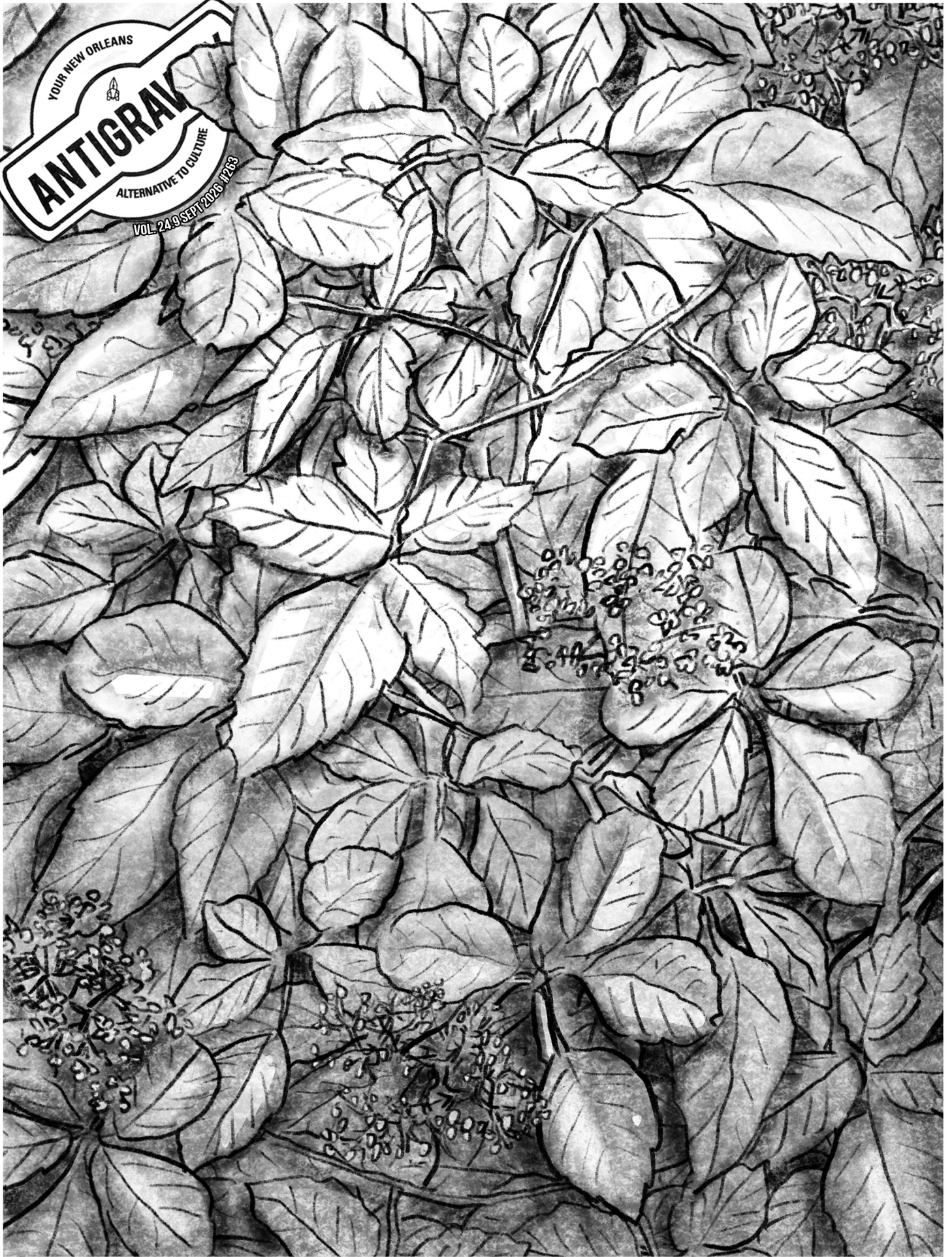


YOUR NEW ORLEANS

ANTIGRAVITY

ALTERNATIVE TO CULTURE

VOL. 24.9 SEPT 2026 #263





ART BRINE

by Emily Farranto

Gain of Form Kyle McLean at Sibyl Gallery

Kyle McLean's exhibition *Gain of Function* at Sibyl Gallery kicks up some existential questions. All the works in the show are small, hand-fabricated lamps, most of which are arranged on pedestals clustered in the middle of the gallery. A few wall sconces hang among the paintings and drawings of a concurrent show. These lamps do not look like sculptures; they just look like lamps. So, "What makes these lamps art?" is a fair question. So is, "Can art be useful?" And "Can concepts be embedded in functional objects?"

The most obvious (and least satisfying) answer to *what makes these lamps art?* is context. They are art because they are displayed in a gallery. This is where the integrity of a contemporary art gallery's program can reassure us that what we are looking at accommodates meaning, something beyond function or decoration. While we may see an inventory of lamps, we are urged to consider these objects as the artist's expression situated within art history and current times. Thankfully, we don't have to leave it at *the object is art because the gallery says so*.

The lamps follow a template of basic forms: a cord, a base, and a shade. Within this format, the individual works are full of idiosyncrasies, traces of labor, and thoughtfully selected parts. Some of the surfaces are distressed from previous use because some materials—like metal bases and shades—were collected on walks or bike rides and repurposed. From abandoned election lawn signs,

the artist shaped metal legs, capped by silicone ends in various colors. Clear silicone feet cause two lamps to appear to hover millimeters above the pedestal. Such details reward close viewing and make the lamps feel like drawings, improvised but also marked with the artist's stylistic tendencies.

Not all of the artist's art has been utilitarian. Four years ago, Kyle McLean exhibited an installation titled *Inner Circle Outer Band* at The Front. He had gathered red rocks—bricks tumbled smooth by the Mississippi River—and arranged them in concentric circles on the floor. This process-driven, visually appealing work offered no practical use. A geometric display of construction materials is an art format with canonized precedent, such as Carl Andre's 1966 *Equivalent VIII*, 120 firebricks arranged in a rectangle on the gallery floor. Before that, in 1925 Marcel Duchamp and other artists developed a movement they called "Dada" in reaction to the profound moral failure of World War I. Duchamp's *Fountain*, a graffitied urinal, helped establish the format of the readymade—an absurdist object stripped of its utility and designated art.

With his lamps, Kyle McLean, aware of both artists, takes it a step further. Where Duchamp put a prefab utilitarian object in an art gallery, Kyle McLean hand-makes them. Where Andre called his material sculptures "communitistic," the lamps are made to function in the homes and lives of people in his community. While Duchamp



Kyle McLean, CSG-4 (2026). Lamp made from steel, glass, aluminum, and silicone.

and Andre titled their artworks, asserting them as art, McLean's lamps come with no such argument. They are individually titled with what reads like serial codes, like *CSS-4*. Duchamp and Andre made art in fraught times and particulates of those times are embedded in their work. We

intended to improve or enhance an organism. This practice is not without controversy. It appears in pandemic and endemic conspiracy theories. Some people believe COVID-19 and Lyme disease were the result of gain-of-function lab leaks. The titles of the lamps (like *CSG-6*)

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are living through a different scary and violent cultural moment. With a forecasted AI takeover, it makes sense for an artist to hand build rather than deploy a readymade. Amidst crumbling empires and rising waters, one may be inspired to make something practical.

The show's title, *Gain of Function*, encapsulates a current preoccupation of Kyle McLean's outside of making art. In a conversation that took place in person and over text message, the artist described his growing desire to be useful to his community. Kyle co-owns Pond, a coffee shop in the Marigny. He told me, "It's definitely not about the coffee. It's more of a gesture of love and dedication." He describes it as a place for people to offer and find community.

"Gain of function" also refers to a type of research involving genetic alterations. These modifications are ostensibly

resemble the names of viruses, like RSV-1, though the artist told me this was unintentional.

Whichever way we understand the title of the show, the work within it embodies the artist's craving to be of use. To return to the original question, "What makes these lamps art?" Answer: Because the artist says they are, his practice reveals the throughlines, and the gallery helps contextualize them as such. Art history and rhetoric draws lines and artists erase and redraw them. "Can art be useful?" Yes, especially if there's access to electricity. "Can concepts be embedded in functional objects?" Functional objects can be metaphors, Trojan horses, or just regular lamps. Function is in the eye of the beholder. ♡

Gain of Function can be viewed through September 6. For more info, check out sibylgallery.com.