech heavy and very much gentrified. That's always an interesting thing of how land can change hands. And I've been interested in how land changes hands for a long time. I think the history of California is a lot about how it was sold to the world as an idea. It was sold as this utopian place where people could come and create this idealized life for themselves. One of the most important books I read as a kid, or maybe when I was in transition to adulthood, was *The Grapes of Wrath*. The idea of this cotton-- these farmers coming and trying to make a life for themselves picking fruit-- was very interesting to me, as this thing that was sold. But then how, Los Angeles for example, was this place where people bought the land and then wanted to sell the land and so they would advertise with these posters that said things like "How About Your Own Fruit Tree?" A year ago I did a project that mined that history of land speculation. And a little before that, I did this project along the edge of the LA river, which took this historic monument, this obelisk, as this failed symbol of hierarchical power and horizontality. I think that this project, this iteration of the Steam Egg, I want to create a world for the Steam Egg, and I wanted it to relate to this history of California. I decided I wanted to make these personal pools, these small bathtubs, so to speak, as a sculpture, where I would create a gutter system—basically

a system that was an endless cycle of water coming down and going back up and coming down and going back up, to reflect a little bit towards this history of California and then I also wanted to play a little with this idea of horizontal power structures and vertical power structures. So I decided to cite the top tub as high as I could, and have the water go as far horizontally as I could, into almost this internal river system. That river system, that aqueduct, that suspension bridge, speaking to the history of this place-- the Bay Area, as another site where you would get really hot and sweaty-- then you would have to even more fully commit than just a sweat, which was to then splash water on yourself or deeply submerge your body into this body of water.

EE: Was the Steam Egg always about that?

MP: The Steam Egg started off as this idea of taking the largest human scale thing I could make that was about the body and about this notion of communal space. I worked on the back of an ambulance for five years. The small, intimate space with strangers, during intense bodily moments, was an incredibly formative thing for me, intellectually and physically. The egg, I think, was this other version of bringing that kind of public intimacy, this anonymous, nonsexual bodily intimacy into a sculptural space.

EE: I'm curious also about the change in material from this iteration of Steam Work from the installation of the Steam Egg you did last year at Pomona. Specifically, this departs from earlier versions with the addition of all the ceramic pieces.

MP: Right. So, I've discovered since then that I get ceramics as a material and I can figure out how to make things intuitively and easily. I also enjoy it and it feels productive. I'm just going for it. It's in this way that I can quickly work through an idea.

EE: So the ceramic elements are not so much conceptually-motivated as materially-motivated.

MP: Right, I just realized that I could make it in a certain amount of Rapidity. And I only had two and a half months before I had the show. SoEx invited me to show the Steam Egg, and I didn't want to just show the Steam Egg. I wanted to create; in the same way *Juicework* just started with the idea of the juicer, it became this way to extract California history, with this tool that's the most over the top hand-made thing you could make. That was the idea. The juicer is the idea. Here the Steam Egg is the idea. But when it was at Pomona, I had just made it. It was like letting it go into other people's hands. It could be other people's. It didn't just need to be in my world. I was curious how other people would enjoy it and use it, or not enjoy it. But they did. So the idea for this Steam Egg, Steam Egg II, is that it can have these other lives. It's designed in this way so that it can come apart and get put back together with relative ease. But for me too it's really great that through this project I've gotten to work with a lot of people. The one thing I didn't fully realize that I want to do is create a full credit list, not just a "thank you" list. I think it's really interesting how these mythic ideas of the artist credits are done. The things I make in clay are so handmade it's so inherent to it, but at the same time, I share credit for everything. But the actual forming of the clay I always do that myself.

EE: Do you think that your impulse to credit people has to do with the same impulse that motivates you around communal space in the steam egg?

MP: Yeah. I think that they are definitely connected for sure.

EE: There's a social empathy thread throughout that. But then again, that has to be a thing for anyone who is also interested in looking at the political history of California.

MP: Yeah. But then it's not just the political history of California. I just happened to have lived in California my whole adult life, so I'm really informed by its liveness. There's so much in California's history that's so relatable to the politics and social history of the world. The Obelisk-- that idea came out of this empathy with the social-political struggle that was happening during the Arab Spring and having this thought that there's nothing I can actually do so maybe I can make this gesture, this attempt of trying to make this thing, originally designed as a symbol of hierarchical power, on state-owned land. But I just didn't think that the state would actually let me do it, but then permission came within three months of proposing the idea to them. Which was crazy.

EE: I think in that way to Obelisk has a pretty clear metaphor to it. What's really interesting to me about *Steam Work* and *Juice Work*, is that there are clear notions that have motivated the work, but that coming in here I wouldn't be like "This is about the lands changing of hands and vertical power structures!" You know, there are 50 or more things that it touches on and references. That seems like a wonderful strength of the work. Just like you were talking about passing the Steam Egg on at Pomona. You're really allowing the work to be passed off.

MP: Right, and to be interpreted however. This is what motivates ME. This is how my brain gets excited and have enough energy to keep going when I'm tired.