

Crush Collision

A new film and installation by Chris Larson, featuring Michael Bland, Grant Hart, Britta Hallin, and gospel group The Spiritual Knights

By *Tamatha Sopinski Perlman*

September 15, 1896, a reported 50,000 spectators gathered in a short-lived town just north of Waco called Crush, Texas, to witness a staged, public-relations spectacle. The brainchild of William George Crush, a passenger agent for the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway (the Katy), this fund-raiser promised ticket-holders a head-on collision of two 32-ton unmanned locomotives, each pulling seven boxcars. People from Texas and surrounding states had spent two dollars apiece on the round-trip ticket to Crush to observe the drama.

Spectators spent the festive day eating, playing games, and enjoying traveling medicine shows, as they eagerly awaited the main attraction. At 5 P.M., the freshly painted engines gently touched noses at the center of a four-mile-long track. Then, slowly, they backed up to their starting points, one to the north, the other to the south. At ten minutes after five, William Crush appeared on the tracks astride a white horse. He threw down his hat. The trains, whistles wailing, careered toward each other, reaching a combined speed of 120 miles per hour. The crowd cheered wildly when the engines crashed in a thunderous climax before settling in a silent heap.

Suddenly, both engines' boilers exploded simultaneously. Chunks of metal, large and small, flew through the air, killing and injuring some of the spectators. Regardless, the Crush Collision was deemed a financial and public-relations success. By day's end, the rubble had been cleared, spectators had returned home, and Crush, Texas, was no longer a town.

Ragtime music composer Scott Joplin was among the spectators that day. Inspired, the 28-year-old composed "The Great Crush Collision March," commemorating the event.

Like William Crush, the man behind that memorable collision of 1896, Minnesota artist Chris Larson has been staging his own collisions. His crashes, expressed in art installations, are collisions between cultures, beliefs, religions, and the art of people from disparate worlds. With the unassuming demeanor of a well-seasoned storyteller, Larson creates films and large-scale sculptures that deliver tales in a rich, iconographic language he has developed during the past fifteen years.

Larson's film, *Crush Collision*, begins with a man in worn work clothes coming out of a floating house. He steps into a boat and rows off into the night. We hear the music of local percussionist Michael Bland (formerly with Prince and The New Power Generation and Soul Asylum), establishing a mood. The man, played by Grant Hart (formerly of the bands Hüsker Dü and Nova Mob), and a woman, played by performance artist Britta Hallin, begin to operate an elaborate machine that creates an endless circle of clay.



The trains just as they struck; September 15, 1896; Crush, Texas
© The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas

Working on two levels, the actors are a study in contrasts. Hart's dark hair and world-weary appearance complements Hallin's angelic face and white dress. She passes lumps of clay to Hart, who feeds them into the machine to be repeatedly beaten and smoothed.

As Hart works, a reverie transports him to another life lived in that house—that of a family, portrayed by the Knight family, a Minneapolis gospel quartet, who are gathered around a supper table saying grace. As the family sings, Hart finds himself on the house's upper level playing a silver piano, not by striking its keys, but by rhythmically rocking it back and forth.

Hart and the Knights represent stories from different times running parallel in the same location. The film is Larson's fourth with producer

Jason Spafford and sound designer Alex Oana. It's a meditative study of dark and light, of the physical and spiritual.

The actual two-story house that served as the film's set spent the winter frozen in a northern Wisconsin lake, and now occupies the gallery as part of Larson's installation. Weathered and worn, it stands as a testament to the events that occurred within its walls. As such, it blurs the lines between fiction and reality.

The sculptures in the adjoining gallery are "constructed destructions." Filling most of the space is another house; along the back wall sits a piano. Larson built the house on its side and painted it flat black as if charred by fire or weathered with age. The staged scene contrasts with the natural

decay of the house as depicted in the film. This one is a prop, telling a story of its ruin rather than of the life it once held. Suspended in time, it tells a story—past or future—of destruction and decay.

The piano plays a role in this ambiguous place and time. The keys on the piano are painted together, the wires and hammers removed, and rockers are attached to the bottom. Pianos are familiar objects, but repurposing this one removes the comfort of its familiarity. This displacement leads to disorientation, to a realm where the familiar is also unfamiliar.

Larson creates the essence of a time and place, not just visually but with an assault on the senses—the earthy smell of wood; the sharp, sometimes dangerous-looking parts of the machines; the soundtracks. His scenarios resonate because they are steeped in history.

Larson grew up in Lake Elmo, and he remembers finding old farm implements in a barn. "I love finding old things and wondering what happened there," he said. "I love concocting things in my head."

Larson began building machines in 1991 when he was a graduate student at Yale University. While researching the town where his work was on display, he discovered that Norfolk, Connecticut, was once a booming mill town. Intrigued, Larson built a large mill of rough wood and labeled its pieces as if assembled from a kit. He studied books on old German farm tools, specifically seeking those written in German, thereby preserving each tool's mystery. Changing the original function of the object, in essence, creates a new object that, in surrealist fashion, requires an alternate perspective. This new function is often instinctual rather than rational. The object's new potential is what interests Larson as an artist.

Larson's curiosity about this potential brought him to filmmaking. He wanted to film his moving sculptures—elaborate constructs of wood requiring their operators to use arms, legs, heads, and even mouths to set them in motion. However, while every movement is carefully recorded, these films are not necessarily about the machines. They are, Larson said, "vehicles to talk about the dualities of life."

Larson's vehicles are loaded with metaphor, but the artist prefers to refrain from scripted messages. He lets the images develop naturally. "I don't like to connect the dots," Larson said. "I like to put the dots out there." This approach enables his work to be lyrical and poetic. For *Crush Collision*, he said, "I knew I wanted a spinning piano to come down around Grant Hart."

The piano would deliver Hart to the Knight family, who agreed to re-enact the scene from the cover of Mahalia Jackson's 1950s gospel album, *Bless this House*. During a break in filming, Larson asked Alberta Knight to sing. Her version of "Old Ship of Zion" was so powerful that Larson recorded it for the film.

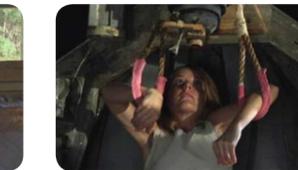
Most recently, Larson has been capturing the moment of impact in his rough-wood sculptures. A space ship smashes into a barn in an untitled work of 2004. Ted Kaczynski's cabin explodes as the General Lee crashes through its roof in *Pause (The Dukes of Hazzard '69 Charger and Ted Kaczynski's Montana Refuge)*. The stories these works tell are filled with larger-than-life heroes and anti-heroes of American culture.

Explosive scenes become metaphors for the duality of human nature. Everything is "...a collision of good and evil, sin and redemption," Larson stated. "It's not a choice between these things. You have both." His works become thoughtful reflections as concepts and people collide in an ever-more-complicated world.

Larson tells strange and fantastic stories, like the folk tales that influence him. His stories deal with the very different lives of contemporaneous people, their struggles, and the duality of human nature.

—*Tamatha Sopinski Perlman is the Program Associate for the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program*

Chris Larson currently lives and works in St. Paul, Minnesota, lectures at the University of Minnesota, and is represented by Magnus Müller of Berlin, Germany.





Mahalia Jackson's *Bless this House* album cover from the 1950s.

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November 17, 2006, to January 7, 2007
Minnesota Artists Gallery

Opening Reception

Thursday, November 16, from 7 to 9 P.M.
Music by The Spiritual Knights

Gallery Talk and Film Screening

Thursday, November 30, at 7 P.M.
With Chris Larson

Critics' Trialogue

Thursday, December 7, at 7 P.M.
With Kris Douglas

All events are free and open to the public.

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