



The Cave of Treasures, 2014, installation view

# ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE ERIC BELTZ THE CAVE OF TREASURES

SEPTEMBER 12, 2014-MAY 1, 2015

Commissioned by the Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara, Eric Beltz's installation, *The Cave of Treasures* represents the artist's first solo Museum exhibition. This exhibition also coincides with the tenth anniversary of the artist's graduation from the MFA program in the Department of Art at UCSB. Since his graduation, he has become known for his highly-detailed, complex graphite drawings that relate to the artist's interest in subjects as diverse and broad ranging as Americana, mythology, botany, Christianity, shamanism, anthropology, and apocryphal texts. While still a graduate student, Beltz began to observe, research, and draw many of the subjects that still hold sway over his practice, such as the poisonous, hallucinogenic, or medicinal plants that grow locally as well as their historic cultural significance in ritual, healing, and daily life. In conceiving this exhibition Beltz revisited drawings of plants he executed while in the MFA program and used them as fodder for elements in the installation. Beltz also saw this exhibition as a unique opportunity to expand his practice by utilizing new techniques, mediums, and materials while at the same time employing his trademark methodology. The result is a contemplative installation surrounding three themes or "treasures" that repeatedly appear in his oeuvre: poison oak, the swastika symbol, and Medusa.

Quantiful Wisdom  
This beautiful  
This superb growth  
Which unfolds  
The beauty  
The beauty  
The beauty

Medusa's Scarecrow, 2014, detail view of text

## THE CAVE OF TREASURES

Beltz's ambitious site-specific installation lays bare the forgotten details, or more nuanced stories, surrounding poison oak, the swastika, and Medusa, all of which are widely maligned and considered objectionable. *The Cave of Treasures* inhabits this lesser-known terrain by playing with and expanding upon tales and misconceptions surrounding these subjects. As viewers proceed through the gallery, Beltz's installation slowly unfolds by toying with the viewer's sense of fear and revulsion, while at the same time alluding to the half-truths that have plagued these subjects. In so doing, he has created a meditative space with deftly executed drawings and sculptures that lure the viewer in and engender such opposing emotions as anxiety, curiosity, revulsion, and sympathy.

As an opening volley Beltz positions at the center of his exhibition, *Poison Oak Vessel*, a sculpture that includes a live poison oak specimen, one of the most feared plants nature enthusiasts encounter. It is situated in a handcrafted concrete planter decorated with eyes that give "sight" to the plant, allowing it to directly engage the viewer. Beltz toys with the viewer's trepidation at being exposed to the plant. Contrary to popular belief, only direct contact with urushiol, the black fluid running through the plant, can cause an adverse reaction either through touch or inhalation of smoke if the plant is burned. Beltz plays on this fear of exposure through his strategic use of the written word "touch" in other drawings in the exhibition. So much fear and misinformation surrounds the plant that it is often difficult to appreciate its positive aspects. Although toxic to humans, poison oak provides an excellent food source for many birds and mammals plus it is useful for habitat restoration projects and helps foster the growth of other plants in areas decimated by fire.



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The base of the concrete planter reveals another theme that re-appears in Beltz's research and drawings, the swastika. Beltz decorated the low pedestal with a swastika pattern done in an ancient "meander" style. The subtle movement suggested in the pattern (as well as the layout of the text on the sides of the pedestal) conveys the counter-clockwise direction Beltz wishes viewers to move through the space. The swastika's association with the barbarous Third Reich of Nazi Germany (1933-1945) as well as more recent Neo-Nazi groups has irrevocably tainted the symbol. As disturbing an emblem as it is, the swastika is also one of the oldest symbols in human culture. In his research endeavors related to ancient symbols, mythology, and a host of other subjects, Beltz has encountered numerous references throughout the world to the swastika, noting its overwhelmingly positive associations with eternity, light, good fortune, the sun, and Buddhism.



Poison Oak Vessel, 2014, detail view, graphite and paint on wood, cast concrete, and poison oak

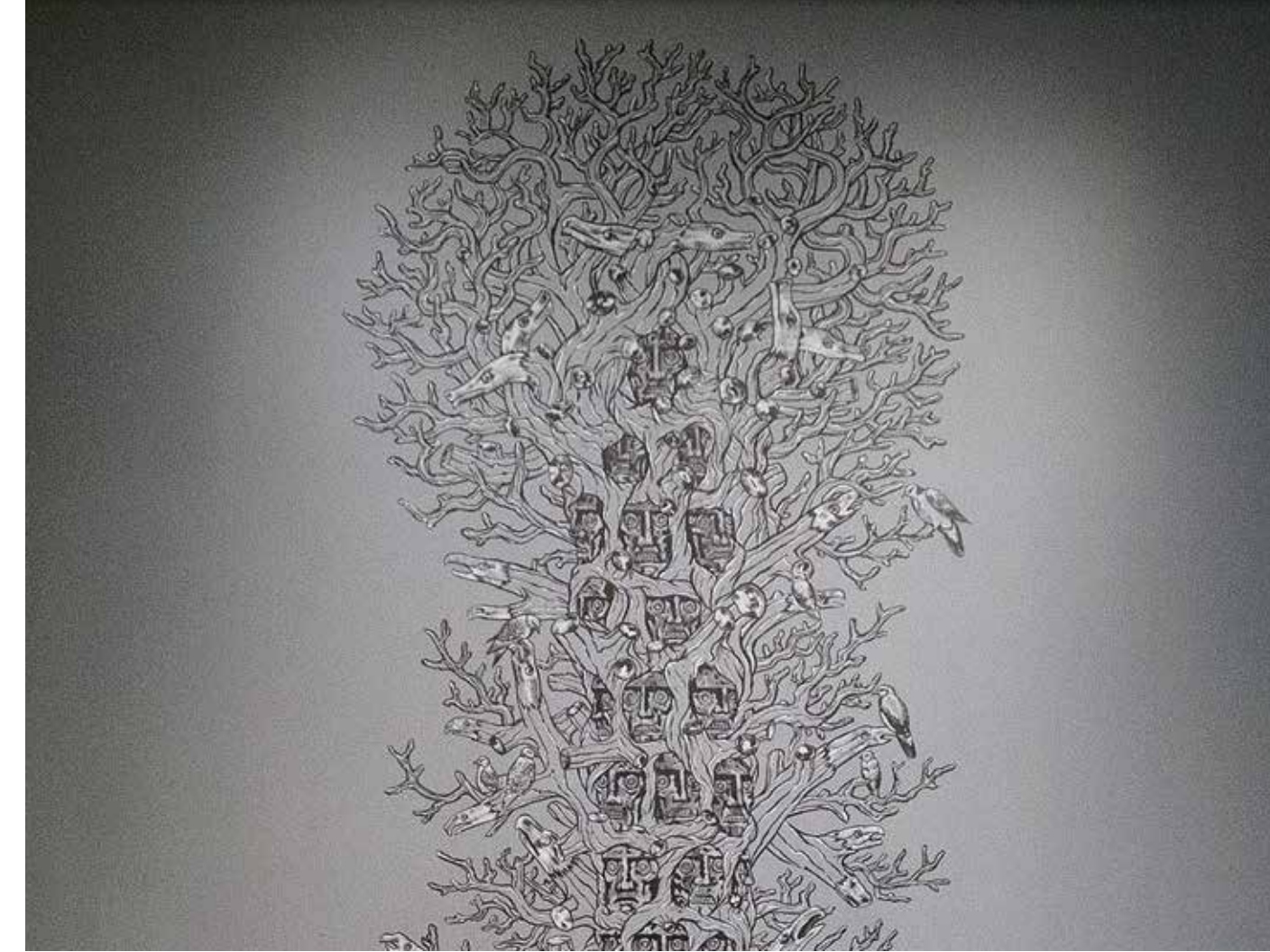
Much of the installation, however, concerns the third "treasure," Medusa, a horrific Greek mythological creature with snakes for hair and a scaly, serpentine body. Her glance could turn anyone to stone. Once a beautiful woman, according to Ovid, Medusa was transformed after being raped by Poseidon in a temple dedicated to Athena. Enraged by the defilement of her temple, Athena victimized Medusa again by turning her into the monster everyone recognizes today. Beltz's *The Mortal Gorgon Medusa*, a large-scale drawing in shellac and silver ink on black paper, features scores of plants arranged to suggest a different iteration of this character. (See image on reverse.) Here, she is an ethereal creature made up of the beautiful bounty of nature. Closer inspection reveals she is composed of potent plants used to cure ailments or induce hallucinogenic states in shamanic practice: poison oak, datura, milkweed, castor, morning glory, mint, and poison hemlock. These helpful, once well-used, plants are now frequently overlooked (relegated to the category of weeds), though they grow abundantly in interstitial sites throughout this region.

The final work in the show, *Medusa's Scarecrow*, is a seventeen-foot wall drawing executed in acrylic ink and paint. Here, Medusa is represented by the power she wields. Stone heads of snarling cats and men with stunned expressions are stacked atop each other, all victims of her wrath. Tree-like roots grow in-



Medusa's Scarecrow, 2014, detail view of birds and stone faces

between the stones, enfolding each one while serene birds rest on the protruding branches that have carved fowl-like gargoyles at the ends. The result is a powerful, totemic figure that protects birds from prowling cats, their natural enemy, and other dangers. The image was inspired by Beltz's research which uncovered a tradition associating Medusa with birds and snakes, creatures of the heavens and the underworld. The artist's creative interpretations of Medusa imagine another fate for this tragic character. Made from humble, overlooked and often reviled plants, Beltz's iteration of this mythical figure, especially in light of her victimization, reads as sympathetic and powerful. In his conception, she finds refuge and purpose in the natural world, capable of acting as a forceful and protective agent on behalf of these modest plants and delicate creatures.



Medusa's Scarecrow, 2014, detail view of top portion

## NEW PROCESSES, OLD METHODS

For *The Cave of Treasures* Beltz worked in new mediums but applied his characteristic methodology. This included numerous studies, multiple tests, exhaustive academic research and his trademark aesthetic sensibility which shares some similarity with collage. Collage refers to a work composed of disparate images sourced from printed matter. Beltz's works, however, are composed of disparate ideas represented by specific phrases or expertly hand-drawn images conjoined in individual compositions. These ideas have their roots in the research he conducts, broadly speaking, on how individuals or cultures have made sense of the world around them and more specifically in relation to plants. "As I am working, I follow whatever challenge comes out of whatever I am working on. This is how my mind works: it finds a question then follows the steps to find some kind of trailhead"<sup>1</sup> His inquisitive nature leads to obscure texts, academic articles and religious treatises, all manner of information which he then uses as the basis for his image-making process. "I want facts in as raw as possible a format. I want to see what these authors are seeing and then shape this into whatever I want."<sup>2</sup> He continually mulls on his research, taking notes and translating his ideas into images and motifs, some of which continually re-appear in different contexts or iterations. Poison oak, the swastika, and Medusa are examples of some of the concepts that he continuously encounters, contemplates, and on occasion incorporates in his works. While each work that he creates is unique, he operates in a manner similar to a collagist picking and choosing ideas and concepts he has found and phrases he has noted. The results are compelling images with overarching themes that are composed of a multitude of ideas, some of which are never fully de-coded for the viewer.

1. Eric Beltz, "Eric Beltz," interview by Hannah Stauffer, *Juxtapoz*, November 2013, 101.

2. *Ibid.*, 100.



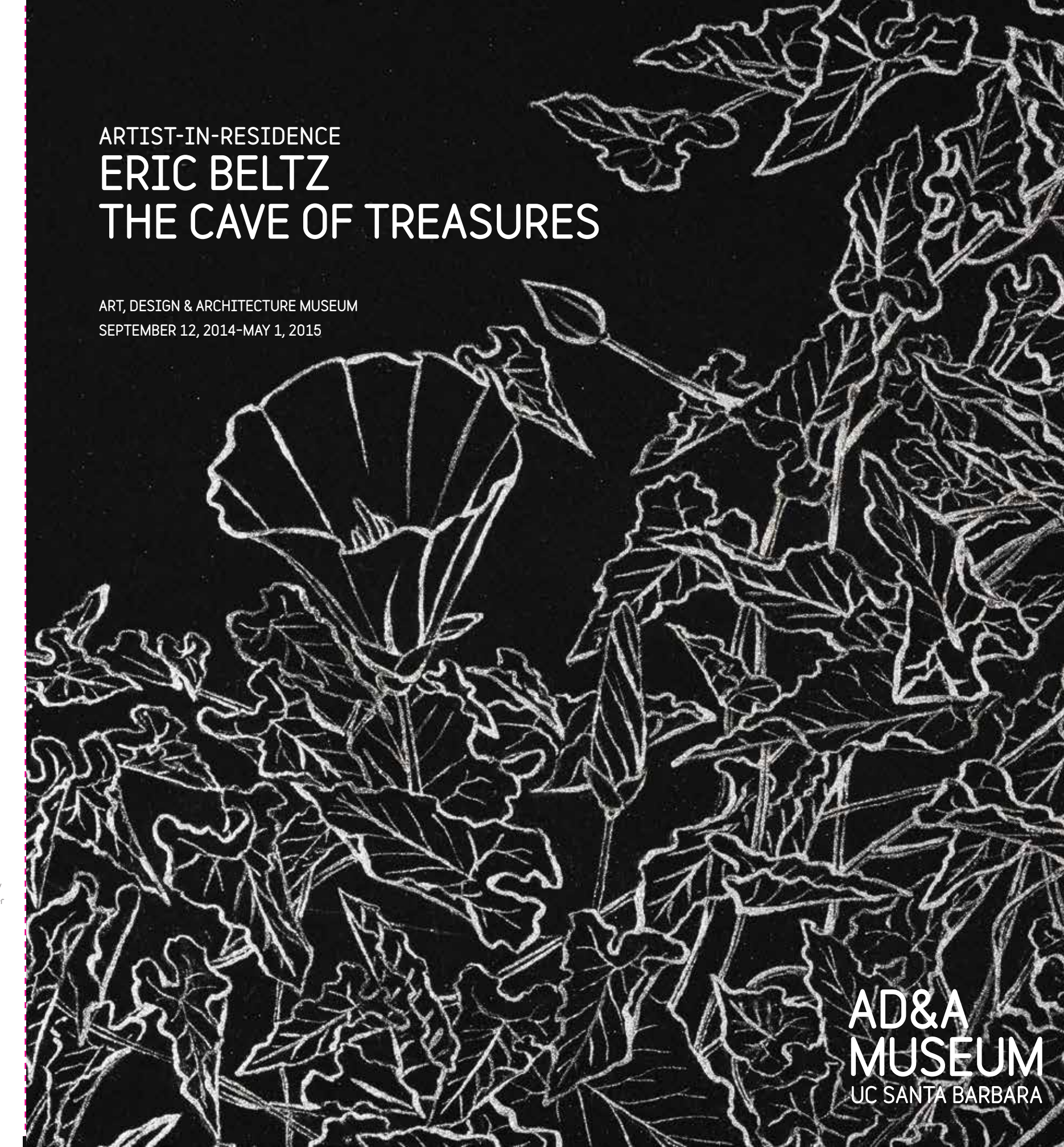
Medusa's Scarecrow, 2014, detail view of tree stumps and logs

In *Medusa's Scarecrow*, the central image of the work, the scarecrow, is the subject but other elements like the cut logs and tree stumps which litter the ground often appear in his works. They obliquely address deforestation which is typically viewed as negative. Beltz, however, sees another potentially positive side to the problem. Felled trees allow sunlight to reach the forest floor and that spurs the growth of low lying plants, many of which contain healing properties. Some of these fast growing plants are among those that make up the artist's interpretation of *The Mortal Gorgon Medusa*. Beltz utilizes text in a similar manner. This same work includes hand-painted phrases which hover on either side of the central composition of the wall drawing. One of them, "Day after day this superb growth which unfolds its beauties darkness desire and wrathful wisdom," is itself a collage. It incorporates several texts taken from the apocryphal Gospel According to Mary [Magdalene] and *Soma: The Divine Mushroom of Immortality* about a mushroom (fly agaric or *Amanita muscaria*). This mushroom was used in ancient Greek rituals, and even earlier, to induce a hallucinogenic state that allowed participants to contact the gods. Here, snippets of the phrase, like "wrathful wisdom," conjure unsettling associations with Medusa, the cruelty of the Nazi swastika symbol, and poison oak's potentially toxic qualities. In the end, Beltz's works represent a carefully crafted mixture of ideas and concepts that in overt and indirect ways are assembled together in carefully choreographed scenarios to produce a complete image.

By employing a collagist sensibility, Beltz cleverly mirrors one's contemporary experience of the world in which images and information frenetically bombard one at every turn. His painstakingly constructed compositions can be seen as distillations of that cacophony, combined with old-world craftsmanship. This sensibility also suits the rebellious spirit that is integral to the work. "Collage," as one curator put it, "is the visual language of the underdog. Some artists have adopted collage as a Trojan horse, a tactic with which to insert unexpected messages and meanings into existing contexts and histories."<sup>3</sup> This same type of defiance runs through Beltz's work and in particular this installation which adds depth of meaning and forces viewers to consider alternative interpretations of this plant, symbol, and character. In so doing, Beltz reminds us that there is always infinitely more understanding to be gained about any tale or taboo subject if one is only willing to look.

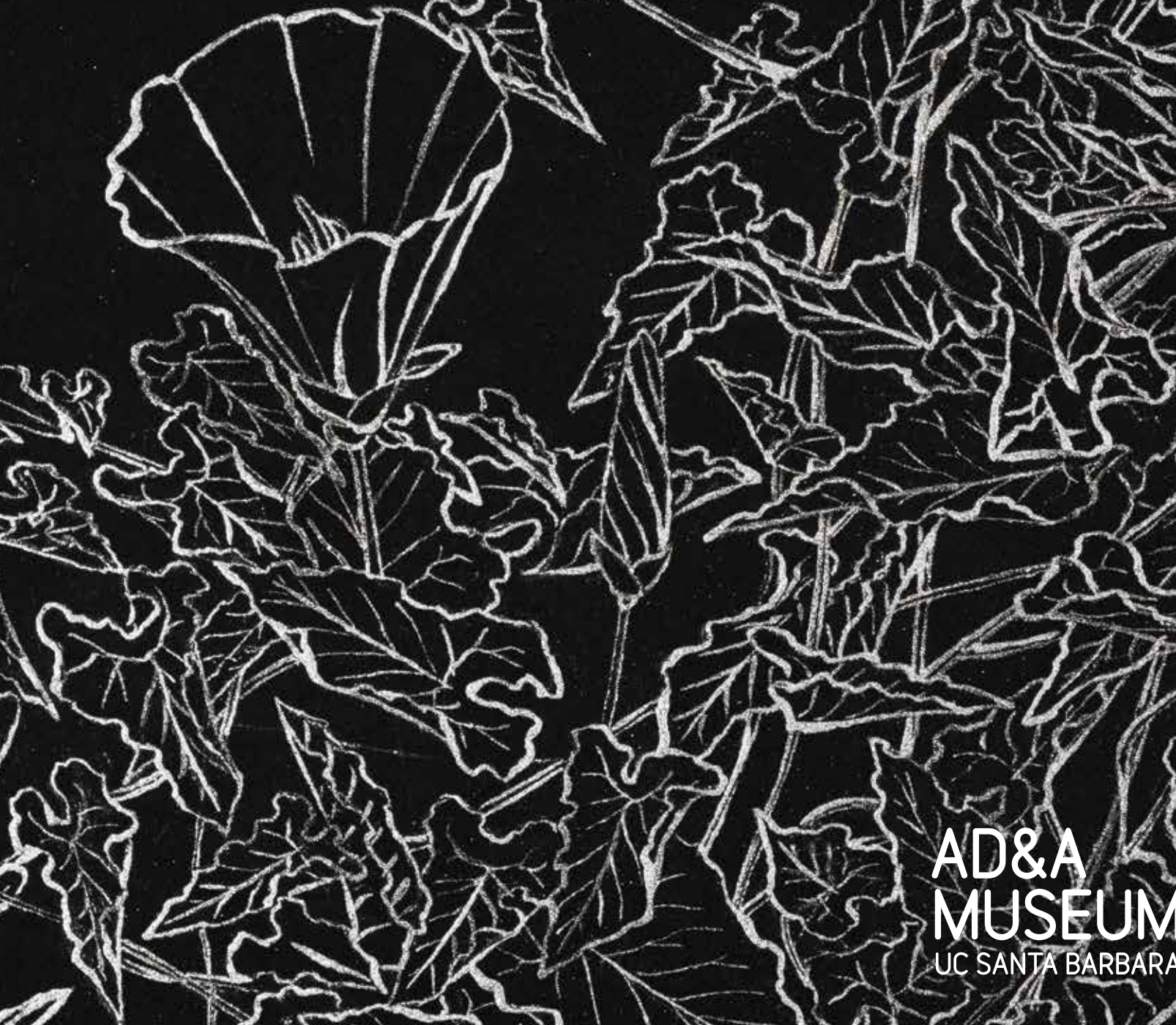
ELYSE A. GONZALES  
Curator of Exhibitions

3. Massimo Gioni, "It's Not the Gue That Makes the Collage," in Richard Flood, Laura Heppner and Massimo Gioni, *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 14.



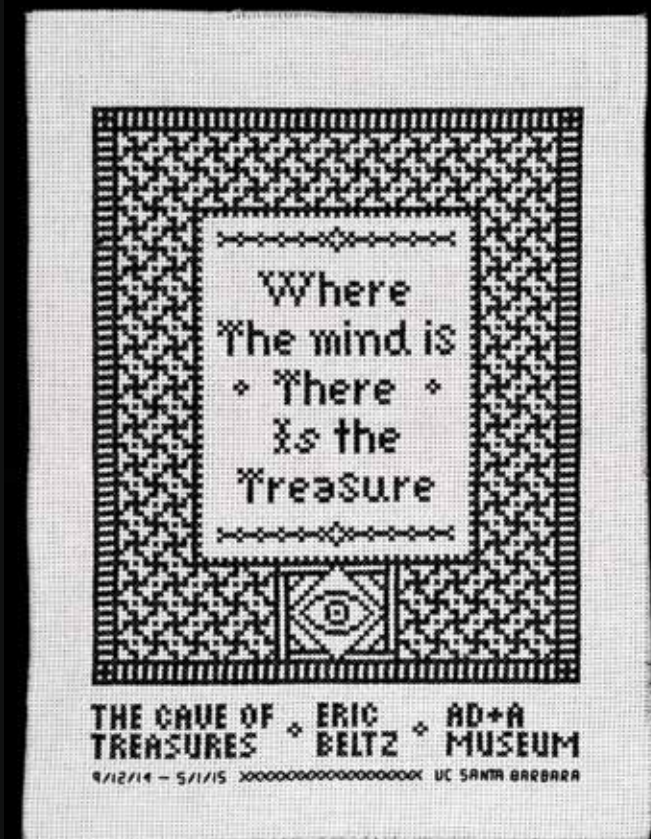
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ERIC BELTZ (b. 1975, Orange, CA) received a BFA in 2000 from California State University, Fullerton and an MFA in 2004 from UC Santa Barbara. He has had several solo shows in Los Angeles, New York, and Houston. He has also been included in many group shows across the country including: the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; CB1 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Koplin Del Rio, Los Angeles, CA; Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art & Design, Los Angeles, CA; and the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC among others. His work has been featured in *Art in America*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *Juxtapoz*, *American Artist*, *Flaunt Magazine*, and others. His work is in the collections of the Nerman Museum, Overland Park, KS; Progressive Collection, Cleveland, OH; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. He is currently represented in Los Angeles by Koplin del Rio Gallery and works as a Continuing Lecturer of drawing at UC Santa Barbara.



Where The Mind Is There Is The Treasure, 2014, thread, needle, Aida 14 fabric, pattern, instructions and signed letter of authenticity, 9 x 12 in, limited edition of 50. Produced by Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara

All images courtesy of the artist and Koplin del Rio Gallery, Los Angeles

REVERSE IMAGE: *The Mortal Gorgon Medusa*, 2014, shellac and silver ink on prepared paper.

COVER: *The Mortal Gorgon Medusa*, 2014, detail view

### ERIC BELTZ, LIMITED EDITION

In conjunction with his exhibition *The Cave of Treasures*, Beltz designed a limited edition, do-it-yourself, counted cross-stitch pattern which relates to his interest in craft, Americana, apocryphal texts, as well as such taboo subjects as Medusa, poison oak and swastikas. Purchase yours at the Museum or contact Michaela Upp at [mupp@museum.ucsb.edu](mailto:mupp@museum.ucsb.edu); 805-893-2951 for more information.

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