

Circling a Material Empire

by Jason Jenn and Vojislav Radovanović

Artifacts from an Unborn Empire was conceived nearly two years ago, its thematic concept arising specifically for the Brand Library & Art Center as both a repository of knowledge and a living civic space providing access to a diverse community. The project began by considering the evolving role of cultural institutions in shaping collective memory and facilitating the exchange of ideas.

The exhibition circles around questions of how civilizations develop, who shapes their foundations, and the varied ways humanity documents, preserves, and understands itself through both tangible and intangible means. As methods of storing, organizing, and accessing information continue to transform, the exhibition reflects on what remains, what is carried forward, and what may yet emerge.

These questions feel especially urgent in a moment of grave uncertainty and change, as many people are reconsidering the systems, beliefs, and narratives that have shaped our lives. Throughout history, countless lives have been forgotten, while others remain visible only because of the stories, images, objects, and cultural traces they left behind.

How do we ensure that history will be preserved and remembered in the future? How much of our understanding of the past is incomplete or inaccurate? What could have been if different materials, languages, belief systems, or forms of social organization had survived? What would society look like if other forms of language, architecture, economic models, or cultural memory had been embraced instead of the familiar ones?

A long line of “what ifs” emerged.

The exhibition’s title became a way to symbolize the tension between the personal and political, the past and future, inherited realities and alternative possibilities. Artifacts brings to mind objects seemingly frozen in time. Unborn whispers of what never was or what may yet come. Empire carries the weight of expansion, conquest, domination, and historical trauma. Combined, we hoped they would create fertile ground for exploring a topic as vast and complex as human civilization itself.

As we recognized that the exhibition would open during the 250th anniversary of American independence, we chose to lean into questions surrounding colonization, democracy, nationalism, and the pressures of authoritarianism. Some celebrate the American experiment while others remain critical of the ways it has operated throughout its history. Has it evolved? Has it eroded? Can it become something different?

Yet we didn't want to get weighed down by grand historical narratives. We were equally interested in personal histories, acts of imagination, and the more relatable and intimate ways that individuals create meaning within larger social structures.

It is from this intersection of history and possibility that the twenty-two participating artists, and their multiple collaborators, approach the exhibition. The artists represent a wide range of experiences and approaches which address the themes. Some have spent decades professionally exhibiting and contributing to contemporary art discourse. Others work as outsiders from the art world, pursuing creative work as a very personal practice driven by curiosity, personal necessity, devotion to craft, or a simple love of making without the original intention to display their works in a public space like this at all. Together they remind us that culture is shaped not only by recognized expertise, but by the countless ways people create meaning in their lives.

Each artist brings a unique perspective on how natural and manufactured materials can reinterpret the systems, symbols, and institutions that shape our understanding of the world. Meaning evolves through both the materials they choose and the hidden histories carried within them.

Material culture forms one of the exhibition's more vital threads. Bricks, clay, glass, steel, fiber, rope, minerals, photographs, books, paper, and found objects appear throughout the galleries as familiar traces of civilization. Yet the artists rarely use these materials in conventional or expected ways. They transform them through the alchemy of their artistic process.

Hugo Heredia Barrera reimagines one of civilization's most fundamental building blocks through luminous glass architecture responsive to light. Ellen Jong transforms ink from a medium of recording into bodies, vessels, and monuments. Ben Cuevas knits skeletal forms that resemble archaeological remains, while Jotham Hung creates ceramic systems that hover between written language and artifact. Gina Herrera combines steel, ceramics, fiber, and salvaged materials into monuments that balance strength with vulnerability, and Cheyann Washington grinds locally sourced minerals into pigments that embed traces of the earth directly into her paintings and vessels.

Across these works, materials are never neutral. They are infused with the labor, experience, and cultural associations of those handling them. The artists continually transform them into new forms, revealing how meaning itself remains fluid and open to revision. Fragments appear throughout the exhibition. Pieces of objects, images, documents, stories, and memories are broken apart, preserved, collected, and

reassembled into new configurations. Like archaeologists reconstructing a civilization from scattered remains, the artists work from incomplete information, revealing how meaning often emerges from what survives rather than from what was originally whole.

Many of the works featured in the exhibition are fundamentally process-based. Rather than beginning with fixed conclusions, they emerge through years of observation, collecting, research, experimentation, listening, and lived experience. The act of making becomes a means of navigating memory, identity, community, and change. Through creation, the artists simultaneously make sense of their place in the world while creating a place within it. In Elana Mann's work, recurring phrases, collective actions, and cycles of participation suggest that social change, like history itself, often moves less in a straight line than in circles.

Questions of archives, preservation, and memory emerge throughout the exhibition. Nancy Kay Turner's *The Chaos of Memories* assembles photographs, books, ephemera, and found objects into a sprawling constellation of interconnected narratives. Kristine Schomaker revisits decades of personal history through accumulated objects and reconstructed artworks that remain in a perpetual state of becoming. Francis Robateau, draws from personal archives, family histories, and experiences between Belize and Los Angeles to explore concepts of accumulation, fragmentation, repetition, and erasure.

Yet archives do not merely preserve the past. They shape it. Every archive contains absences, gaps filled with speculation and mystery. Every collection reflects choices, elevating certain stories while leaving others behind. The artists gathered here remind us that history is never complete, only continually revisited and reinterpreted.

Questions of identity, inheritance, and belonging surface throughout the exhibition. Rubén Esparza's vessels emerge from the fractured lineage of colonization, exploring mestizaje as both wound and inheritance. Kayla Tange transforms her adoption documents, medical imagery, and personal records into works that challenge the authority of institutional narratives. Reyah approaches self-portraiture as an ongoing process of becoming, using performance, ritual, and image-making to explore identity, spirituality, and self-definition. Jason Jenn draws from Midwestern quilting traditions passed through generations of women in his family with a contemporary queer perspective. These artists reveal identity not as something fixed, but as something continually assembled through family, memory, migration, language, resistance, contradiction, and care.

Alongside these inherited histories are entirely imagined worlds. Antonino Isaia-Formicca maps fictional cities populated by invented languages, geographies, and cultural systems. Rosalyn Myles imagines a future library and asks how knowledge might be recorded and accessed by generations yet to come. Jason Trucco creates an impossible bibliography of books about himself, blurring autobiography and invention. Aprille Curtis crafts handbound books that operate as gifts, repositories, and intimate acts of exchange.

Taken together, these works suggest that civilizations are not only inherited, they must be imagined into existence. Some works look toward alternative pasts, while others speculate on possible futures. Digital identities, fictional archives, imagined libraries, and evolving online personas point toward new ways of creating, storing, and experiencing culture. As emerging technologies continue to transform how information is produced, preserved, and shared, new questions arise about memory, authorship, and what it means to remain human within increasingly virtual environments.

As the exhibition developed, yet another powerful theme emerged for us: collaboration. Many works exist not simply because they were made, but because communities helped develop and sustain them. The exhibition itself emerged through these same dynamics: conversations with artists, curatorial exchange, institutional support, and, at times, a bit of luck. Greg Day's photographs of New York's queer underground survive as evidence of a network of a flourishing creative community of artists and friendships, who as together as cultural outsiders built new ways of living, creating, and being seen beyond many of the structures that excluded them. Marcus Kuiland-Nazario's work emerged from more than one hundred conversations about grief, memory, and loss, making the act of listening a communal ritual. Vojislav Radovanović's collaborative film project brings together singers, poets, musicians, playwrights, performers, and visual artists into acts of collective world-building. Robert Patrick's drawings came to light after his passing more fully because friends and collaborators wanted to ensure his visual practice could be appreciated by others. Across generations, artistic knowledge is exchanged not only through institutions, but through mentorship, friendship, chosen family, and community.

At a certain point, it became clear the exhibition was less about the artifacts than the hands that made them, the people who carried them forward, and the stories they continue to tell. Civilization is not some abstract force, built from objects alone, but from the lives, relationships, and acts of imagination that shape them.

This realization also brought the exhibition back to the idea of human scale. While many works reference monuments, empires, archives, architecture, and centuries of history,

they rarely operate through monumental gestures. Instead, they remain grounded in individual lives: a handmade book, a conversation with a stranger, a photograph preserved by a friend, a vessel shaped by inheritance, a drawing on the back of a script, a memory shared. Again and again, the artists return us to the people behind the artifacts, revealing memory not as a fixed record of the past, but as a living process continually reshaped through exchange, care, and community.

An empire is often imagined as something vast and powerful. Yet the works gathered here suggest a different kind of empire: one built not from conquest or authority, but from stories, relationships, memories, and acts of care. One not just of some future civilization, but present within the countless possible worlds contained in every archive, every collection, every unfinished project, every personal memory, and every creative act waiting to be discovered.

Rather than presenting a singular vision of what constitutes a civilization, *Artifacts from an Unborn Empire* offers a constellation of perspectives that challenge familiar assumptions about power, progress, permanence, and belonging. Ultimately, we have assembled a civilization of twenty-two artists and their many collaborators, each illuminating a different way of remembering the past, inhabiting the present, and imagining the future.

The question remains:

What empires do we inherit, and what new ones might rise in their place?