



## ***Slow Drift: On Nik Gelormino's Tramp Work***

By Andrew McNeely

### **What do we dream on the 101 freeway?**

So asks an inscription on a knife on view in Nik Gelormino's exhibition *Well* at Fernberger Gallery in Los Angeles. The piece, which possesses a brass handle in the shape of a cartoonish car, catches my eye because it conjures an image of a driver drifting into sleep. In fact, the term *drift*, both in its sense of *to be carried along* and in its idiomatic usage—Do you catch my drift?—is useful to illustrate why Gelormino's work merits serious attention, indeed makes seriousness an object of attention.

Drift's strict sense signifies a surrender or inability to resist external forces, whereas its colloquial use implies a coy way of phrasing something to speak around an intended meaning. It thus has conflicting valences, namely to be without direction or to be directed by misdirection. I liken this conflict to a kind

of push and pull that I'll take up later. But first, drift's sense of leaving something unsaid compels me to disclose that I didn't just happen upon Gelormino's art.

On the contrary, I've known the artist for about twenty years—we attended the same art school as young men—but we were never close. In fact, I spent those years viewing him through a lens of my own aesthetic prejudices, judging his comedic sensibility as a complacent lack of seriousness. Those feelings still lingered when I stepped into his studio for the first time in fifteen years and met a man who is nothing if not serious about his art.

As evidence, I must first cite Gelormino's embrace of woodcarving, a methodical technique that is difficult not to take as a refusal of the computer-controlled routers, three-dimensional printers, and other whiz-bang machines that regularly thrill art audiences with

inscrutable creations. By contrast, Gelormino's sculptures are simple, unambiguous in both the method behind their creation and the exertion involved in their execution. It is because the artist's labor is so palpable that his work possesses a devotional character, one that injects the irreverent attitude of youth into objects that possess a mature contemplative mood.

For example, one sculpture, a beautiful redwood side table with an absurdly tiny brass drawer, looks like it might protect a precious memento but opens to reveal a single cigarette. In another example, a wooden home decorated with polished brass corners strikes me as a kind of minimalist *châsse*, a medieval reliquary meant to resemble a tomb but often misinterpreted as a house. Gelormino's version, which reduces the domicile to its essential parts, reminds me of the Sears Modern Homes that could be ordered by mail in the early twentieth century. One also encounters the ceremonial theme again in an assemblage sculpture featuring an exaggerated carved thumb. The piece sits atop a repurposed nozzle of a garden hose that—to me—makes the piece resemble a *philatory* for the desiccated remains of a saint's finger. Together, these relic-inspired objects exhibit an unmistakable American iconoclastic energy with a distinctively California style.

In parallel, Gelormino's watercolors, laboriously rendered with stippled strokes of ink, depict exaggerated hands igniting disposable lighters, images connotative of illumination that are as frivolous as they are austere. Indeed, the watercolors' overindulgent emphasis on volume and surface recall the edginess of Gilbert Shelton or R. Crumb's underground comix. This affective collision is worth lingering on; it recalls attempts to transfigure the vernacular world that one sees in Robert Gober's or Mike Kelley's work. But Gelormino's exalted objects



are neither larger than life nor theatrical. They are small and modest, a bit understated even.

Chiseling and stippling are techniques rooted in the meaningfulness of “slow work,” the artist tells me while in his studio. And so, despite *Well's* cheeky humor, I cannot help but intuit a sincere philosophical focus behind what might otherwise feel like the sardonic grin of a pop sensibility.<sup>1</sup> Echoing my suspicion, the curator Glenn Adamson has written that Gelormino's ritualistic carvings represent the “idea that we are subject to forces beyond our control, even beyond our ken.”<sup>2</sup> His work dwells in “the paradox of predetermination,” affirming that “it's the very act of navigating [the open sea that is life] that gives a sense of direction.”<sup>3</sup>

What Adamson describes as predetermination—and what I wish to recast as *telos*—surfaces in my correspondences with the artist. By



text message, Gelormino tells me about his teeth sculpture, a section of driftwood he discovered while on the beach, whose form was so reminiscent of lips that he felt compelled to finish what nature began:

While our brain tells us the order of operations that brought this object into being, we cannot entirely avoid the chicken-or-the-egg of it all. Two living things: a tree and an artist finding each other through chance, through movements and actions years in the making, miles apart. What was added? What was pre-existing?<sup>4</sup>

In my view, the appeal to “chance” and “the chicken-or-the-egg of it all” reflect more of a preoccupation with contingency versus design than determinism versus agency. But where Adamson and I align is in the belief that underpinning the artist’s slow work is a deep meditation on the nature of causality itself—forces beyond our ken to use the curator’s phrasing. In other words, it might be said

that the work dwells in the limits of causal explanation.

The exhibition therefore may seem at first glance to simply stage a familiar high/low collision, provocative enough to attract attention but detached enough to avoid commitment. But rippling throughout the show is a deeper rumination on the reality of physical laws often taken for granted. This is what I call the teleological impulse, namely the concern that behind nature’s vagaries there may be some guiding principle acting upon life, even if it is not necessarily set into motion by an unmoved mover. It gestures toward why Gelormino prefers the immediacy of the chisel over the distance of the machine. Like the process of whittling, it is at least as much about the act as about the outcome.

It is the teleological impulse that would compel someone to pick up a piece of driftwood and, instead of taking such an occurrence without a second thought, ruminate on “movements and actions years in the making.” The drift conjured

by driftwood—drift as a kind of metaphysical humility—is the work’s operative throughline.

In *Well*, one sees drift in the sense of the drifter, alluded to by Gelormino’s exaggerated thumb sculpture that, the artist mentions in passing, could be used as a hitchhiker’s tool. The drifter is likewise intimated by repeated references to smoking, the hallmark activity of the loiterer (another social type invoked by Gelormino’s pulp aesthetic). It was this figure that came to mind when I first encountered the knife with which this study began. Its car-shaped handle closely resembles the vehicles cruising across the cover of the Grateful Dead’s *Shakedown Street*, an iconic illustration of a classic misdirection, “I was just passing through, officer.”

Like the 60s’ romantic *ramblin’ man*, Gelormino’s art doesn’t desire purpose; in fact, it refuses it. And the nostalgic appeal of this allusion makes me worried about my own creeping conservatism. Might it be that despite its freewheeling disregard for authority the work merely smuggles back in a covert religiosity? While I wrestle with this question, my mind shifts back to the whittler, that paragon of slow work, where I discover that there’s a strong connection between the drifter and the whittler.

Before the road trip became a powerful American symbol for antiestablishment freedom—think *Easy Rider* or Kesey’s *Merry Pranksters*—another romantic myth stirred the minds of men yearning for escape, namely that of the Hoe-Boys.<sup>5</sup> These were men who’d train hop the railways with their hoe in hand in search of short-term work in a postbellum America. They are the origin of the modern term *hobo*, and at the turn of the century they and the folk-art form with which they became associated—Tramp art—served as a powerful symbol for freedom. As one chronicler recounts, these men “lived by their own code of law and honor, authored their own stories,



composed their own songs, developed their own customs, and wrote their own language.”<sup>6</sup> In their wake they left so-called tramp work, a genre of whimsical handicrafts whittled from discarded cigar boxes and wooden pallets to be bartered for food, alcohol, and shelter.<sup>7</sup>

The figure of the hobo or whittling nomad is born out of the same perennial countercultural spirit that gave rise to the *ramblin’ man* but embodies a kind of humble world-building absent in the latter. Take for example the fact that by the turn of the century there were several itinerant workers’ unions circulating polemical street newspapers on a national scale, such as *The Hoboes Jungle Scout* and the *Tourists Union Journal*.<sup>8</sup> To this point, one might also consider the cultural influence of two of the most iconic tramps of all time, Joe Hill and Charlie Chaplin.<sup>9</sup> The whittling nomad has many qualities that appeal to my politics.



For example, *she* attunes herself to the passage of time. She prefers the simplicity of things. She invites others to share in her craft. She does not seek control or mastery. These are the virtues of her tramp work, and they gesture toward an ethical orientation that does not proselytize, does not speak down to its admirer. Nor does it sit on the sidelines either.

Tramp work names a praxis that looks unserious to the viewer who demands purpose or who is under the impression one has it in the first place. This is why I argue Gelormino's slow work merits attention. Slow work as tramp work is not a rebranding of craft. To be sure, there is a discussion of craft to be had here, which is why many—Adamson among them—see echoes of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the work. But comparing Gelormino's

motivations to the fusion of spirituality and labor that industrialization fomented doesn't fully capture a practice that seems just as prepared to burn down its own idols.

If anything, the artist's praxis stands as an exemplar of what it looks like to rebel against the exigencies of an attention economy attenuating our capacity to be attentive. From this vantage point, I can see the work's politics on its own terms, and it didn't require invoking instrumentalizing words like *critique* to arrive at them. I merely needed to think with the work, slowly.

## Endnotes

- 1 My characterization of Pop art is taken from rock critic Greil Marcus, see “Twentieth Century Fox,” in *The Doors: A Lifetime of Listening to Five Mean Years* (PublicAffairs Publishing, 2011), 115.
- 2 Glenn Adamson, “Deep Cuts: Nik Gelormino by Starlight,” House of Seiko, April 20, 2024, <https://houseofseiko.info/Nik-Gelormino>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Nik Gelormino, SMS direct message to author, December 17, 2025.
- 5 I am indebted to the artist Erik Moskowitz for reminding me of Ken Kesey’s significance on this topic.
- 6 Adolph Vandertie, *Hobo & Tramp Art Carving* (Sterling Publishing, 1995), 16.
- 7 The claim that hoboes played a central role in the development of Tramp art is contested by recent scholarship, but the lore of this origin played an indelible role in the shaping of the tradition and its cultural influence, see Leslie Umberger’s edited volume *No Idle Hands: The Myths & Meanings of Tramp Art* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2017).
- 8 Roger Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (Methuen, 1980), 112-123.
- 9 Note that Joe Hill did not appear in the original distribution of this essay but was added later.

**Andrew McNeely** is a writer, editor, and curator based in Los Angeles. He recently served on the curatorial advisory team for the historical retrospective *Beatriz da Costa: (un)disciplinary tactics* (September 7, 2024 - January 5, 2025) at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. He also curated *A NonHuman Horizon* (June 29 - September 1, 2019) at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and *Restless Debris* (January 9 - February 6, 2016) at the University Art Gallery, UC Irvine.

## Artist & Exhibition Information

**Nik Gelormino** is a Los Angeles-based artist. The essay *Slow Drift* appeared at the exhibition *Well* (January 17 - February 14, 2026), a solo presentation that debuted at Fernberger Gallery, located at 747 N Western Avenue, Los Angeles.

For further information on the artist, see <https://nikgelormino.com/>.

For further information on the exhibition, see <https://www.fernbergergallery.com/exhibitions/well-2026>.