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Artist Goes John Deere Green

Sculptor David Brooks disassembled a 1976 John Deere 3300 combine harvester for new exhibit



David Brooks's 'Continuous Service Altered Daily' is on view at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., until February 2017. *PHOTO: MICHELLE MCLOUGHLIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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What is enormous, has clawed green toes and is imposing enough to cast a shadow in a museum entryway?

A dinosaur of the farming-equipment kind.

A vintage vehicle—a 1976 John Deere 3300 combine harvester, to be exact—is the star of an unusual new artwork at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., that explores the relationship between nature and technology. For the immersive installation, sculptor David Brooks has disassembled the machine into thousands of constituent parts and put every one on meticulous display.

Some are kept outside, in their normal habitat; others are exhibited indoors, artfully lighted on pedestals and in vitrines. Titled “Continuous Service Altered Daily,” it is the

artist's first solo museum exhibition.

The sculpture's inspiration, in part, was a playful one.



Every part of a disassembled 1976 John Deere 3300 combine harvester is on display in the exhibit. *PHOTO: MICHELLE MCLOUGHLIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“It’s childish on one hand, like this big toy with cogs and wheels that we can all identify with,” Mr. Brooks said of the piece, which splays out over 9,000 square feet in all areas of the museum.

The work also addresses the idea of man-made machines used to shape the organic world.

“There’s an uncanny aspect to this weird-looking box slowly consuming the landscape,” the artist said. “A combine is a thing that puts food on the table and feeds millions but at the same time contributes to [destruction of the terrain] and a decline of biodiversity.”

The strangeness of the combine is on display from the start, with hulking tires buried in the ground along the Aldrich Museum’s walkway and what looks like a giant metal foot standing by the entrance. The clawed contraption is in fact the corn head, which chops down stalks and starts the harvesting process.

“Separated from its body, it is a horrifying thing,” said Mr. Brooks, pleased with its evocation of an alien creature in John Deere green.

Inside, museumgoers are greeted by a video of the combine in operation, with different views to show the many interlocking parts of such a large and complex machine.

That complexity is key to Mr. Brooks, a 40-year-old Brooklynite whose environmentally minded art has drawn on an interest in ecosystems studied during research trips to the



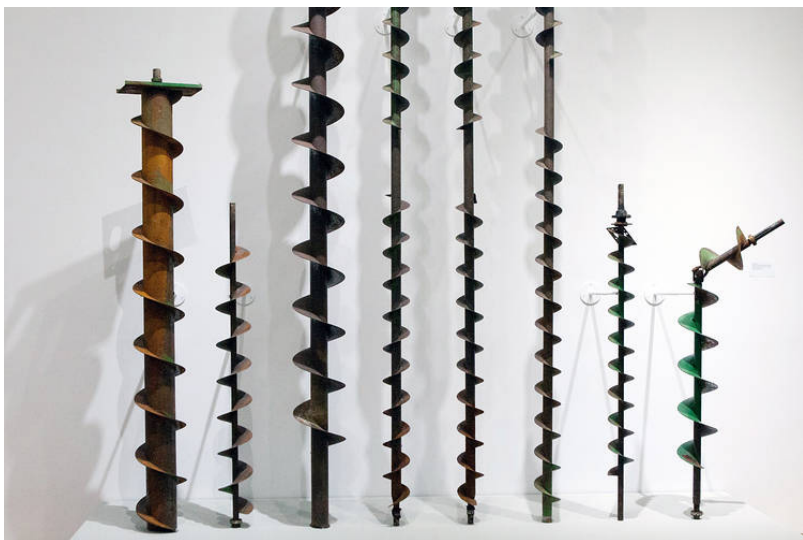
Mr. Brooks looks through his piece 'Migratory Species (Habitat Formation)' at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.
PHOTO: MICHELLE MCLOUGHILIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Amazon and the Florida Everglades, among other locales.

A piece called “Lonely Loricariidae,” exhibited at the 2014 Art Basel fair, included tanks of Amazonian catfish that, while not yet even named by scientists, have already been commodified in the ornamental aquarium trade.

In another industrial-pastoral piece, “A Proverbial Machine in the Garden” from 2013, he buried a tractor in the ground at the Storm King Art Center in upstate New York.

For the Aldrich project, on view until February 2017, Mr. Brooks said he came to think of the combine as a kind of ecosystem in itself, with interconnected parts and too much happening at once to ever observe and understand as a whole.



'Precipitation (Water Purification),' another piece on view in the Brooks exhibit. *PHOTO: MICHELLE MCLOUGHILIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“There’s a lot going on in a machine like that,” said David Gelfman, an artist and machinist who was hired to help Mr. Brooks take it apart.

Some of the combine parts were left untreated and raw, like sheets of green metal hung on the walls and augers that stand tall on a pedestal like spiral totem poles. Others were turned into beautiful relics, with some parts painted gold or brass-plated.

“They really transformed from what they were before—crusty, rusty suspension springs—into something that is quite precious,” Mr. Brooks said of a few favorite metal pieces set off in a vitrine.

“Many people don’t really know what a combine harvester is and what it does, and there’s quite a fascination once they see,” said Amy Smith-Stewart, an Aldrich Museum curator who commissioned the piece.

For Mr. Brooks, the purposefully overwhelming presentation of the combine in its thousands of component parts echoes the daunting task faced by scientists trying to make sense of ecosystems around the world.

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“Good scientists are philosophically in tune with the limitations of science,” said Mr. Brooks, who aligned his dissected combine with “overthinking and overdetermining something to such a degree that it becomes abstract and has nothing to do with the thing in front of you.”

He likened the piece to “science working itself into an irrational state” while searching for understanding that remains elusive.

Corrections & Amplifications:

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated Mr. Brooks is 41 years old. (June 23, 2016)