

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Travis Diehl, "Sean Townley at Kristina Kite Gallery," *Carla*, Issue 23, February 2021.

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Sean Townley at Kristina Kite Gallery

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The thickly embellished, medium-brown furniture of *Gassing the Imperial Throne* (2020), the centerpiece of Sean Townley's *Bad News from the Colonies* at Kristina Kite Gallery (co-presented by Night Gallery), has its back to the gallery doors. It is also, strikingly, ensconced in a pillow of clear vinyl, wrapped in metal bands and flanked by two tanks of argon gas: an inflated version of a common conservation technique used to kill mold and pests. The throne was salvaged, perhaps once located in an Orthodox church; so was the pair of carved wooden angel wings that, fixed to posts on either side of the room, echo the twin tanks (*Remnants from the Fire*, 2020). Consigned to an ornate sanctuary or museum storage, these objects might blend in. Here, the wings' beefy armatures and the argon bulging around the throne are too corporeal for the pert practices of conservators or priests. Puffed up and exposed, Townley's dramatized display leaves space for open, even volatile analysis.

Townley's exhibition melds quite well with the gallery's chessboard tiles and high ceil-inged, former bank aura. This light site-specificity frames fragments of "old institutions" from Byzantium, Rome, and

humanist Europe in a way that amplifies their mutual themes. *The Imperial Mace (Retired)* (2019), located in the back gallery, forms an axis with the throne and doors. The piece is a replica of the Mace of the United States House of Representatives, a scepter based on the Roman fasces (a bundle of rods) and topped by an Aquila (martial eagle), that is still carried into the chamber by the Sergeant at Arms whenever the legislature meets. Townley's version swaps carbon and steel for the original's ebony and silver—and also decapitates the eagle. This bit of iconoclasm is a literal version of the downgrading Townley performs throughout the show by extracting such remarkable imperialist holdovers from the rituals of contemporary democracy. Nearby is *JUDGE JUDGE JUDGE* (2019), a larger-than-life knockoff of a United States Supreme Court justice's robe (complete with proprietary pleats), that Townley has solidified with epoxy and placed on a wanly molded mahogany slab. The robe is deflated, crumpled, and matte—as if the judge who wore it, like something undead, has melted into the dark, stately wood. On the wall, a cast of a wheeled codex, *Untitled (XSLOTHXCLAWX)* (2019), mixes arcane references to Illuminati-style conspiracy, Thomas Jefferson, and prehistoric megafauna. Within the show's physical sense of "order," Townley's curation of the trappings of U.S. soft power suggest the mystical, moralistic cross-contamination between the beliefs that ground and surround each sculpture.

Of course, the United States are no longer colonies



Sean Townley, *Bad News from the Colonies* (installation view) (2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Brica Wilcox.

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—we *have* colonies—and the affectations of state are not news. Still, in a country that deifies liberal barristers as much as demonizes septuagenarian capitalists—in a world where one of the most articulate advocates for climate justice is the Pope—it's worth repeating that the absurd dramas of power have always been effective distractions. The world is strange already. Townley's best sculptures appear in the gallery like pointed excerpts of an oft-misquoted text. Like the salvaged throne in its bubble, he sets ceremonial and superstitious objects into the anoxic material stasis of art. The context of government and god stripped away, the growth of insects and spores suppressed, these objects remain meaningfully reactive.