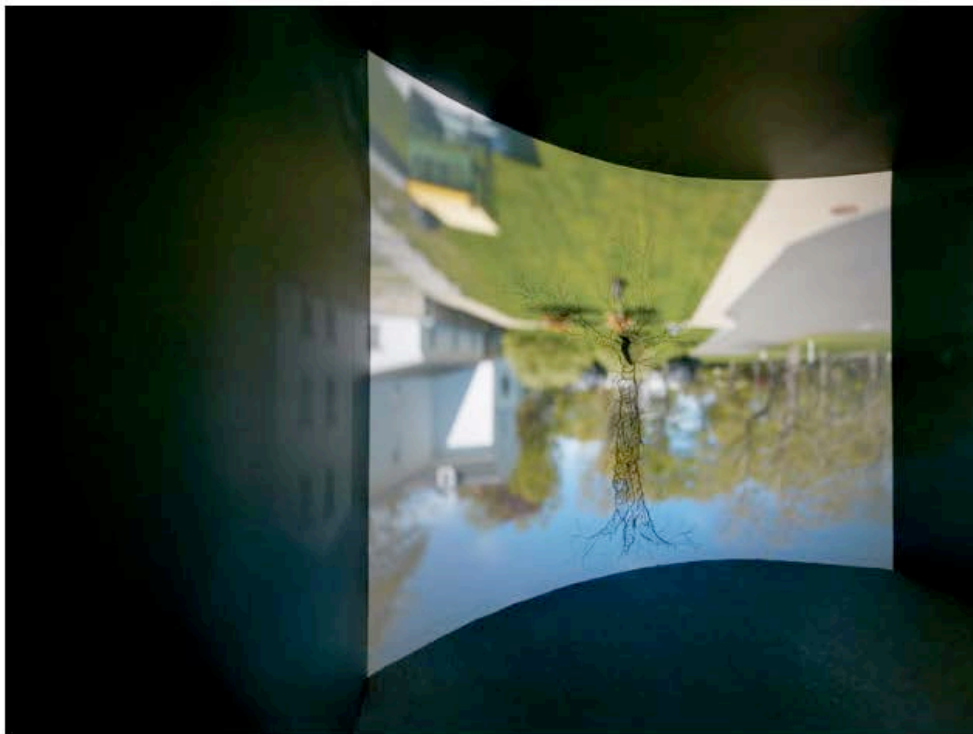


Falkenstein Michelle, 'Rats on Main Street? Don't Scream, They're Art; Kim Jones'. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), 8 July 2016.

## Rats on Main Street? Don't Scream, They're Art

By MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN JULY 8, 2016



The white crow in Kim Jones's exhibition can be found amid shadowy projections of crab apple trees from outside the museum. Tom Powel Imaging

A pre-turncoat [Benedict Arnold](#) had two horses shot from under him in [the Battle of Ridgefield](#), which was actually one fierce clash and several skirmishes in 1777 that left around 100 dead.

All that remains of the battle are a few monuments and markers, as well as a British cannonball embedded in a post of [the Keeler Tavern](#), now a local history museum. Tranquillity was long ago restored.

But the charm on Main Street has been disrupted by a crab apple tree teeming with dozens of rubber rats that appear to be scurrying along its branches (they are actually secured with black tape). Three other crab apple trees have been deeply scored around their bases and bound in black tarps with rope and more tape.

It's all part of the artist Kim Jones's installation "White Crow," currently on view at [the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#). And while there's no link to the Battle of Ridgefield, there is a connection of sorts to the war in Vietnam.

"White Crow" is part of "Site Lines: Four Solo Exhibitions Engaging Place," featuring work both inside and outside the museum by Mr. Jones, David Brooks, Peter Liversidge and Virginia Overton. The crab apple trees, which the museum plans to remove because they have grown too tall, were offered to Mr. Jones to use as he wished.

But in an exhibition featuring so much vermin, why the title "White Crow"? Part of the explanation may lie [in folk mythology](#), in which white crows symbolize the outsider as well as approaching change.

Mr. Jones said he did not consider rats bad or evil. As to whether crows and rats are signs that [something evil this way comes](#), he said only, "Let's wait until after the next election."

Mr. Jones, who was born in 1944 in San Bernardino, Calif., and lives in New York, has long incorporated rats, both rubber and real, in his work. In 2004, Mr. Jones used the rats now at the Aldrich, along with nearly 2,000 others, to cover the facade of SITE Santa Fe, a contemporary art space in New Mexico. In February 1976, Mr. Jones staged an art performance, "Rat Piece," in the Union Gallery at California State University. Dressed as a character called Mudman, he sprayed lighter fluid on three live rats in a cage [and burned them alive](#). Mr. Jones paid a fine for animal cruelty; the gallery's director was fired.

Mr. Jones served in [Vietnam](#) as a mail clerk in the Marines in 1967 and 1968 and said rats constantly plagued the soldiers, who would catch them and set them on fire, or drown them. "It was a brutal thing," he said. "I was taking a bit of that war brutality and bringing it to L.A."



Rubber rats and stuffed crows used in the exhibition. Chris Manning

When Mr. Jones performs as Mudman, he is nearly nude (sometimes, he performs completely nude) with a nylon stocking over his head, his body caked in mud and other organic materials, bearing a huge lattice of sticks on his back. His first Mudman performance took place in January 1976 in Los Angeles, when he lumbered down Wilshire Boulevard for 10 hours.

Mr. Jones said that because he made difficult work, people tried to brand him as a crazy Vietnam vet. "It's not true," said Mr. Jones, a slightly built man with a puckish quality. "I have a job; I pay taxes; I pay my rent; I don't kill people."

Mr. Jones said that in addition to his service in Vietnam, his work reflected his inability to walk from age 7 to age 10 while he suffered from [Perthes disease](#), a polio-like condition that causes degeneration in hip sockets. His work, which also includes drawing, painting and sculpture, suggests the restrictive nature of wheelchairs, leg braces and large military backpacks.

During what he described as a lonely youth, Mr. Jones began drawing large, complex battle scenes between tiny X's and dots, complete with tanks, battleships, factories, military buildings and barracks. When the soldiers are killed, Mr. Jones erases them. In this sense, the drawings are palimpsests depicting the action of battle. He continues to make war drawings, and one is on view at the Aldrich.

Also part of "White Crow" are wall sculptures that incorporate children's plastic toys and dolls, covered with mantles made from pantyhose, sticks and brown foam rubber. They look as if they had been left to decompose in a forest. Some of the toys were given to Mr. Jones by an old studio-mate, the artist Byron Kim, whose children had outgrown them.

In another room at the Aldrich, Mr. Jones has assembled rows of folding metal chairs on which stuffed black crows and rubber rats with wire dry cleaning hangers attached to their backs — "Rats with wings," he says — are lectured by a rubber rat encased in a Mudman-like structure.

The white crow of the show's title can be found clinging to the back wall of a nearly lightless room painted black. A camera obscura across from the crow filters in a tiny amount of light. The shapes of wrapped crab apple trees, projected upside down, are faintly seen near the crow. As cars pass the museum, their shadowy images traverse the wall.

Richard Klein, curator of exhibitions at the Aldrich, sees surrogates for Mr. Jones throughout the work. "The rat is a surrogate for him, the crow is a surrogate for him, and the sculptures are a surrogate for Mudman," Mr. Klein said. "Kim has a connection to nature in an odd way. There's also an undercurrent of survival, life and death." Rats, he notes, live in colonies and take care of each other, and crows also have a society. "They live where people live," he said. "They are our partners in urban living."

[Benedicte Goesaert, a director at Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp](#), Belgium, which represents Mr. Jones, has worked closely with him for nearly five years. "It's complex work, and you need time to dig in," she said. "Kim is an artist's artist." A number of prominent artists, including Maurizio Cattelan, Robert Gober, Jasper Johns and Jeff Koons, own works by Mr. Jones.

Ms. Goesaert described Mr. Jones as friendly and charming but found a weird sense of humor and darkness in the art. "It's just how he sees life," she said. "He's part of the art world, but he chose the idea of the outsider."