

# 805 LIVING



**GIVE THANKS  
GIVE BACK**



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ARTIST RUSSELL CROTTY DRAWS FROM HEAVEN AND EARTH.

**T**he garage door entrance to Russell Crotty's studio in a hip industrial park in downtown Ventura is fully open on an early fall day, making the work space light and airy. Inside, hanging on the walls is a series of collages that will make up the artist's one-man show at Ojai's Porch Gallery, which opens on November 8. They're not exactly abstract, however, the drawings within drawings suggest oil rigs, apartment buildings, spaceships, robots, planets, and occasional landforms. They're colorful, a bit fanciful, and wildly engaging.

Elsewhere the studio seems meticulously tidy and organized. One large table is covered with tools and materials in accessible containers, another has neatly arranged books, monographs, and museum catalogs about Crotty's work. A third harbors piles of tiny pen-and-ink drawings that will eventually be incorporated into larger works. "I'll sit at home at night and do them," Crotty says. "Now I'm organizing them by theme and putting them in Ziploc bags. I've always been a control freak."

Crotty has also always been fascinated by astronomy, the ocean, and the coast, themes that have permeated his art >



and pushed his career in unusual directions. He grew up in Marin and Mendocino counties and enjoyed looking at the Milky Way in the night sky, even sleeping outdoors in the summers to continue stargazing. When he was about 12, he got his first glimpse of the universe via telescope. “I saw Jupiter,” Crotty says, “and I was blown away.”

His astronomical interests took a back seat during art school in San Francisco and graduate school at UC Irvine, and in the 1980s, when he relocated to Los Angeles, he was focused on making large-scale surf drawings that brought him critical acclaim. When he moved to Malibu, however, he acquired five telescopes, built a small observatory, and resumed being what he calls “a classical visual observer” of the heavens. By the late 1990s he had become known for creating large globes covered with fine astronomical drawings.

After a fire in 2007 destroyed his Malibu house and studio, consuming the observatory and telescopes, Crotty moved to Northern California for a few years before settling in Meiners Oaks in 2010. But the intense detailing of the globe drawings had strained his arm and shoulder and prompted another shift in his work. Crotty began drawing with a stick, sometimes fashioned from driftwood (“I hate brushes,” he says), applying to a paper surface ink drawings that morphed into collages of oil rigs or lunar modules, incorporating plastic, and using tinted bio-resin over it all. “Bio-resin was fairly new in 2012,”

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he says. “[Unlike traditional resin,] which is horrific, bio-resin doesn’t kill brain cells. It’s environmentally friendly.”

Art and science, the universe and the natural world—these passions have continued to motivate Crotty, and they led to a two-year residency co-organized by the Institute of the Arts and Sciences at UC Santa Cruz, UC Lick Observatory, Theoretical Astrophysics Santa Cruz, and the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. There he conferred with astrophysicists, looked through the Lick’s gigantic telescopes, drew his observations, and produced an installation that modeled the universe back to the Big Bang. It was part of an exhibit entitled *Look Back in Time*, which included some of the Lick’s historical artifacts and a retrospective of Crotty’s early astronomy-related work.

“I made 16 eight-foot-tall panels on craft netting and lots of drawings geared to each part,” he says. At the front of the exhibit were the panels of modern galaxies, stars, and exoplanets. The back panels depicted the cosmic dark ages. In between were black holes, supernovas, and blue blobs, among other heavenly phenomena, all spaced so visitors could walk through this creative history of the universe.

Crotty’s current collages are considerably smaller, but no less involving, in part because they’re so tactile. He starts with a drawing, then incorporates small drawings that sometimes have bits of text. He overlays transparent fiberglass cloth that lends a moire-like pattern to the surface, then adds three-dimensional plastic bits and tinted bio-resin, which contributes an element of unpredictability.

“The new work involves elements of everything I’ve ever done,” he says. “The surf drawings in 1992 had oil rigs and derricks. The globes had nocturnal landscapes. A lot of things I’ve observed—Saturn, comets, Jupiter—make it into my works.” Some of the small images include environmental commentary, but Crotty says, “I don’t have a political message. These are more of a reality check.” He acknowledges we’re in the Anthropocene period, when human activities affect the environment, but since new discoveries happen all the time, he says, perhaps there’s hope.

“The work is whimsical,” he says. “You have to have a sense of humor.” ♦