

# ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

## Material Artifacts: Stephen Lichty Revisits a Site of Ecological Catastrophe

At YveYang, Stephen Lichty's sculpture queries "how desire can shape and, indeed, destroy a landscape."

YveYANG

By Nicole Kaack



Stephen Lichty, *Forest*, 2026, pine rosin, glass. Installation view.

*Through July 3, 2026*—In Jack Kerouac’s 1962 autobiographical novel *Big Sur*, the author’s alter ego retreats from urban life to California’s Central Coast in an attempt to evade fame and his all-consuming alcoholism. In a cabin off Highway 1, to the indefatigable pulse of saltwater on stone, Kerouac’s thoughts turned to the insignificance of human industry when compared to the devouring *durée* of geological time. He wrote that traces of our passage would disappear as easily as those of our forebears, “only with a little more noise and a few bridges and dams and bombs that won’t even last a million years.”

While working for a San Francisco–based stonemason circa 2016, sculptor and performer Stephen Lichty encountered a quartz stone that originated at Liberty Hill Diggings, the site of a historic gold mine in the Sierra Nevada range that was stripped and quarried in the 1850s. The mine reshaped Liberty Hill’s landscape: The earth was opened with explosives, lakes were emptied to wash away vast tonnages of soil with hydraulic cannons, and drift mines were bored into the dark to search out the gold-laden quartz vein. Today, the site’s hillsides remain largely barren, despite the passage of more than a century.



**Stephen Lichty, *Stone*, 2026**, quartz. Installation view

Material artifacts from this site of ecological catastrophe are staged under the gilded ceiling of YveYANG Gallery, in a SoHo storefront that was once—fittingly—a jeweler’s shop.

Attached to the doorknob with hand-braided twine hangs *Bell* (all works 2026), a chime cast from iron ore carried by snowmelt from the Sierra Nevadas to the Pacific and collected by Lichty on San Francisco’s Ocean Beach. Its dome houses a quartz clapper that strikes and sounds with the entry and exit of each visitor like the invocation to a séance. Daylight streams through the plate glass of the front windows, but the light is low down the long hall and into the interior gallery. In the next room sits *Stone*, a 350-pound fragment of quartz pocked by crevices akin to the webbed reticulation of biological tissue—the earth’s bones and marrow exposed. Over the ten years since acquiring the stone, Lichty has hurried natural weathering and erosion with dental scalers, water picks, and other tools, re-creating at minor scale the conditions of its original excavation. In the absence of artificial light, the stone seems to phosphoresce dimly at the center of a gallery made cavernous by shadow. Two luminous archways at either end of the back wall beckon the viewer to venture onward. The empty back room is transformed by *Forest*, a work comprised of 102 glass panes installed over an existing atrium roof and coated with resin collected from pine trees at Liberty Hill. Daylight refracts through the pitted, planar facets of caramelized resin to cast the room into a perpetual if melancholy golden-hour glow.

Stopping, speeding, and eroding time’s passage, the works in the show reflect how material holds memory—and can also forget. Formed from the silica expelled by cooling magma over millions of years, quartz preserves in negative the ancient configurations of surrounding stone. Iron ore, however, once smelted and recast, retains no trace of its original source. Nonetheless, the objects engage a deeper sense of time than the one that shapes our day-to-day and, with Lichty’s aid, stage minor interventions in perpetuity: The resin continues to warp and change under exposure to sunlight, the bell and its quartz clapper impact and minutely shape one another, the stone’s erosion is subtly continued by hourly misting.



**Stephen Lichty, *Forest*, 2026**, pine rosin, glass. Installation view.

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac concludes his meditation on the lithic archive with a wistful hope that time erases all evils, writing, “Even the rocks of the valley had earlier rock ancestors, a billion billion years ago.” These too, he reflected, “have left no howl of complaint.” Lichty’s works belie this mirage, querying how desire can shape and, indeed, destroy a landscape. California is, once again, the stage for a gold rush—albeit one of a different kind; gold and high-purity quartz are integral to semiconductor fabrication, from production and bonding to electroplating and insulation. I’m reminded of the scene in Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 *Pulp Fiction* in which Vincent Vega opens a briefcase to the gleam of light off what is surely gold. An existential seriousness enters his eyes. He tokes his cigarette contemplatively, butt held between thumb and forefinger, eyes hard. I thought of those eyes when, a year ago, hiking Berkeley’s Charter Hill, I turned to look down at San Francisco Bay through a veil of gray-shaded eucalyptus. In the early evening, the water was incandescent with sunlight, the bridge blown out by an encompassing auric glare. Shading my eyes against the sea-setting sun, I wondered whether this was why they called it the Golden Gate; as if the waters might potentiate that Midas touch, equal parts gift and malediction.