LIZ GLYNN, *Untitled (Shaft)*, 2010. RECLAIMED FORKLIFT PALLETS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVE TURNER CONTEMPORARY, LOS ANGELES.

The Big Four: Michael Decker, Liz Glynn, Jed Lind, Jacob Yanes

Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles

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Despite having a title redolent of a college playoff match, with all of its problematic competitive connotations, "The Big Four" at Steve Turner presents a few large sculptures that engage in a considered critique of scale in relation to power and meaning. While the works on display are all big by conventional gallery standards, their conceptual heft does not come from accentuations in scale alone. When they succeed, the works here use physical amplification to meld one form with a conceptually resonant other, inspiring visitors to rethink the meaning behind familiar forms.

To that end, Liz Glynn's *Untitled (Shaft)* (2010) considers two dissimilar subjects: the transportation of material goods, and the transportation of the spirit to the afterlife. Glynn repurposes wooden planks from conventional forklift pallets into a constricting skin that covers the hallway entrance to the gallery's upstairs project space and business offices. As the title suggests, Glynn's work resembles the wooden bracing used to support mine shafts, shrinking the hallway to a cramped enclosure where one has to crouch in order to pass through. Small shards of light guide one down the dark, dead-end corridor.

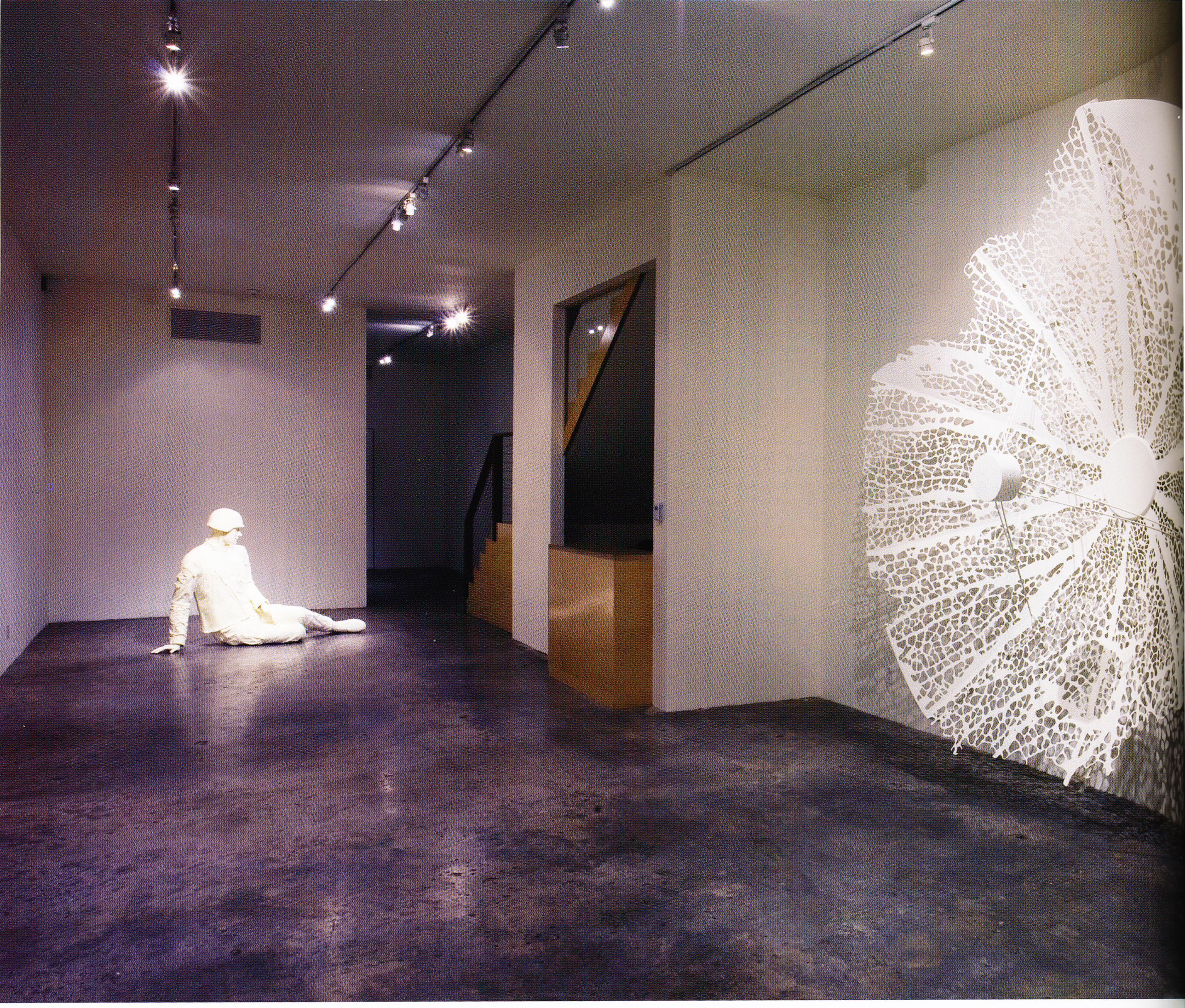
"The Big Four" press release states: "*Untitled (Shaft)* is part of an ongoing series of works [by Glynn] using the architecture and archaeological history of the Great Pyramids of Giza to explore notions of object fetish, superstition, and the desire to cheat death." This motivation is certainly evident in *III*, Glynn's massive pyramid made of shipping pallets erected on a hilltop in East Los Angeles in 2010. Constructed as an off-site exhibition for Redling Fine Art, *III* was activated as a site for performances and discussions; one could enter it, sleep in it, and experience it as a truly monumental form, ascending dozens of feet into the air. There, the implied relationship between her pyramid and the larger-than-life grandiosity of its Egyptian counterparts was clear. The formal and historically suggestive pairing could also be appreciated from afar;

a pyramid in a landscape has immediate connections to Giza no matter its scale.

While the shafts leading to royal tombs in ancient pyramids bring to mind the transmutation of a body from one state to another—the passage from life to death to afterlife—the presentation of a mine shaft here, in the gallery, points towards current events. Hunched over inside the installation, my thoughts shifted from ancient Egypt to the mine collapses that frequently punctuate today's news, both in the United States and abroad.[1] Unlike the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the mining industry is not in business to build passages to the afterlife, but exists to exploit the land and its workers for profits. Glynn's use of repurposed forklift pallets, a ubiquitous fixture in both the domestic and international transportation of large quantities of products and materials, furthers this connection. In this way, Glynn's work subtly ties a thread between the past and present, using the symbolic resonance of a mythological form (the pyramid) to interrogate contemporary

1. I am thinking not just of the Chilean mine collapse that stranded thirty-three miners underground for three months, but also of the Massey Energy mine disaster in Montcoal, West Virginia, which killed twenty-nine miners, and the more than twenty-three miners who died in a mine flood in Wangjialing, China. All three disasters, and many more, took place in 2010.

JACOB YANES, *Soldier*, 2010. CAST POLYURETHANE, 51 X 74 X 27 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVE TURNER CONTEMPORARY, LOS ANGELES.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "THE BIG FOUR: MICHAEL DECKER, LIZ GLYNN, JED LIND, JACOB YANES" AT STEVE TURNER CONTEMPORARY, LOS ANGELES. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JACOB YANES, *Soldier*, 2010, AND JED LIND, *Captain Midnight*, 2010.

realities of exploited laborers and capitalist globalization, which, governed by free-market ideology, demands the voracious mining, acquisition, and shipment of raw materials needed to produce goods for an ever-growing consumer market.

Jacob Yanes's *Soldier* (2010), an off-white polyurethane sculpture of a man in combat fatigues, boots, and helmet, impresses because it formally and conceptually repositions the contemporary image of an army figure in a liminal space, caught between two incongruous art historical genres. As an image of a man dressed for combat positioned on the floor of the gallery, his weight supported by his right arm, *Soldier* first brings to mind heroic battle statuary, especially *The Dying Gaul,* the famous ancient Roman marble statue depicting a wounded soldier at the moment of contemplating the reality of his own death. Like its historical antecedent, *Soldier* communicates through amplified scale and exaggeration. This *Soldier* stands around one hundred inches tall, too big to be

"life-like," yet too small to be monumental. He doesn't look like a generic miniature toy soldier, but instead has particular features, a pronounced nose and gentle eyes. His amplified presence creates a certain distance, a remove, where the viewer can see the work as a representation of both a specific soldier, but also a symbolic, larger-than-life icon, a stand-in for the very idea of a soldier. What make Yanes's *Soldier* so compelling are the apparently conflicting identities it holds in balance.

In his essay "Sculpted Men of Athens: Masculinity and Power in the Field of Vision," Robin Osborne argues that sculptures such as *The Dying Gaul,* which depict idealized, heroic, or powerful men in states of vulnerability or defeat, put masculinity "on trial," presenting "a problematic gap between the image of masculinity and what real men are."[2] *Soldier* furthers this critique by questioning masculine archetypes through an investigation of idealized femininity. Positioned reclining on the floor, legs demurely crossed with his left arm draped delicately over his body, his hand just above his groin, Yanes's *Soldier* bears a resemblance to countless images of objectified female nudes throughout art history. While *Soldier* may have a different appearance, its pose certainly echoes Antonio Canova's *Pauline Borghese as Venus*, a life-size marble sculpture from 1808. Carved in the round, Canova's sculpture depicts Napoleon's sister lounging topless on a large divan, her left arm resting on her outstretched legs, her right arm raised to her head. This kind of depiction of femininity, characterized by a detached passivity, remains omnipresent today, from the poses in fashion magazines to the contortions of department store mannequins. Though he wears the trappings of a serviceman, Yanes's *Soldier* is equally passive, occupying a symbolic space between weary warrior and reclining nude.

On the floor, with his head tilted slightly downward, just above the viewer's crotch height, his lips slightly parted, and dilated eyes fixed on something in the near distance, Yanes's figure certainly stands (or reclines) in contrast to the ways the armed forces are typically depicted in contemporary culture. Contrast *Soldier* with billboard ads recruiting for the Marines, or famous statues like Felix de Weldon's *Marine Corps War Memorial* (1954), based on the iconic photograph *Flag Raising at Iwo Jima* (1945), and the comparison becomes clear; soldiers are supposed to be active and ready for battle. As a work that re-positions this icon of masculinity, Yanes's sculpted soldier is effectively queered. *Soldier* is a physically impressive, almost gargantuan, warrior that is both masculine and feminine, active in dress yet passive in pose, alive and dead, particular yet generalized. Given the

2. Robin Osborne, "Sculpted Men of Athens: Masculinity and Power in the Field of Vision," from *Thinking Men: Masculinity and Its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, ed. Lin Foxhall and John B Salmon (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 25.

cultural and political climate in America during its exhibition, it's hard not to see *Soldier* enmeshed in today's contentious debates about homosexual troops in the U.S. armed forces, and questions of who is "combat worthy."[3]

Like Yanes's *Soldier*, Jed Lind's *Captain Midnight* (2010) also presents viewers with a sculptural melding of two seemingly incompatible forms whose impact derives partially from their impressive size. *Captain Midnight* is a roughly ten-foot wide, wooden replica of a satellite dish. Painted white, its concave disk is carved away to resemble a colossal piece of fan coral. Inspired by 1980s DIY manuals on how to build one's own low-noise satellite dish, Lind's work has nostalgic connotations, referencing the nascent stages of the "communication age" when, for the first time, civilians with the means to do so could interact with man-made celestial objects in orbit. In this way, Lind's work engages the immense, the desire to reach across the farthest expanses of space and understand that which is otherworldly and outside of physical experience. The phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard has argued that objects can only point towards the immense, not embody it, because the immense is only understood via one's own imagination. He writes, "Since immense is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness. In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination."[4] In Lind's work the satellite's protruding receiver points not towards the heavens but directly at the viewers, as if to implicate us as the transmitters of information, not just the receivers of it. *Captain Midnight*'s resemblance to fan coral, whose mesh-like structure allows it to act as a stationary net to catch phytoplankton at night, doubles the implication that the sculpture allegorically implies its own receivership. The work also brings forth thoughts of undersea exploration, itself another space of immensity, a kind of outer space on Earth. But this piece of metaphorical coral is dead, the color of bone, mirroring the obsolescence of the oversized home satellite dish, which in recent years has been replaced by smaller, more efficient models. The result is a commentary on the intertwined realities of oceanic destruction, rising sea levels and temperatures, and the ravenous expansion of communication technologies.

Michael Decker's *Old Growth* (2010) is a conglomeration of metal ironing boards in a variety of colors, propped together to form a rickety structure rising well above the viewer's head. Sharon Mizota called Decker's sculpture a "low-rent Nancy Rubins," a critique that, while riddled with problematic class-connotations, does speak to the work's derivative employment of Rubins's signature accumulations of unwieldy objects.[5] Yet this doesn't get at the real problems with the work, especially within the context of this particular exhibition. While the other works in the show transform the sign value of one material into that of another while drawing connections between the two: forklift pallets become a mine shaft, a reclining female nude and a dying warrior meet in the larger-than-average body of a queered soldier, a satellite and fan coral merge to confront the viewer with a obsolete transmission device—Decker's work doesn't point towards any reassessment of the objects that went into its creation. *Old Growth* is indeed big, but that's about it. Taking its immensity as a point of interest, a way of reading the piece as a kind of monument, the title, *Old Growth*, could imply that this configuration of ironing boards has some relation to ancient trees, and by extension to notions of longevity and resilience. Given that the work is made from ironing boards, such a line of thought might lead one to argue that ironing, and domestic labor in general, is something that deserves the respect that comes with such a mammoth object. But the artwork doesn't go much further than drawing this tentative connection linguistically with the title, rather than with anything *in* the work itself. While one is tempted to pore over the light that passes through the staccato patterning created by the steam vent holes on each board, or ponder

3. *Soldier* takes on particular resonance due to the fact that "The Big Four" was open on the day that President Obama signed a congressional order repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell, allowing gay and lesbian soldiers to serve openly in the U.S. military. As of this writing, the repeal of DADT has yet to go into effect systematically.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1964; reprint, New York: Beacon Press, 1994), 84.
5. Sharon Mizota, "Art Review: The Big Four at Steve Turner," Culture Monster Blog, *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 2010. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/12/art-review-the-big-four-at-steve-turner-contemporary.html.

the intricacy of the mass of intertwined ironing board legs that form the inner core of the work, *Old Growth* doesn't demand much more from its viewers.

Over the last decade, the trend towards large-scale art production was fueled by the need to fill colossal exhibition halls, cavernous commercial gallery expansions, and museum boards' enthusiasm for a flawed bigger = better equation. Against this backdrop, a holdover from the art boom years, it might behoove artists everywhere to reflect on just what it means to make "big" work. When work in "The Big Four" succeeds, it does so by teasing out the subjective realities of being "big" as a physical state that retains its proportional verisimilitude to the real. This type of subtle scale shift challenges us to rethink normalcy. In contrast, work that collapses into the spectacle of being big for big's sake transforms physical scale into a kind of personality trait, an overblown assertion of presence, and a declaration of territory, which too often masks a hollow core.

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MICHAEL DECKER, *Old Growth*, 2010. FOUND IRONING BOARDS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVE TURNER CONTEMPORARY, LOS ANGELES.