

The background of the entire image is a complex, layered collage of various objects. At the top, a large animal skull with prominent teeth is visible. Below it, there are numerous colorful beads in shades of red, green, and gold. A shiny, metallic pink ornament with gold filigree is prominent in the lower right. A crumpled piece of aluminum foil is in the center. The collage also includes pieces of clear and colored plastic, a blue sequined strip, and other indistinct metallic and organic-looking items. The overall composition is dense and textured, suggesting a collection of found objects or a specific artistic assemblage.

Daniel Giordano

LOVE FROM VICKI ISLAND

MASS MoCA



Coat hangers, marzipan, motocross bikes, and cattails: Daniel Giordano finds much of the material for his provocative and playful sculptures on the streets of Newburgh, New York, and on the banks of the nearby Hudson River or the train tracks that run alongside it. An amalgamation of industrial and natural elements, his eclectic assemblages evoke creatures from some apocalyptic fantasy, but for the artist they truthfully reflect how he sees himself and his milieu: his family, the myths and mores of his Italian-American heritage, and the social, economic, and environmental realities of the gritty postindustrial city he calls home.

Giordano works in his family's now-defunct factory, where he has taken over the third floor of the former Vicki Clothing Company, founded by his grandfather and named for his aunt. The studio—which the artist calls “Vicki Island”—overflows with memories as well as remnants of the previous enterprise: sewing machines, rolls of fabric, giant spools of thread, even piles of decades-old dust. Any space on the floor or on the old shelves has been filled with hordes of items that catch the artist's eye, recall a memory, or reveal something about the people and places

that shape him: a lump of bricks found in the river, a prized eel caught as a child, boxes of Murano glass shards donated by a friend. At the steel cutting tables once occupied by an assembly line of seamstresses, Giordano combines his heady mix of industrial detritus, foodstuffs, and organic matter with components he crafts in ceramic and cast aluminum. Though he makes each unique object by hand, the artist works in extended series, both mimicking and subverting the processes of mass production. While this mode of making is a tribute to the factory, it also acknowledges the rise of the creative economy and its promises to replace the manufacturing industry that has been lost.

Newburgh is still a mix of crumbling buildings and pockets of development that walk the line between revitalization and gentrification, contrasts that Giordano reflects in his work. His own sculptural mash-ups are both monstrous and magical. They bring to mind the assemblages of predecessors such as George Herms and Bruce Conner, with subtle but rich social commentary embedded in the materials and in their juxtapositions. Yet Giordano's influences range far and wide, from the works of Francis Bacon and Paul McCarthy, to Japanese art of the Edo Period, Samurai culture, and an Etruscan chariot

Daniel Giordano's studio in Newburgh, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell





Daniel Giordano, *My Scorpio I*, 2016–2019. 1970s Husqvarna motocross bikes, aluminum, Canadian maple syrup, cattails, ceramic, deep-fried batter, epoxy, phosphorescent acrylic paint, plastic wrap, railroad spikes, steel, stockfish, urinal cake. 88 x 72 x 24 inches. Photo: Ernesto Eisner

in the Metropolitan Museum. Giordano's work is equally inspired by the imaginings of childhood, and the wizards and warriors from the films and figurines of his boyhood (most still in their packages and stacked in piles in his studio).

The mystical beings that once offered an escape from the challenges of a complicated family life and an insular childhood spent in a one-bedroom apartment now inform the artist's sculptural language.¹ The likes of Gandalf and Merlin are referenced in several of Giordano's portraits of his brother, Anthony, who is both a central muse and alter ego. The artist credits his older sibling with his cultural education and introduction to art, opera, and literature, so this conflation of his brother with the enchanted figures who provided him a way to imagine other worlds and other selves is all the more fitting. In *My Scorpio I* (2016–2019), Giordano conjures an image of his brother as a fantastical creature, rising like a phoenix from deteriorating 1970s-era motocross bikes. Giordano has crowned these symbols of toughness with dried fish that suggest a beak or perhaps the titular scorpion's barbed tail or an ecstatic plume of exhaust. The artist immersed the bikes in batter and deep-fried them, an alchemical process which is an apt metaphor for the transformations suggested in many of his works.

For Giordano, this shape-shifting highlights the contradictions he feels within his own identity and his desire to encompass—or reveal—any number of imagined selves. In his ongoing series of mask-like self-portraits, for example, Giordano portrays himself from the comic to the dark. He uses his usual mix of incongruous materials, such as moisturizing masks that provide the base of each face, to bison fur, ticks, lipstick, and pomade. He variously presents himself as his father, a bugiardo (liar in Italian), Mother Earth, someone who feeds on excrement, and, over and over, as his brother. Giordano in turn portrays his brother—in these works and in several free-standing sculptures—as a multitude of personas, from a wizard and a shy ballerino, to Pulcinella and a flamboyant Cyrano de Bergerac, adorned with lace-like pizzelle cookies.²

Within these portraits, Giordano depicts and satirizes many traditional tropes of masculinity, incorporating objects that conjure a certain notion of macho America: Bison tails, urinal cakes, and bald eagle excrement included, which the artist attempts to counter with lipstick, glitter, and nail polish. A pair of Truck Nutz painted the colors of the Italian flag make fun of the stereotype of an "Italian Stallion" in Giordano's portrait of his brother as La Pulcinella. In his version, the comedic character's oversized, pointy white hat is made with mascarpone and is more flaccid than forceful. Yet, despite his attempts to deflate these symbols, Giordano expresses the persistence of male privilege. In *My Immaculate Conception I* (2013–2021), a fishing



Daniel Giordano, *Self-Portrait as the Bugiardo*, 2020–2021. Deer fur, durum wheat, epoxy, lucky rabbit's feet, masonry drill bit, Northeast Fast Dry tennis court surface, permanent ink, pomade, silicone, shellac, thread, upholstery foam, vinyl. 9 x 8 x 13.5 inches. Photo: Ernesto Eisner



Daniel Giordano, *Pleasure Pipe XIII (Jupiter Optimus Maximus)*, 2019. Aluminum, artificial clementines, artificial navel orange, Aunt Vicki's cheesecake, buttons, cattails, ceramic, Christmas tree ornaments, construction adhesive, deep fried batter, deer jaw, duct tape, enamel, epoxy, foam ball, gravel, horseshoe, hosiery, mop head, oil based clay, paper plates, phosphorescent acrylic, plastic bags, railroad spikes, steel coat hangers, tennis balls, tin, water chestnuts, wood. 71 x 79 x 24 inches. Photo: Ernesto Eisner

rod becomes a mash-up of a weapon and a rustic antenna. The title is a reference to the way he and many boys are too often absolved of their sins.

The artist repeatedly references the older patriarch of the family, his grandfather Frank, a “Rat Pack” type the artist never knew but whose legacy was acutely felt. Always pictured smoking, he inspired the ongoing series, *Pleasure Pipes*. Notably, Giordano depicts each pipe, most made from wood or ceramic, with a column of smoke, as if still in use. While smoke, like the breath that produces it, is as fleeting as memory, Giordano translates this ephemeral cloud into something concrete, lasting, like the family myths that linger. Treated with whimsy and humor, the series has evolved from homage to more of a catharsis and expressions of the artist’s own life. The transparent glass smoke plumes of the earliest pieces give way to more complex, even more abject, images with vitamin D capsules, dog fur, and thorns.

The related *Pleasure Pipe XIII (Jupiter Optimus Maximus)* (2019) magnifies the scale of the pipe into something only the most outsized character could use. The stem is a tree trunk, the bowl a

stump, with smoke conjured by an extravaganza of glittery Christmas ornaments, tinsel, and Aunt Vicki’s cheesecake — all encased in a dark and dusty layer of plastic and resin. A nod to the joy of the family holiday, it also suggests the tension between abundance and excess, between saving and hoarding, that is evident throughout Giordano’s practice. Likewise, the food incorporated into the sculptures, from prosciutto to Italian nougat, speaks to pleasure, tradition, and cultural identity, but also the specter of rot. Giordano has arrested the inevitability of decay with layers of resin and epoxy, which hold together all the works’ seemingly incompatible elements.

Giordano applies unifying surface treatments with inventive materials and processes, from eye shadow to charred tennis felt; and, while his intense labor and care are apparent, it is key for him that seams and imperfect joins also remain visible. This evidence of forceful attachment reveals that the elements of the sculptures are inextricably bound to one another but not necessarily through affinity, likeness, or common form. The logic of the works functions as a metaphor for the complexity of the internal dynamics and generational clashes of the artist and his family but also of a city — and a nation — similarly struggling to reconcile the past with the present without breaking apart. At Vicki Island, a place both real and imagined, Giordano uses love to make new forms out of the old, with glitter, glaze, deep-fried batter, and whatever it takes to manifest the transformation.

— Susan Cross, Senior Curator, MASS MoCA
with Jessica Chen, M.A., 2024, Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art

- 1 Tennis also served as an outlet, with Giordano playing competitively with the United States Tennis Association and the International Tennis Federation in high school and part of college. Tennis balls and racquets make an appearance in many works.
- 2 Pulcinella is an Italian character often associated with the commedia de l’arte and later puppetry. Dressed in white blouse and pointy hat, and wearing a black mask with large, hooked nose, he is alternately described as a fool, or a rascal, and a man of the people, who speaks truth to power and authority. Cyrano de Bergerac is also known for his nose, the size of which is rivaled by his great wit and intelligence which he uses to woo his love, Roxanne, on behalf of a less gifted, more handsome rival.



Daniel Giordano (b. 1988, Poughkeepsie) earned his MFA from the University of Delaware in 2016. He graduated from Pace University in 2014 with a B.A. in business, studying accounting before deciding to commit himself to art-making. He has had solo exhibitions at the Rosenberg Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York; Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver, Canada; and Sardine, Brooklyn. The artist's work has been featured in group exhibitions in New York at Fortnight Institute, Zürcher Gallery, Fridman Gallery, JDJ, anonymous, Morgan Lehman, and at Mother (Beacon). He is a recipient of the AIM fellowship at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Giordano's work has been featured in *Art Spiel*, *Canadian Art*, *Cultured Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *Sculpture Magazine*, which spotlighted his work in a 12-page feature article in 2020. For additional information, see danielgiordano.xyz.

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Front and back cover photos by Kyle Knodell

Interior flap: Daniel Giordano, *Study For Brother as La Pulcinella*, 2016–2020. Acrylic polymer emulsion, aluminum, artificial tooth, butterfly wings, ceramic, copper leaf, epoxy, glitter, gold leaf, loose-leaf binder clip, mascarpone, medicated itch powder, milk paint, nail polish, pigment, plastic wrap, shag fabric, silicone, starch, Tang drink mix, Truck Nutz, variegated leaf, wood. 64.5 x 14.5 x 28 inches. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody. Photo: Ernesto Eisner