

Juan Willam Chávez

LIVING PROPOSAL

PRUITT IGOE BEE SANCTUARY

2010-2012

Organized by

Marilu Knode
Executive Director
and
Dana Turkovic,
Curator of Exhibitions

Laumeiersculpturepark
ST. LOUIS



Intro

Juan William Chávez Living Proposal: Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary 2010-2012

Kranzberg Exhibition Series 2012
October 27, 2012 – January 20, 2013

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Kranzberg Exhibition Series at Laumeier Sculpture Park and the end of our 35th anniversary year, and it is fitting that this year’s project is by Juan William Chávez. Like Nancy and Ken Kranzberg, Juan has had a broad impact on the arts in this community, through his own artistic practice, through his creation of Boots Contemporary Art Space, an alternative exhibition and performance platform in St. Louis, and today at his Northside Workshop space, in which Nancy and Ken have been involved from the beginning. Over ten years the Kranzberg Series has marked the evolution of St. Louis-based artists, and Juan’s career exemplifies our collective cultural maturation.

I am grateful to the Laumeier staff that has made this show happen. Curator of Exhibitions, Dana Turkovic, continues the organization’s goal of re-imagining how sculpture parks can “make place” as the world around us changes. Juan’s show also launches the next phase of our working together; a five-year exchange between Laumeier and Juan’s Northside Workshop. Juan, with partner Kiersten Torrez, will work with Laumeier staff in producing unique experiences that focus on our mutual interest in the landscape that is at the heart of our lives.

As always, my gratitude goes to Nancy and Ken Kranzberg who make so many things possible for Laumeier and our 300,000 annual audience members. Thanks go to Nick Lang, Chief Preparator, Kara Pollnow, Registrar / Collections Manager and Eric Nauman, Assistant Preparator, who get all of our programs up on time. Our Development team—Jackie Chambers, Development Officer, Marie Oberkirsch, Special Events Manager and Jennie Swanson, Membership and Museum Services Manager—creates a wonderful environment that supports all of the programming we do here. Don Gerling, Operations Supervisor, St. Louis County Parks, and his staff Mike Clermont, John Meyer and Wes Nance manage the grounds for artistic experimentation. Karen Mullen, Curator of Education, and Clara Collins Coleman, Curator of Interpretation, have worked with Dana and Juan to organize educational experiences that further Juan’s exploration of the clash of interests that create our built environment.

My thanks also go to Julia Norton, our diligent Administrative and Volunteer Coordinator, Mary Ruskin, Accounting Director, Becky Adamietz-Deo, Public Relations Officer and Joy Wright, Librarian, for all of the ways in which they make Laumeier the glorious oasis that it is. As always, I am grateful to our Board and volunteers, St. Louis County Parks, the Regional Arts Commission, the Missouri Arts Council, the Arts and Education Council of St. Louis, the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Mark Twain Laumeier Endowment Fund for on-going support of our mission.

Marilu Knode

Executive Director Laumeier Sculpture Park and
Aronson Endowed Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History,
University of Missouri-St. Louis

For a Swarm of Bees

Old English

*Sitte ge, sigewif,
sigað tō eorðan,
næfre ge wilde
tō wuda fleogan,
beō ge swā gemindige,
mīnes gōdes,
swā bið manna gehwilc,
metes and ēðeles.*

Translation

*Settle down, victory-women,
Never be wild and fly to the woods.
Be as mindful of my welfare,
As is each man of eating and of home.¹*

A thousand years ago, when *For a Swarm of Bees* was sung in the original Old English, a swarm of bees in the attic was seen as a blessing as it gave the cottager an endless pot of honey. Today a bee hive is seen as a danger to be removed by animal control. Attitudes have changed and not for the better, as artist and social activist Juan William Chávez points out in *Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary*, his survey of the modern ruins of St Louis. He seems to ask, where have all the people gone and how can we get them back?

These series of photographs, films, bee suits, unused hives and outdoor sculpture promote a public dialogue over a field research period which spans two years, are collectively titled *Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary: Living Proposal 2010-2012*. The galleries at Laumeier restage Chávez’s methodology from conception to its current state as a “living proposal” exploring the empty lot where the infamous and immense Pruitt-Igoe tower blocks in north central St. Louis were built and demolished between 1956-73. The apparently dead ground of the ruins constitutes a miniature tour of American racial segregation and desegregation, the failures and triumphs of aborted civil rights struggles and hopeless Modernist Utopian housing schemes. More specifically, Chávez’s work addresses urban abandonment, refocusing the conversation about the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe complex from one soaked with bitter history into one loaded with future possibility.

Chávez chose to research Pruitt-Igoe because of his initial confusion about where it was actually located—it is often confused with other housing projects like Cabrini Green in Chicago and Darst-Webbe in St. Louis—surprised to find that it is now an overgrown bramble patch. Overtaken by nature the

fallow ground of Pruitt-Igoe itself represents the overabundant mythology that continues to surround the dithering of civic authorities, the corrosive impact of “white flight” to the suburbs and the ultimate irresolution about the site’s future use, doomed as it now seems to be the subject of endless graduate student proposals and vanity projects. On its face Minoru Yamasaki’s bewildered lament, “I never thought people were that destructive” is only secondarily emblematic of the bruised pride of an architect commenting on the destruction of vandals (who had already trashed the towers long before the controlled demolition). Primarily this mournful assessment cuts to the flamed heart of urban ecology, which Chávez recasts as a grave cycle of decay and growth.

After the demolition of the towers in 1973 (the rubble finally cleared in 1976) the remaining empty lot of several acres near downtown has, in the fullness of time, transformed into a habitat for various flora and fauna. Chávez explored the fenced-off site, increasingly intrigued by the state of disrepair a half kilometer away from central St Louis. There have been many artworks made about the iconic destruction of the buildings, so Chávez focused on its current condition rather than its pyrotechnic explosion. Chávez explains, “I entered this forest expecting the remnants of a community but was surprised to see the beginning of another.”² Observing the number of bees that had claimed the woodland as their own, Chávez came to think about the sculptural comparisons and the metaphorical potential of bee communities, realizing that, like the human population of St. Louis honeybees are, for various environmental reasons, also on the decline.

The dramatic bee population collapse of 2006 left billions of dollars of crops at risk endangering global human food supply because bees are a key pollinator of fruits and vegetables. Ironically our capitalist system (and ultimately our liberal democracy) necessarily rest upon the foundation of the bee’s collectivist (perhaps even socialist-like) hive society. The epidemic and its self-evident threat to our own society challenged researchers to discover the cause. According to Ralph Grundel from the United States Geological Survey, “Colony collapse disorder has cut through honeybee populations, with some beekeepers reportedly losing up to 90 percent of their stock in recent years.” In this plague a lot is at stake and Grundel continues with a prophecy of understated elegance: “It is important to understand the health of our native pollinators because in the absence of pollination, whole communities could collapse.”³ Grundel of course means human society would also collapse along with the bee population which constitutes an early warning of our own fate.

Chávez sees the successful beehive as a metaphor for a sustainable community and an enduring civilization. Represented by the 33 buildings of the Pruitt-Igoe complex, the beehives became a temporary site-specific installation that formally mimicked the towers. In the film and five framed photographs, *Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary*, 2010, plant life is recorded as it exists today and the documentation acts as

an important *memento mori*. Chávez views his project as a promissory note for the city, an acknowledgement of pathological epidemics, creating a poetic gesture recognizing that our relationship with bees is something both dangerously tangible and ancient and perhaps one as old as art itself. With this in mind, Chávez traveled to the Cuevas de la Araña (known in English as the Araña Caves or the Spider Caves) in Bicorp, for the first stop on his summer 2011 research trip in search of the “Man of Bicorp”. A town of 600 people in Andalusia, Spain, Bicorp holds the oldest recorded example of the human/bee relationship; an 8,000-year-old cave drawing of a figure climbing a tree toward a swarming beehive. Other drawings in the cave illustrate hunts, weapons and domestic animals, verifying the important role of honey in the Neolithic diet. These markings appear in the film as flickering gestures that demonstrate and emphasize an increasingly symbiotic rapport.

Luxembourg Gardens, 2011 is a documentary-style film using an 8mm camera set in a heavily used harmonious public space for bees and humans in France. Filmed during the second stop on his bee research trip, Chávez toured France’s Rucher École (Beekeeper School) located in Paris’s Luxembourg Gardens. The work interlaces scratchy documentation of the gardens and an interview with native Parisian Wilfried Segue, a black Frenchman who taught for two years at Soldan High School in St. Louis. In the film, Segue compares and contrasts the social attitudes of Parisians to public spaces with the shrinking cities of the Midwest, merging the interview about his experience in working on the North side with the generous public aesthetic of the French people. Segue notably mentions the influence of urban French styles in St. Louis such as Benton Park contrasting this with the meaner public ethos of American cities. This observation and “outside perspective” provided a critical conceptual and formal link as the exhibition at Laumeier, as a St. Louis County park and mansion turn art museum, is grounded in the connection between historical city planning and access to green space. However glamorous it may sound, the Rucher École is a simple gazebo that houses beehives and a few tool sheds; Parisians lounge alongside the millions of busy bees in blissful harmony. The film therefore provides proof of a long-standing and safe coexistence, a good example of urban beekeeping commingled within a city environment and viewing bees more as a “maintenance crew that naturally helps sustain the park rather than a fearsome menace,”⁴ mindful of one another’s welfare and peacefully settled among each other. The film also attempts to demystify and explain the human/bee symbiosis using an existing model to demonstrate the possibility for a similar space to exist on the Pruitt-Igoe grounds along with an education center and public park.

Untitled, 2012, assembled from 14 recycled street lampposts are arranged to create a 1:1 scale footprint of a Pruitt-Igoe building, is Chávez’s version of the Native American Mississippian’s “Woodhenge”. It replicates the form of the contemporary reconstruction of the henge, providing a monumental, poetic echo of the collapsed civilization. The towering wooden poles compare modern and prehistoric con-

struction that acknowledges St. Louis’ successes and failures acting as both functional architecture and a living memorial.

Laumeier is a dedicated sculpture park with its own bee population and a lush laboratory for ideas, a cultivated version of the wildly Arcadian Pruitt-Igoe site. This exhibition highlights creative possibilities for the still unoccupied land at Cass and Jefferson through a delineation of environmental similarities between the two green spaces. Built on the parallel relationship between urban population decline and colony collapse disorder in bees, *Living Proposal: Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary 2010-2012* encourages public dialogue that fuses the aesthetic and social. It also aims to demonstrate the opportunity for the combination of art, nature and public space to provide a platform for reflection and education.

Dana Turkovic

Curator of Exhibitions

Endnotes:

1. Kemble, John Mitchell, *The Saxons in England, A History of The English Commonwealth, Till The Period of The Norman Conquest*, (London: B. Quaritch, 1876), pp. 403-404.

2. Chavez, J. (2012, 12 July). *Personal interview*.

3. Fecht, Sarah, “Hive and Seek,” <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=hive-and-seek-domestic-honeybees-keep-disappearing>, accessed August 1, 2012.

4. *Excerpt from interview on November 11, 2011, Q &A: Juan William Chavez, Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary* <http://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Magazine/November-2011/Q-A-Juan-William-Chavez-Pruitt-Igoe-Bee-Sanctuary/> accessed July 15, 2012.

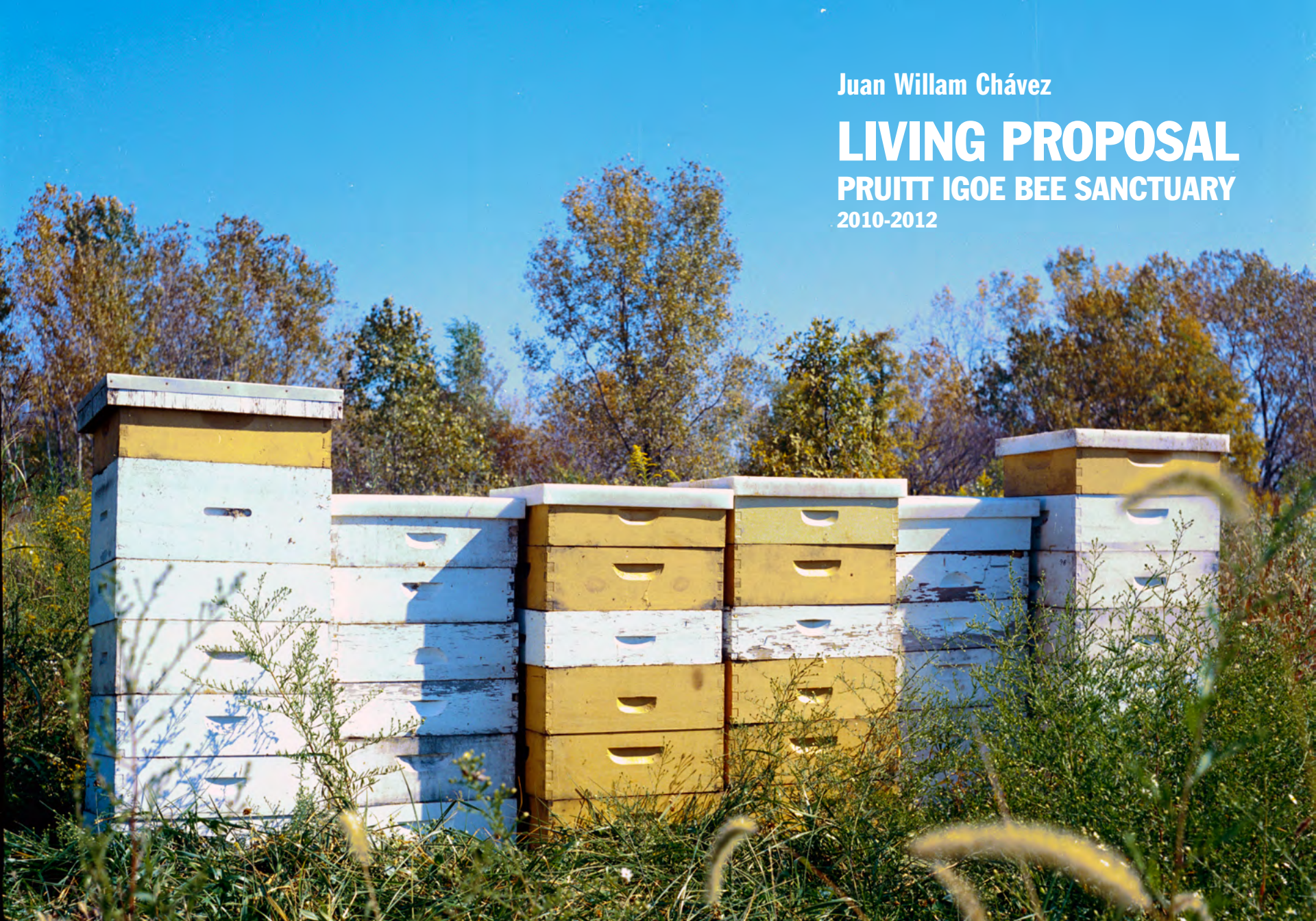


Juan Willam Chávez

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Section One

33 BUILDINGS 11 STORIES

In the summer of 2010, I created a series of photographs that focused on the current state of the Pruitt-Igoe site. What was once 33 buildings standing 11 stories high was now an overgrown urban forest.

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX





Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX





Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX



Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX



HUMANS AND BEES

To explore the relationship between humans and bees I had to start from the beginning. So I traveled to Spain to document and analyze an 8,000-year-old cave drawing, the *Man of Bicorp*. The drawing depicts a figure in tree reaching into a beehive with bees flying around. It is the first record of humans and bees interacting. Surrounding the drawing were images of the hunt, tools, wild and domestic animals. The drawing inspired a question: what was so important to humans 8,000-years ago to etch into the walls of this cave? Survival, and beekeeping was part of that survival.

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX





Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Section Three

PRUITT-IGOE BEE SANCTUARY

In 2011, St. Louis falls to its lowest population in more than a century. Concurrently, 30% of honey-producing hives in the United States were lost due to Colony Collapse Disorder. Saint Louisans and bees were now in the same situation.



Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

LUXEMBOURG CONVERSATION

I wanted to know if there was a preexisting model of bees living within a public space. This inquiry led me to the Jardin du Luxembourg Paris, France. In this park resides the oldest Beekeeping School in the world, le Rucher-Ecole du Luxembourg. It was here that I had a conversation about education and public space with a french teacher that taught in the St. Louis public school for two years.

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX



LIVING THE PROPOSAL

Inspired by education and public space we took the proposal off the page and developed a pilot project called *Urban Gardens: Beautification of Vacant Space*. This summer program consists of five workshops that focused on addressing vacancy through the development of an urban garden. Middle school students learned an introduction to beekeeping, gardening and printmaking.

Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX





Left:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

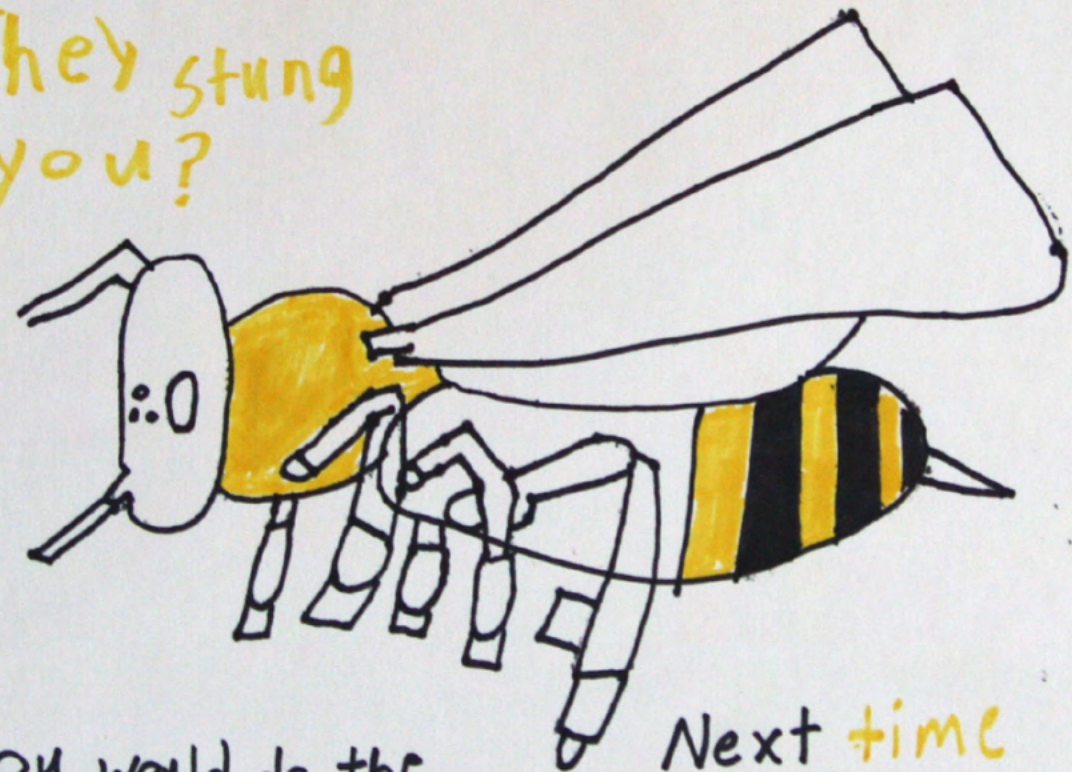


Right:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

So many parts...

So harmless

They stung
you?



You would do the
something.

Next time
leave them
alone!

What did they do
to you?

After you
swung on th

Left:

Title of Piece

Dimensions notes etc

20XX



Right:

Title of Piece

Dimensions notes etc

20XX



Left:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Right:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX



Checklist for the exhibition

All work courtesy the artist.

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary, 2010

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe, 2010

press photo

8 x 10 inches

Pruitt-Igoe, 2010

press photo

8 x 10 inches

Pruitt-Igoe, 2010

press photo

8 x 10 inches

Box of Ephemera, 2010-2012

mixed media

dimensions variable

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary, 2010-2012

8mm color film transferred to DVD

running time: 12:16 minutes

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (aerial map), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (chain-link), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (fence post), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (flower), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (lamp post), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary (morning), 2011

C-print

20 x 20 inches

Honey, 2012

jar of honey

dimensions variable

Koyaanisqatsi, 2012

movie poster

20 x 30 inches

Living Proposal, 2012

2 Beekeeper suits, gloves, smoker, hive tool,

clip board, hive inspection records

dimensions variable

Luxembourg Conversation, 2012

8mm color film transferred to DVD

running time: 19:15 minutes

Luxembourg Conversation, 2012

C-print

12 x 23 inches

Biography

Juan William Chávez was born in Lima, Peru and lives and works

in St. Louis. Chavez received his B.F.A. from the Kansas City

Art Institute in 2000 and his M.F.A. from the School of the Art

Institute of Chicago in 2004. He has exhibited in galleries and

museums nationally and internationally, including: the Van Abbe

Museum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; Art in General, New York;

TinT Gallery, Thessaloniki, Greece; Getsumin Gallery, Tokyo; Gal-

lery 400-University of Illinois at Chicago; the Hellenic Museum

and Cultural Center, Chicago; Contemporary Art Museum, St.

Louis; Harris Lieberman Gallery, New York; and White Flag Proj-

ects, St. Louis. In 2006, Chávez founded Boots Contemporary

Art Space, an artist-run art lab in South St. Louis City. In 2011,

Chávez was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial

Foundation Fellowship for Advanced Study Abroad in 2012 and a

grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the

Fine Arts.

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