

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### JJ Stevens "Department of Archeological Oversight"

Curated by Jeff Chabot

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Dark Matter Gallery  
(In collaboration with D-Block Projects)

*Long Beach, CA* - Artist JJ Stevens presents handmade objects from the "Department of Archeological Oversight," a fictitious institution that collects unique circa-19th century technological inventions.

*Description* - One might think the objects in JJ Stevens' "Department of Archeological Oversight" were found in an antique store or stored away in someone's basement. But these objects were neither found nor existed during the 19th Century time period from which they appear to originate. Instead, Stevens creates objects that look weathered, archaic, and reminiscent of early industrial revolution machines and inventions.

The objects are handcrafted from wood and metal among other materials. For many of the works, Stevens fashions his own bolt threads, gears, and assembling hardware. The way the objects are put together clearly harkens back to the days before mass manufacturing and the standardization of tools and fittings.



In this body of work, each item is given an inventory number as part of the collection of the Department of Archeological Oversight, an institution which Stevens made up as the proprietor of all these unique objects.

To support his fictitious inventions, Stevens creates alternative histories in which the names of inventors and inventions are fabricated, while the locations where the objects were found did actually exist. To find these lost places, Stevens scans through Census data from the 1800's searching for registered cities and towns that have disappeared from the maps. He looks for places that may have had only a handful of people in their population, but as Stevens humorously suggests at some point "may have been washed away by a sand storm."

The rest of Stevens' history is largely fictional. For example, he refers to an inventor named Richard Wilkins and his Gold Perception Spectacles from a place called Golden, New Mexico (which is an actual location, but now referred to as a ghost town). The artist suggests that these special glasses were used to detect gold in mines and therefore a hot commodity among down-and-out gold miners in the middle 1800's. Stevens injects a dose of humor into the history by revealing the glasses would have been almost impossible to use given the optics would cause the world outside to appear upside down.

Stevens also refers often to a fictitious Native American tribe known as the Steorragente (or Star People) who used advanced technology such as the so-called Agent Mask device for long-distance communication. In another example the Steorragente developed a gunpowder-propelled flaming arrow that is fired from an arm mount. Although the advanced weapon seems almost drawn from a child-like imagination the artist suggests the weapon contributed to anti-Native American propaganda and the non-fictional Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Steven's "Quick-Draw Holster" elicits almost the same humorous response. The holster itself is conceivably harmless without a gun, but is retrofitted with a set of springs to aid in the quick drawing of the weapon -- a great idea for a showdown but not particularly safe for one's foot.

Stevens draws influence from the "mechanicians" of the time period -- engineers or scientists who worked in the field of mechanics. He often refers to the Swiss mechanician Henri Maillardet who worked with automatons -- self-operating machines that could write and draw. You can also see influences from Los Angeles' Museum of Jurassic Technology, which holds many obscure artifacts derived from technology and science.

Lines may also be drawn to contemporary science fiction such as the video game *Bioshock* in which the player enters into a fictional underwater world and discovers foreign technology. And, Stevens' advanced weapons and communications tools (for their time) may also share qualities with James Cameron's *Avatar* world in which the Na'vi communicate by advanced methods humans are unable to recreate.

What may be most symbolic of this body of work is Stevens' "Compass of Promise" -- a device similar to a compass but instead of North points us to a Promised Land by indicating the direction is either Correct or Incorrect. In Stevens' history, a historian named Dr. Robert Koslo confirms determines the compass points to a direction that is constantly moving. In fact, the "Compass of Promise" does move its direction ever so slowly and so finding your way to the Promised Land would prove to be an impossible journey.

In researching through historical data Stevens often comes across grey areas where historical documentation seems to end and one may find oneself imagining what would have been. These "grey areas" in history form the impetus for Stevens who seems to want to fill those gaps with his own interpretations.

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