

THE CYCLE

BY CYRUS TILTON

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This March, a swarm of muslin and steel locusts will inhabit one of the Museum's third floor galleries as part of *The Cycle* by Cyrus Tilton. Based on the life cycle of the locust — an insect best known for its voracious appetite — the exhibition serves as a cautionary metaphor for the world's burgeoning population and its insatiable consumer habits.

The artist, the late Cyrus Tilton, was born in Palmer, Alaska, in 1977 and grew up near the Matanuska River in northeast Anchorage. There, his parents instilled in him the environmental consciousness of the 1960s, developing their son's appreciation for nature, which he carried into his artistic practice.

Tilton was awarded a full-tuition scholarship to the Art Institute of Seattle and after graduating, settled in Oakland, California. In 1999, he became the lead sculptor — and later, art director — at Scientific Art Studio in Richmond, a fabrication studio for props, models, and prototypes used in the art, medical, motion picture, and television industries. In addition to his work as a sculptor and illustrator, Tilton was a musician and composer for the experimental, underground bands NED and Mwahaha — the latter featured in an episode of National Public Radio's "All Songs Considered."

In 2008, Tilton began showing at Oakland's Vessel Gallery. His sculptures, often conceptual and surreal, continued to express his love of nature and its organic forms; but to Tilton, the stark contrast between Alaska's vast, natural expanses and the dense, urban landscape of the Bay Area was deeply troubling. The disparity intensified his anxieties over the world's rapidly growing population and its environmental impact, inspiring his three-part series *The Cycle*, which debuted at Vessel Gallery in 2011.

Last March, Tilton was awarded the Crocker's inaugural John S. Knudsen prize for his overall body of work. As part of the

prize, *The Cycle* will be shown as the artist's first museum exhibition. A large sculpture of mating locusts, entitled *Lovers*, marks the gallery entrance and, thanks to generous supporters of his work, it will also become part of the Crocker's permanent collection. Lining the walls, Tilton's *Potentials*, or locust eggs, hatch into *Individuals*, swarming together in a kinetic installation that represents the insect in its most destructive form.

Locusts are a type of grasshopper with the ability to mutate, and under optimal environmental conditions, they transition from their innocuous, solitary state to a gregarious one. The transformation is both physical and behavioral, and creates dramatic swarms that ravage crops and vegetation. "All of the sudden, they're out of control," says Tilton. "Everything goes into overdrive... They eat themselves out of house and home and move on to another area." Like the voracious locust decimating food supplies, Tilton describes our own consumer habits as "exponentially ceaseless and unrelenting." For both, the unrestrained depletion of finite resources leads to environmental destruction and, perhaps, the species' demise.

Tilton was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer and passed away after a year-long battle in March of last year; however, he lived to receive the Knudsen award and began planning his exhibition for the Crocker.

Despite his concerns over the future of the planet, as well as his own health struggles, Tilton remained optimistic throughout: "It is my hope that we can reject our tendencies toward the growing swarm of mass consumerism," he said. "Perhaps the line of human evolution that we are walking will fall on the side similar to that of the colony or hive that works together for the common good and is more mindful of using only the necessary resources to make it happen in a non-destructive way. If we can maintain this balance, there may be hope for us after all." ♦



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— CYRUS TILTON —



■ TOP: Cyrus Tilton, *Lovers*, 2011. Steel, muslin, beeswax, and damar resin, 144 x 78 x 78 in. Courtesy of Vessel Gallery, Oakland, CA. Photo by: Wilfred J. Jones

■ BOTTOM: Cyrus Tilton, *Individuals* (detail), 2011. Bamboo reed, steel, muslin, and tulle; Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Vessel Gallery, Oakland, CA. Photo by: Wilfred J. Jones

■ OPPOSITE: Cyrus Tilton, *Potentials*, 2011. Concrete, wire, polymer clay, rocks, sand, and found objects; 12 x 11 x 4 in. Courtesy of Vessel Gallery, Oakland, CA. Photo by: Cyrus Tilton