

CLAIRE HEALY  
SEAN CORDEIRO  
ARE WE  
THERE YET?

**NOW** AT THE  
CORCORAN



# CLAIRE HEALY SEAN CORDEIRO ARE WE THERE YET?

*The field of space feeding is unlimited. When interplanetary travel is as pedestrian as freeway traffic, meals in space may be as common—and basic—as tonight's family dinner.<sup>1</sup>*  
—Los Angeles Times, December 21, 1964

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro's art demonstrates the transformative potential of the quotidian. The objects and installations they produce reference the history of art, yet the primary concern that underlies much of their practice is scrutiny of the world at large. Healy and Cordeiro's evocative and enigmatic works investigate the human condition, teasing out discomforts and anxieties through multilayered and often playful presentations. Since 2005 they have lived in both Sydney and Berlin, but they

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Sydney 2009.  
Photo: Olivia Martin-McGuire.

spend much of the year crisscrossing the globe, undertaking artists' residencies and conceiving works inspired by their shifting locations and experiences. For such intrepid travelers, it seems fitting that much of what inspires them involves modes of living, adapting for their subjects the objects that inform conceptions of cultural specificity and personal identity. They present familiar matter in unexpected contexts, testing the balance between imaginative license and rational inquiry.

The Corcoran has commissioned Healy and Cordeiro to create a new body of work for this, their first exhibition in the United States. Occupying two discrete spaces at the Corcoran, their project consists of a site-specific gallery installation, *Are We There Yet?*, and seven wall works constructed from Lego blocks from the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-11. Adopting a technique akin to culture-jamming, the artists refer directly to events from American history and to literature, pop culture, and current affairs. They also explore the symbolism of space exploration and the gulf between aspiration and reality. The materials they use for their sublime explorations are "readymades," composed of products found on supermarket shelves and in toy stores, repurposed in the context of the museum.



In considering a new site-specific installation for the Corcoran, Healy and Cordeiro observed that "our universe is both infinitely small and infinitely vast, with our own bodily experience of scale sitting somewhere between." A planetary system constructed from grocery products, *Are We There Yet?* consists of ten hemispheres, representing the sun and nine planets (including Pluto), within our solar system. Each hemisphere has been built using the provisions necessary for an "everyman" astronaut to survive a 520-day round-trip journey to Mars. Based on a 3,800-calorie-per-day diet (plus a daily ration of 9.6 cigarettes), the chosen supplies reference categories from the ten top-selling grocery items in the United States during 2009, including cans of soft drinks, boxes of cereal, and salty snacks.<sup>2</sup> The installation also includes a bed from IKEA, a replica EVA Space Suit on loan from NASA, and 1,586 square feet of gold-anodized aluminum that covers the entire gallery floor. This reflective surface alludes to "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," the final passage of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This seminal 1968 film also inspired the artists to include elements based on the final sequence's mysterious bedroom, the visionary environment that hosts the symbolic death and transfiguration of the film's "everyman" astronaut David Bowman. *Are We There Yet?* echoes the film's ultimate journey of isolation and reflection: an



*2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Courtesy MGM / Photofest. Photo: Kevin Bray ©MGM



Top: *I Hope Tomorrow is just like Today*, 2008. IKEA furniture. 126 x 90 1/2 x 6 in. Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney. Belgiorno-Nettis Foundation Collection. Photo: Uwe Walter

Bottom: *Hänsel and Gretel*, 2008. Laser etched IKEA knäckebröd. 18 x 18 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney. Mohseni Collection, Hong Kong and Singapore. Photo: Uwe Walter.

introspective experience into the depths of space and the realm of the imagination.

The title of this installation seems, on the surface, a tongue-in-cheek gesture to the long, tiring family journeys required to traverse vast countries such as the United States and Australia (and epitomized by popular cartoons like *The Simpsons* or in the children's books of Alison Lester). Alternatively, it could suggest a contemplative investigation into the very effort of living life. Most directly, though, the title acknowledges the monotony and isolation experienced by astronauts traveling through space, where surely the most irritating question for any crew member to ask must be "are we there yet?"

Healy and Cordeiro have also used as inspiration Henry David Thoreau's twenty-six-month-long experiment in social isolation at Walden Pond, Massachusetts from 1845 to 1847. By attempting to do away with the excesses of life and retreating into the landscape, Thoreau sought to discover whether it was possible to transcend normality and experience the divine. In his account of this period, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Thoreau wrote:

*It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have*

*been taken to obtain them; or even to look over the old day-books of the merchants, to see what it was that men most commonly bought at the stores, what they stored, that is, what are the grossest groceries. For the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence; as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.*<sup>3</sup>

Musing on these ideas of necessity and isolation in the context of the 21st century, Healy and Cordeiro write:

*How can we be distinguished by what we consume? As the saying goes: you are what you eat. Walden has inspired us on this journey. Through isolation within his wooden cabin, Thoreau goes on a spiritual journey, burrowing into the self and in essence the society that has nurtured and shaped the self. He looks at what bare necessities it takes to live—analyzing materialist and consumerist ideals of Western culture and critiquing their value.... The wood cabin is akin to the space capsule, although vastly different in many ways; the solitude it provides, set against a vast backdrop of nature, perhaps invokes the many philosophical questions that come of such an inward journey. Walden hones in on the bare necessities of life, the fundamentals of what it takes to exist.*

Artists have long investigated the boundaries of human existence, seeking a link between the

earthly and the celestial. Healy and Cordeiro use objects that have existing meanings and associations to build new interpretations. "Space" and "Time" have been recurring themes in Healy and Cordeiro's work for a number of years. A body of work from 2008, including *I Hope Tomorrow Is Just Like Today*, and *Hänsel and Gretel*, adapts the "Pioneer Plaque" diagram (a pictorial message attached in 1972 and 1973 to robotic planetary explorers Pioneer 10 and 11), to question the significance of material possessions, as well as the challenge for human beings to live within our means. Healy and Cordeiro overlay the diagram (depicting a naked man and woman and map of the planets) with instruction manuals, knäckebröd Swedish crisp breads, and IKEA furniture, repurposed to reference Piet Mondrian's iconic paintings. These works mimic the original objective of the plaques and pose the question: if they were to be discovered by other life forms, how would they be interpreted?

Healy and Cordeiro's 2009 artwork *Life Span*, installed within the deconsecrated chapel of a former nunnery in Venice, consisted of 175,218 VHS videocassettes, stacked into a giant monolith. The combined running time of these video cassettes was 60.1 years, the average human life span in 1976, the year the VHS-format consumer videotape was first released to the public. This installation of obsolete technology within a former convent could be read as both a

meditation on life encased by spirituality and a monument to modernity within the realm of high culture. Indeed the large VHS block, dense with inaccessible information, was as imposing and mysterious as the monolith that served as a gateway through time and space in Kubrick's *2001*.

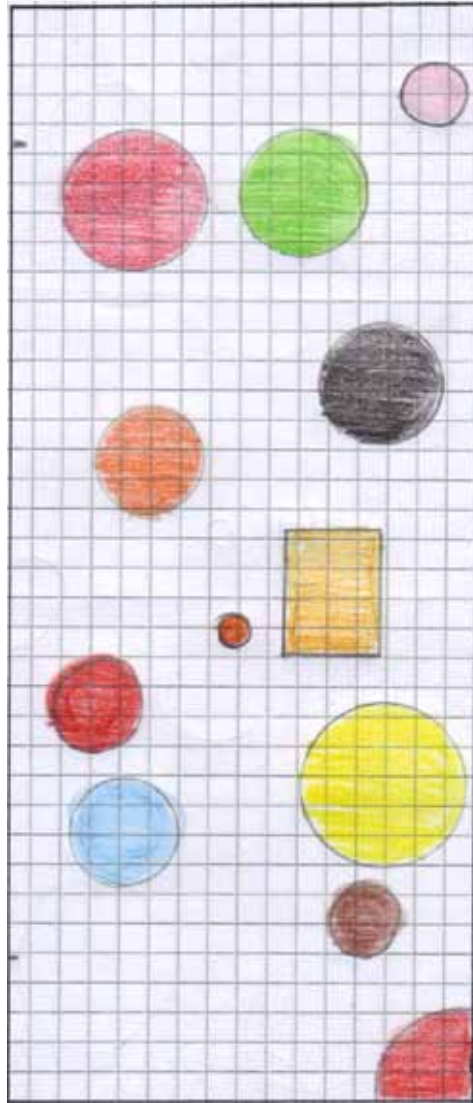
*2001: A Space Odyssey* stands as one of the most ambitious and esoteric science fiction films ever made. Groundbreaking in its use of film technology and depicting a not-too-distant future where space travel could be as accessible as international flight was for contemporary audiences, the film became the pop culture touchstone for visualization of the space experience. The neo-classically decorated bedroom in the final sequence of *2001* is not dissimilar from the architecture and scale of the Corcoran's Beaux Arts galleries. In the film, this room evokes a human zoo or observation center, and in the context of the museum—and Healy and Cordeiro's installation—we find ourselves within a cultural time capsule, surrounded by the products of our creation.

While we may not be traveling beyond the Earth's atmosphere as regular commuters, the ambition to establish a greater understanding of our universe is still vital to the work of governments and corporations. In 2010 U.S. President Barack Obama said, "By the mid-2030s,

I believe we can send humans to orbit Mars and return them safely to Earth."<sup>4</sup> A year later we have observed the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's first manned flight into space as well as the retirement of the ambitious NASA Space Shuttle program. Another recent milestone is particularly resonant with *Are We There Yet?* In 2010, a crew of six men entered a 19,400-cubic-foot ground-based experimental facility in Moscow for a 520-day experiment. This trial, Mars 500, coordinated by the European Space Agency and the Russian Academy of Science's Institute for Biomedical Problems, aimed to simulate the time scale and conditions of a manned mission to Mars. The "Marsonauts" ate rationed space meals comparable to those consumed on the International Space Station; drinking alcohol and smoking were prohibited; and communications to mission control—and beyond—took place through computer technologies such as e-mail, Web-diaries, Tweeting, and a YouTube channel. Within the facility was a greenhouse for plant cultivation, a gym, central command unit, medical module, storage module, kitchen, and bathroom. There was no access to natural air or light.



Far right: *Life Span*, 2009, 175, 218 VHS video cassettes, silicone. 236 x 130 x 203 1/2 in. Installed at the Ludoteca, 53rd Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldouls, Sydney. Upper and lower left: *Life Span*, 2009, (detail).



Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, working sketch for *Are We There Yet?*, 2011. Courtesy of the artists.

Proposing an alternative conceptual field trip to the Red Planet, Healy and Cordeiro comment: *This project was not really one that we had filed away in our little black book, waiting for the right space to come along, rather it was an inspiration that came upon visiting Washington, D.C., for our site visit. It made sense that within the precinct of so many museums that we engage with the city in such a fashion. We thought it would be fun to jam space exploration with consumerism, a meditation on how we live and what we consume ... within a museological context. Purchasing some freeze-dried ice cream from the Air and Space Museum and a visit to Costco, seeing the perceived basic necessities that go into the shopping trolley, got us thinking...*

Beyond its everyday centrality in our lives, as the source of our nutrition and the fulcrum of our survival, food is key to establishing our collective understanding of the importance of occasions. We “break bread” at events as disparate as birthdays, religious holidays, and sporting activities. Just as advancements in science, technology, and industry have enabled human travel to space, so have substantial developments occurred in food science, resulting in greater distribution of products and longer shelf life. Drawing from the long established tradition of artists using food as a means to explore mortality and symbolize time, and with particular

responsiveness to works by Andy Warhol, George Maciunas, and Roy Lichtenstein, Healy and Cordeiro arrange their selected non-perishables into a cosmological supermarket. Brand names are repeated infinitely in the reflective surfaces of the gallery, reinforcing the Pop iconography of advertising as well as the fundamental role food plays in our lifestyle and culture.



Seven works constructed from Lego blocks are also displayed in the Corcoran’s first-floor atrium space. These large-scale wall-works are an adaption of both iconic and unfamiliar images, and a continuation of the artists’ ongoing series *Where We’ve Been, Where We’re Going, Why*, 2010–11. Incorporating images of the 1986 Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster, these works are pixelated, abstracted arrangements of lurid color and shiny surfaces as well as a disquieting and profoundly sad reminder of human loss in the pursuit of knowledge. The title of this body of work references Paul Gauguin’s allegorical painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* from 1897–98. It also echoes the name of a lesson plan prepared by Christa McAuliffe, NASA’s first Teacher in Space, intended for presentation to earthbound students during the 1986 *Challenger* mission. Witnessed on television screens around the world, the

*Challenger* disaster humanized the risk of devastation inherent in space exploration. Unsettling, grotesque, humbling, yet spirited, these works illustrate the crux of Healy and Cordeiro’s practice—an investigation into the paradox of human behavior. The *Challenger* works are a scrutiny of our aspirations, needs, emotions, and pursuits, as well as our relationship with the planet we occupy.

Healy and Cordeiro’s art is simultaneously wondrous and provocative, transforming the ordinary far beyond any intended utility. Drawing relationships between the unexpected and the everyday, they encourage us to look from a different perspective and to think beyond our comfort zone. Their art is an endeavor in this fragile world to make order from chaos and to ask the questions that have no answers.

Beatrice Gralton  
Evelyn S. Nef Associate Curator  
of Contemporary Art

1. “OUT IN SPACE: Table Manners Up for Grabs.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1964.
2. Although the average recommended intake is 2,000 calories, the purchased intake, allowing for spoiling, plate wastage, and other losses is 3,800.
3. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854 Time New York, 1962, pp 9–10.
4. President Barack Obama, April 15, 2010. NASA Kennedy Space Center, Florida.

All quotes from the artists have been extracted from an email interview between the author and artists, September 2011.

## ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

Claire Healy (b. 1971) and Sean Cordeiro (b. 1974) began collaborating on works in 2001 while undertaking their Master of Fine Arts research degrees at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. In 2005 they were awarded Australia Council residencies in Berlin and Tokyo, and they have since been based in Sydney and Berlin. In 2006–07 they were guest artists at the Universität der Künste, Berlin. In 2010 they participated in the residency program at the Akiyoshidai International Artist Village and took part in the Setouchi International Art Festival 2010.

Exhibitions of Healy and Cordeiro's work include PREMS at La bf15, as part of the Biennale de Lyon 2009, Paper Trail at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 2007, flatpack at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2006, and The Cordial Home Project, Artspace Sydney in 2003. Their work has been included in numerous group exhibitions in Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, Turkey, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.

Healy and Cordeiro's installation *Life Span* was part of the Australian representation at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009. Their works are held in collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Newcastle Regional

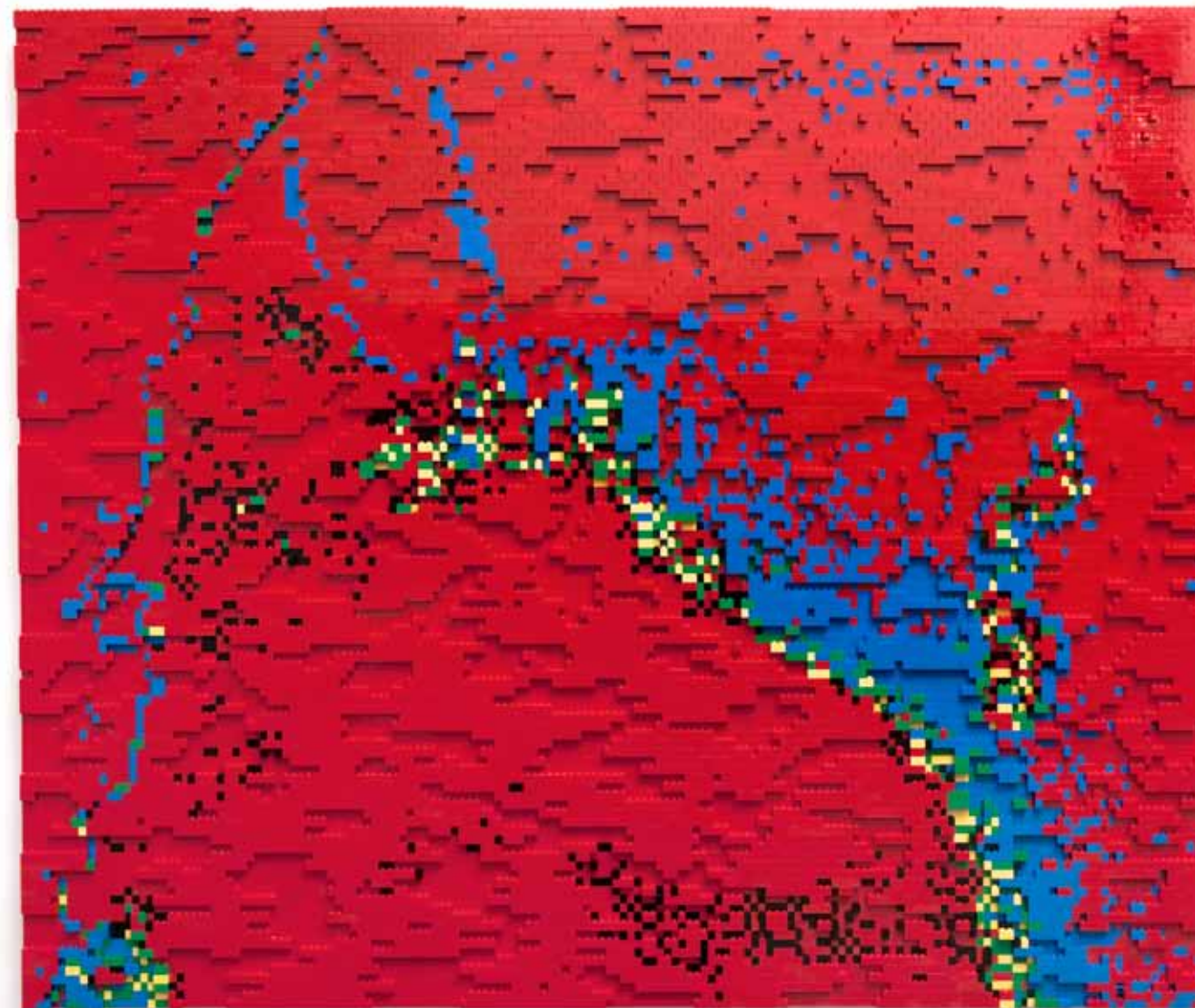
Art Gallery, New South Wales; and The University of Queensland Art Museum. In 2010, Sean Cordeiro was awarded a fellowship by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. The exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro: Are We There Yet?* is the first presentation of their work in the United States.

## NOW AT THE CORCORAN

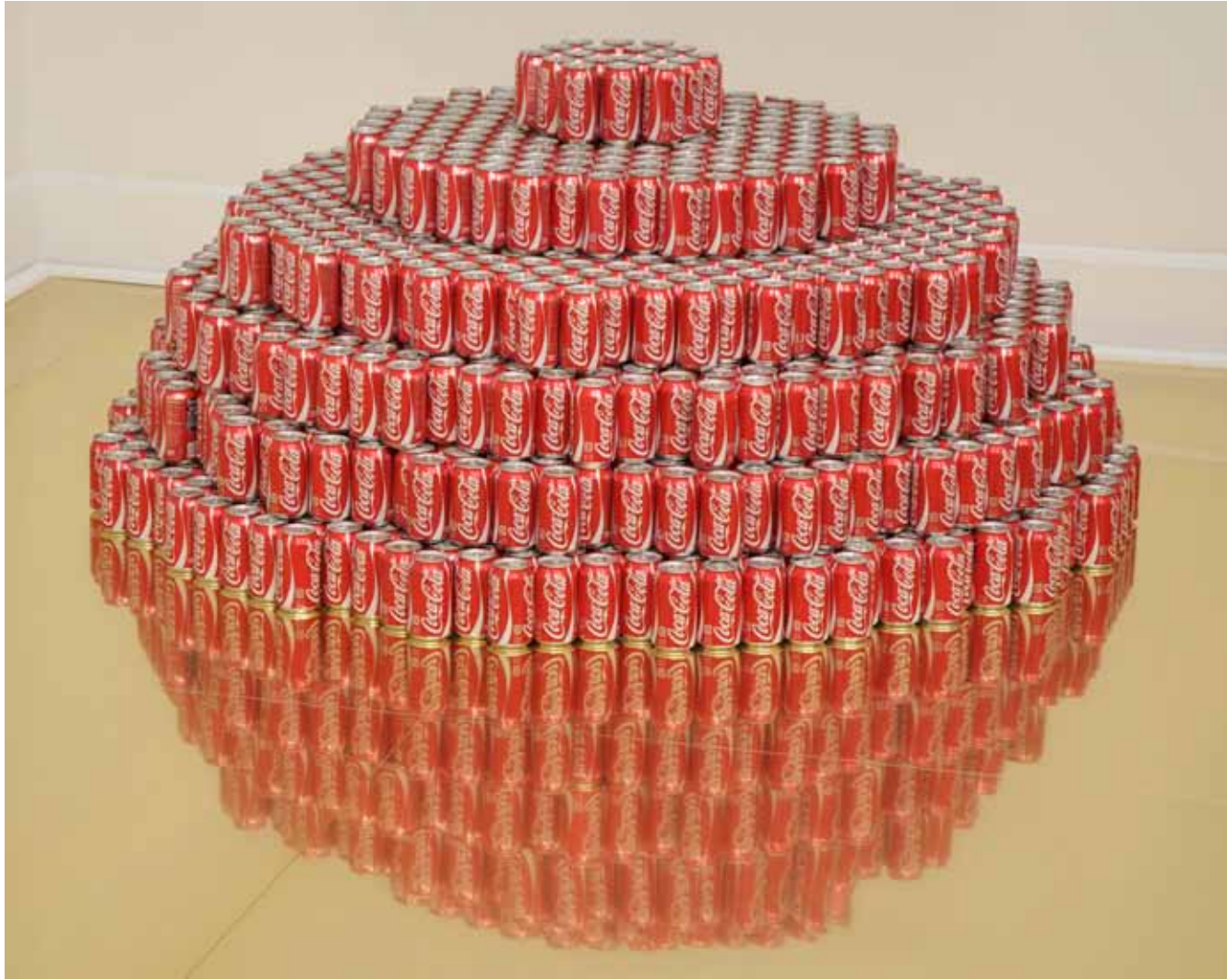
*NOW at the Corcoran* is a series of exhibitions that presents new and site-specific work by emerging and mid-career artists. It highlights work that addresses issues central to the local, national, and global communities of Washington, D.C., and that responds to the collections, history, and architecture of the museum.

This exhibition is organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and supported by the Australian Government through the Embassy of Australia, Washington, D.C. and the Australia Council for the Arts. Additional support has been provided by the Corcoran Contemporaries.

[www.corcoran.org/NOW](http://www.corcoran.org/NOW)



*T+64\_red*, 2011, from the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010–2011, 51 1/2 x 44 x 1 1/2 in. Lego, Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney.



*Are We There Yet?* (detail), 2011. Gallery installation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. 97 boxes of 3L Black Box Chardonnay, 360 Boyardee Beef Ravioli 15 oz. tins, 83 cases of Bud Light, 624 cans of Carnation Evaporated Milk, 43 Cheerios Twin pack 37 oz., 95 cases of Coca Cola, 40 Kraft Velveeta loaves (2 x 32 ounce loaves per package), 49 boxes of Nabisco Premium Saltine Crackers 3 lb., 25 cases of Marlboro Red, 41 containers of Utz cheese balls, replica EVA Space Suit on loan from NASA, IKEA bed, pillow, duvet, gold anodized aluminum, 239 x 732 x 312 in. Courtesy of the artists, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, San Francisco

## CLAIRE HEALY AND SEAN CORDEIRO: ARE WE THERE YET?

DECEMBER 3, 2011-MARCH 11, 2012  
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

### EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works are by Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro.



*Are We There Yet?*, 2011  
Gallery installation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.  
97 boxes of 3L Black Box Chardonnay, 360 Boyardee Beef Ravioli 15 oz. tins, 83 cases of Bud Light, 624 cans of Carnation Evaporated Milk, 43 Cheerios Twin pack 37 oz., 95 cases of Coca Cola, 40 Kraft Velveeta loaves (2 x 32 ounce loaves per package), 49 boxes of Nabisco Premium Saltine Crackers 3 lb., 25 cases of Marlboro Red, 41 containers of Utz cheese balls, replica EVA Space Suit on loan from NASA, IKEA bed, pillow, duvet, gold anodized aluminum  
239 x 732 x 312 in.  
Courtesy of the artists, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, and Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, San Francisco



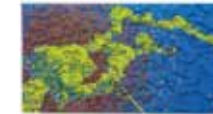
*T+100\_yellow*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
63 x 28 x 1 1/2 in.  
Lego  
Courtesy the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+79\_yellow*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
Lego  
56 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 1 in.  
Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+85\_red&yellow*, 2010  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
41 x 117 in. (diptych)  
Lego  
Courtesy the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+102\_blue&green*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
Lego  
34 1/2 x 63 x 1 1/2 in.  
Courtesy of the artists, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+77\_brown&red*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
Lego  
31 x 53 1/2 in.  
Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+85\_green*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
48 1/2 x 46 1/2 x 1 in.  
Lego  
Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



*T+64\_red*, 2011  
From the series *Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Why*, 2010-2011  
51 1/2 x 44 x 1 1/2 in.  
Lego  
Courtesy of the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



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