

## Visiting artist Michelle Lopez finds beauty in destruction



Artist Michelle Lopez is infatuated with collapse and failure. She crushes, wrecks, crumples, bends, wilts, damages and deconstructs materials and imagery to create her sculptures and installations. The results are mangled forms that invert cultural iconography.

"For me, material is everything," Lopez said. "The material's origin and the artist's manipulation of material are what determine if a thing becomes a work of art or not."

Lopez will travel from her home in Brooklyn to Spokane for the first time next week to discuss her violent explorations in materials in three talks as part of the Visiting Artist Lecture Series. The lectures are presented by Spokane Falls Community College, the Jundt Art Museum, Eastern Washington University and the Sahlin Foundation.

Lopez has shown at venues nationally and internationally with solo exhibits in Paris, Istanbul and New York. Her sculptures and installations have been included in exhibitions at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard, Bass Museum of Art and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Lopez's latest show, "House of Cards," opened last month at New York's Simon Preston Gallery.

Lopez's artistic process, and subsequent distorted shapes, can be directly traced to the events of 9/11. The then-31-year-old artist was installing a solo show in Soho when the first tower went down. Lopez should have been thrilled to have been featured by Deitch Projects Gallery, known for picking the next great art stars. Instead, she wanted to cancel the show. Nothing seemed relevant anymore. Not escape, entertainment, and certainly not art created pre-9/11.

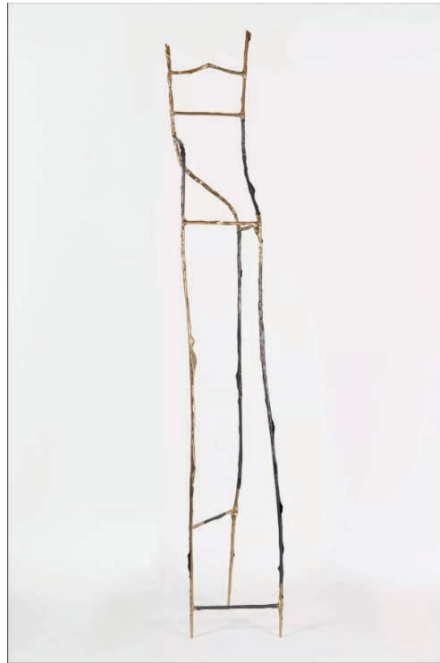
"It was a super dark time," Lopez said. "But my dealer said we have to have the show because we don't know what will happen to New York if we all give up."

The exhibit was eye-popping. Objects were wrapped in leather, even an entire car, examining how society fetishizes objects. None of the sculptures rested on pedestals, but rather nestled on top of sand that covered the floor like a beach.

But times had changed, and so had Lopez, in a way. Something in her had broken, or at least morphed into something else. She soon moved for a time to Berkeley to teach art at the University of California. She threw herself into exploring new ideas and materials. The sand and the leather fell away. She began to derive narratives from depictions of technological failure.

"I got a bit obsessed with plane debris," Lopez said. "There came this question of what does it mean to think about work in fragments?"

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par Audrey Overstreet



In 2009, she held her first solo show back in New York since 9/11, called "The Violent Bear It Away." The title is from the southern Gothic novel by Flannery O'Connor that propels the notion that everything that destroys also creates. Lopez garnered critical acclaim for her triumphant return, including praise for "Woodsonner," the leather-wrapped car from the 2001 show. It was now "edited," a wrecked shell leaned uselessly against a wall, its leather drooping and deteriorating. Another piece included a tree smashing through another wall, broken but held together in places with resin material that Lopez fashioned as intricate phantom limbs.

Over the years, Lopez has studied with leather crafters, carmakers, chemists, prosthetics experts and pastry chefs. In her 2012 show "Blue Angels," she created airplane wings by riveting together industrial sheets of mirrored aluminum and powder-coated steel, only to destroy their perfect surfaces with her own body.

"For me, ('Blue Angels') represented the failure of technology and of it being turned into a weapon, and forever having this kind of ambivalence about the triumph of western culture," Lopez said. "I wanted to represent this kind of deflated form. But it's also a stance of just thinking about being an American female sculptor and really dealing with the history of this masculine, male-dominated art form and wanting to critique that in some way."

For another show, against the advice of a gallery owner, Lopez made mirrors from silver nitrate to simulate smoke patterns from explosions. "He said it looked like dirt," Lopez said, laughing. "I was glad I stood my ground." He later admitted he was wrong. The show was another success.

"I'm very open to what materials would elucidate my concept or even critique Western iconography," Lopez said. "Like right now I've been examining not only tornado clouds but also (virtual) information clouds, and working with Google to examine data hacking."

"Materials is such a broad word. There are so many opportunities there."

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