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Boat Transforms Into a 'Sea of Shavings' in Midtown Storefront



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GARMENT DISTRICT — Stroke by careful stroke, James Leonard (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/james-leonard>) is transforming a wooden boat into a sea of shavings, a painstaking performance taking place eight hours a day inside a narrow Midtown (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/manhattan/midtown-theater-district>) storefront.

The performance artwork, titled "A Kiss for Luck," (<http://open-source-gallery.org/james-leonard-a-kiss-for-luck/>) started last Wednesday. It runs every day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through Aug. 11, when Leonard will find himself surrounded by inch-long pieces of boat, having all but erased the once-seaworthy vessel from existence.

"As the piece goes on, I find what it means to me is much more layered and complex," said Leonard, 39, who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/brooklyn/bedford-stuyvesant>). "This is the largest and most challenging piece I've done. Everything I've learned through my career has come to fruition in this piece."

Leonard said he felt compelled to pursue this piece, with inspiration emerging from "the anxieties I have felt" about global warming and the recent rapid changes in annual Arctic ice-melt.

"We really have no f---ing idea what this is going to mean for human civilization," he said. "I feel like I'm staring into the sun of my own anxieties, and the collective anxiety of what's coming."

The 13-foot boat was simply not available on Craigslist, he said, but choosing that particular vessel was not without significance.

"Self-contained vessels, whether it's a spacecraft or a sea craft, it's different than a wagon or a horse or an automobile where you can really pull up anywhere," Leonard explained. "When you're in this vehicle, this boat or this spacecraft, you're relying on it for your own safety. That desperate claustrophobia, it's attractive to me."

Anna Chan (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/people/Anna-Chan>), project manager for Chashama (<http://chashama.org>), which is hosting the performance in its storefront at 266 W. 37th St., called "A Kiss for Luck" at once "a mutually-destructive relationship and a symbiotic relationship."

As Leonard destroys the boat, made of mahogany, pine and plywood, he undergoes change himself, both emotionally and physically, both Chan and the artist described: altered muscle tone, nicks and cuts from the knives and wood chips, and a body so sore that he ends each day with Epsom salt baths and keeps a massage company on speed dial.

What's more, with the wide window in front, "we have hundreds of pedestrians passing every day who make sure the art in the space is very interactive," Chan said.

On Friday, more than a dozen people stopped in just a half hour to watch or snap photos. Leonard, who did not acknowledge any of the passersby, said he's nonetheless "developing a strong peripheral vision, and I'm catching these little mini-narratives people are leaving me."

Some, taking a literal view of the show's title — which was inspired by lyrics from the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__VQX2Xn7tI) — blow or plant kisses on the front window. Others seem to stare "almost longingly" at the boat and his work, Leonard described.

"It's a piece that is almost meant to be seen in time-lapse," Leonard said. "People see it in little snippets, sort of like the leaves changing in the fall, or like a sunset or the change of the seasons."

A 45-second time-lapse video, in fact, was posted to Tumblr (<http://a-kiss-for-luck.tumblr.com/post/56789622038>) Monday.

The wood shavings, meanwhile, will be made the centerpiece of a reception Aug. 16 at Pearl Studios. After that, their fate remains unclear: they may be used as compost, but the adhesives in the materials make them unsafe for growing food.

"We're also considering appropriate placement in a permanent collection," Leonard said.

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