

Union Hall is pleased to present *The Spirit in The Flame*, an exhibition of new works from Denver-based artists Carissa Samaniego and Matthew Smith. In this exhibition, both artists present a distinct series of sculptural objects that serve as markers in a non-linear narrative about their upbringing. In each artist's body of work, the objects they present give form to the experiences and memories of the places that they call home. Tied to rural spaces and identities of America, both artists aim to create layered sensory landscapes that give viewers an understanding of the history and culture of a place, and the beliefs and values that are present there.

Carissa Samaniego was raised between a reserved Midwestern household in Minnesota and a close-knit Latinx family in New Mexico. In her body of work for *The Spirit in The Flame*, she explores objects, materials, and imagery that are connected to the environment of Southern New Mexico, where she spent time with her father's family. Samaniego weaves together a story that is set in the landscape of the Southwest and connected to indigenous knowledge, Catholic traditions, and the tools of modern American warfare. She presents her experiences of these borderlands to the viewer through object portraits that utilize natural materials such as mulberry tree branches, petrified wood, volcanic rocks, and trinitite (the light green, glassy, slightly radioactive material left on the desert floor as a result of plutonium-based nuclear bomb testing). She also uses handmade stained glass and mass-produced miniatures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, St. Francis, and Jesus Christ. Samaniego's work references personal narratives as well as historical ones: the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe's first appearance in 1531 is interwoven with her childhood memories of the apparition of the Virgin in her Grandmother's mulberry tree. Her grandmother also witnessed the atomic bomb Trinity's mushroom cloud in 1945 at her family's field in Hatch, New Mexico. The beauty, mystery, and toxicity of the Southern New Mexican landscape is remembered through family stories and retold as enigmatic objects both made and collected by the artist.

Matthew Smith's work similarly serves as a translation of memory to objects, centering around one particular winter in his hometown of Wabash, Indiana. When his father's job required that he temporarily move away from the family, Smith and his twin brother were tasked with taking on his father's role of keeping the house warm with their wood-burning stove. Smith's memory of this task is almost mythological: a rite of passage, a coming-of-age narrative. He compares firemaking to the act of prayer: process-oriented and ritualistic, yet seemingly magical in its attempt to conjure something from nothing through hard work and faith. Smith's narrative is one that seems intrinsic to a spirit of Americana, especially as it is tied to rural and religious communities. Through actions which are simple yet repetitious, ubiquitous and yet unique, and mundane yet monumental, there is fulfillment to be found. Smith's work frequently takes the form of a reconstruction of objects from his childhood, and his sculptural objects in *The Spirit in The Flame* are primarily made from wood, much of which is sourced from the woods of Wabash. By remaking parts of his sculptures of the axe, the wedge, the splitting maul, and the woodpile out of the same wood that kept his family's home warm all winter, he allows the medium to reinforce the significance of both the material and the process in his narrative. The one exception in materials is a sculpture constructed from a quilt, handmade by Smith from a reference photograph of himself as a ten year-old boy asleep on top of the heating vent, covered in a quilt to trap in the heat. The medium is also the message in this piece: "Home is where the heat is."