

## What's the purpose? Slow art can be taxing in a fast-paced world.

Trey Duvall's new installation at Rule Gallery explores futility. It's more fun than it looks.

By Ray Mark Rinaldi | | The Denver Post

September 25, 2023 at 6:00 a.m.



Trey Duvall's "RETURN/SWEEP" takes up the entire first floor at Rule Gallery. (Provided by Rule Gallery)

It might be funny to call Trey Duvall's new art installation at Rule Gallery "exciting." After all, the piece is a bit tedious to watch.

Here is the visual: a broom sweeps across a mound of sand.

That's it. The broom, ordinary and plastic, moves back and forth very slowly. It pushes the sand this way, just a little, and then that way, just the same.

Perhaps this review should end right here because there is not much more to say about the visuality of this particular piece of visual art. I could go on, as I sometimes do, over-describing the scene, talking about how the sand is the color of brown sugar; or how the broom is a pure white with honey-shaded bristles.

Or I could get into the mechanics, which, like most of Duvall's pieces, are decidedly low-tech. The broom handle is attached to a string, which is connected to a pulley on the ceiling, which is operated by a motor; which drags the broom toward the back wall of the gallery, about eight feet, then changes direction and drags it back the same distance toward the gallery's storefront window, which faces Santa Fe Drive.

The roundtrip journey takes a lazy eight minutes to complete.

The viewer's job is to watch, and to get into the groove, the very gradual groove.

In some ways, that can be stressful. This is a fast-paced world we live in and this installation, titled "RETURN/SWEEP," is a work of slow art. Standing there, counting the minutes, watching the minimal movement of the sand can be taxing.

Plus, there's no end to this story. The broom does not accomplish anything. It will just do its thing until the eight-week show closes on Oct. 14.

But I say, hurry over. Because when you settle in and let the action unfold, you start to understand the things Duvall is exploring: repetitiveness, purpose, purposelessness, the relationship we have with everyday objects, with our work.

How different is this machine for sweeping from the actual act of sweeping your kitchen floor? It just gets dusty again. And so you sweep again. As a tool, a broom is both useful and useless.

"RETURN/SWEEP" allows viewers to go down whatever rabbit hole they fall into. I think for some this will be a meditative exercise. The plot might be dull, but the motion is relentless and rhythmic. The piece can lull you into a mindset of low expectations and easy satisfaction if you let it.



Trey Duvall installs "RETURN/SWEEP" at Rule Gallery. (Provided by Rule Gallery)

For others, it will be frustrating. Watching all of this work and its total lack of achievement can be maddening. But that does mirror the more frustrating parts of contemporary life, those days when you feel like you get nothing done.

This is the beauty of Duvall's work, which regularly investigates futility, which invites us to think, on a small scale, about the maintenance required to be human and exist in an orderly society, and on a larger scale, what we achieve for doing our part. His work is all about mindless tasks, about wearing something until it wears out as a way of sizing up what things really mean to us.

On the surface, his objects can feel distant and cold. But in effect, they are devastatingly close to the heart.

And it works because of its nothingness, its simplicity. Duvall taps us into the connection we have with everything, and in a way, everyone, using just one broom and one pile of sand. His real skill is editing.

He does offer a nice sideshow for this Rule Gallery exhibition, a pleasant distraction, if you will, by placing a series of acrylic boxes, evenly spaced, on the wall. Each is a square and see-through, and about 10 inches wide on each side.

Inside every clear cube, there is a pile of sand. Duvall put the sand in by hand at the show's beginning, very carefully, drizzling it in so that every pile comes to a very distinct point at the top.

Over time, the neat piles of sand fall away. The motor for these pieces is a combination of things: gravity, vibrations, slamming doors, the shake of the gallery as heavy trucks fly by on the busy road out front.

Each cube has its own journey, depending on where it is positioned in the gallery space. Now, about a month into the exhibit, some piles are nearly flat. Others still look like perfect little pyramids.

If you want to turn these cubes into a metaphor, to assign them meaning, you might think of the way life unfolds at its own pace, often out of control, sometimes without a clear objective. I'm not sure that is a proper interpretation, though, since the interesting aspect of Duvall's work is that it resists being so directly functional. It is anti-functional.

That's the exciting part, the restraint of the artist to give us anything so easily, to make us work without actually doing anything, to make us think, wonder, reflect, succeed, give up, whatever.

He does that with just a broom and a pile of sand.



Clear cubes hold tiny piles of sand that fall apart organically over the run of the eight-week exhibition. (Provided by Rule Gallery)