

# Sam Durant

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

No one would accuse Sam Durant of restraint when it comes to contesting mainstream, representational narratives of American history.



His recent work includes *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions*, Washington D.C., 2005, which envisages moving all the memorials to Native Americans killed during colonization to the National Mall in Washington, DC; *End White Supremacy*, 2008, a sign adapted from a 1963 civil rights protest displayed on the facade of Paula Cooper Gallery during the 2008 presidential election; and a show of former Black Panther Emory Douglas's posters and prints he curated in 2007 for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Durant's work is most persuasive when it uses the conventional language of public, social memorializing against itself—as in the first of the aforementioned examples—to interrogate the ways in which structures that claim to represent collective memory actually mask their own ideological underpinnings. It is refreshing that Durant makes no bones about the underpinnings of his own critical tendencies, as evidenced by his deployment, in the text accompanying this recent exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, of the notion of capital as “dead labor,” which, in Marx's words, is “vampire-like [and] only lives by sucking living labor.”

Titled “Dead Labor Day,” the show offered a platform—literally and figuratively—for us to reconsider the uncomfortable interpenetration between labor relations (in American history and in contemporary terms) and capital punishment. The exhibition comprised three efficiently interrelated elements. *Gallows Composite C (Billy Bailey Gallows, Haymarket Gallows, Rainey Bethea Gallows, Saddam Hussein Gallows)*, 2008, is a hybrid of the structures used in four government-sanctioned executions, taking the form of a small wood and metal model mounted on a mirrored pedestal. The fusion of these gallows into a single sculpture embeds and materializes the interconnections of chronologically disparate events. The light-box piece *Break Room with International Mass Meeting*, 2010, meanwhile, reproduces the ghostly afterimage of a document from 1916 announcing a meeting in San Francisco commemorating the “29th anniversary of the martyrdom of the Chicago anarchists,” superimposed over an upside-down color image of an unidentified mid-twentieth-century workers' break room. Durant's text for the show recounts the repressed history to which the work directs our attention: After a rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square in support of the eight-hour workday turned violent, five anarchist labor activists were arrested; four of them were publicly hanged the following year (one had committed suicide in prison). These events contributed, twenty years later, to the establishment of the eight-hour workday, and to the founding of International May Day.

The exhibition's largest work, *Dead Labor Day*, 2010, is a symbolic consolidation of the other two pieces. It operates as a conflation of break room and gallows—an extrapolation of the scaffold used to

hang the Haymarket Martyrs (as the Chicago anarchists came to be known). Upon signing a release, one could walk up the structure's perforated metal stairs onto a wooden platform, where one encountered a functioning office-style water dispenser, along with disposable cups and a trash can. If one walked directly toward the water dispenser, one found oneself stepping onto a subtly embedded trapdoor, locked shut but offering, with the space around its edges, a view of the gallery floor eight feet below. Not without resonant black (or even gallows) humor, the allusion to the scaffold here created an unnerving psychological space in the viewer-as-subject, via the implied relationship between this terrifying instrument of social discipline, emblematic of the ultimate power of the state, and the watercooler—a banal, utilitarian signifier of the breaks taken by twenty-first-century American workers. If Durant's practice characteristically converts the fruits of research processes into forms and structures that operate as materialized sociopolitical allegories, in *Dead Labor Day* he compels the viewer to experience, corporately, the links between present conditions and historical events.

—Joshua Decter