

# "I am California"

## "David Kimball Anderson: Bakersfield Standards"

Bakersfield Museum of Art, September 25, 2025–January 3, 2026

by Neil Goodman

*Yeah, dig all my gold, soak in my springs  
Conquer my mountains if that's what you need  
I am California, can't you see?  
Wherever you roam, you'll always want me*

– John Craigie

**B**akersfield, California—known for oil production, agriculture, and manufacturing—is about 135 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, located in the central part of the San Joaquin Valley. If you live on the coast getting to Bakersfield is a bit of a challenge, as the roads are mostly two lanes, with large areas of semi-mountainous terrain intersected by gullies, valleys, and steep turns. Closer to Bakersfield, the landscape flattens, with long planar stretches of farmland. Small towns pepper the landscape, as the worker community sustains the rural economy.

Bakersfield is also notable for having one of the largest Basque communities in the country. One Basque restaurant in particular (the Pyrenees Cafe), was popularized by Guy Fieri in his show "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives." The Bakersfield Museum of Art (BMoA) is equally a bit of a surprise. If we see California through the lens of its largest art institutions, it is refreshing to visit a smaller venue, with a focus on artists most closely linked to their region. Bakersfield is becoming a bit of a hub, as cheap rent, large spaces, and a new contemporary art gallery are attractive for artists looking to leave Los Angeles or San Francisco. Also, an active BMoA board, along with the recent addition of museum director Gilbert Vicario and longtime curator Victor Gonzales, promises a strong direction and increased visibility. In short, Bakersfield is a destination, a land defined by backbone and brawn, with a strong work ethic, and far removed from California's coastal glitz and glamour.

The title of David Kimball Anderson's show is "Bakersfield Standards." (A standard is a song of established popularity that has become a core part of the repertoire for a particular genre.) The "Bakersfield Standard" is a hybrid country western genre popularized by Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. In Victor Gonzales's catalog essay, he mentions that Anderson's steel supplier was based in Bakersfield. Although Anderson both lives and works in Santa Cruz, California, the many years of long and frequent drives to Bakersfield became both a source of inspiration for many of the works in the exhibition. In this way, the road traveled was his "Bakersfield Standard."



*Hawk*, 2023. Steel and paint, 148 x 38 x 46 inches. Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art.



(Left) *Barn Owl*, 2010. Galvanized steel and paint, 50 x 27 x 22 inches. (Right) *Nest in Fan*, 2013. Steel and paint, 25 x 21 x 13 inches. Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art.

The show is complex and broad. It covers several decades of work and includes nineteen sculptures. Although subjects differ, the material is largely weathered steel, with the occasional addition of neon and cast bronze. To quote the artist: "Steel is nothing more than dirt in a more sophisticated molecular arrangement, and steel wants to do nothing more than to go back to being dirt." Perhaps this feeling of metal as both static and active is the essence of Anderson's work. Embedded in each sculpture is a history of what it once was and what it is now.

The exhibition is housed in two rooms. The smaller entry room segways to the larger space, and although connected, they are distinct. The first gallery is dominated by the sculpture *Hawk*. An abundance of thin steel bars, twiglike like in circumference and irregularity, are perched on a bucket-container at the top of a pole. On one hand, *Hawk* is strongly industrial; on the other, it is equally a crown of thorns with the associated religious reference. It is raw, and without the context of the museum for aesthetic support, it would be part and parcel of its indigenous landscape.

Flanked by *Hawk* is *Barn Owl* and *Nest in Fan*. Both sculptures, made from originally utilitarian objects, are returning as shelters to the natural world. These works have a kind of Rauschenberg feel, as found objects that are recontextualized. A perceived lack of manicured refinement in the sculptures is deceptive, as there is a keen eye and craftsmanship behind the work with clear aesthetic decisions made.



*Water*, 2025. Steel, wood, and paint, 88 x 51 x 34 inches. Photo by the author

*Trough*, 2014. Steel, wood, and paint, 36 x 96 x 24 inches. Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art.



*Water* is in the second, larger gallery space. The sculpture's "tank" is framed by weathered wood. Metaphorically, the armature has a certain pagoda feeling, like the entry to a Japanese shrine. Particularly in arid environments, water is life. Both the catalog and exhibition include a photograph of the original found object, as a companion to the exhibition sculpture. Anderson's reinterpretation of the original structure? is quietly recontextualized, as source and inspiration are deftly woven into the piece.

Like *Water*, the sculpture *Trough* alludes to a past with a specific function, yet within the museum context, the interpretation is open-ended. As a trough can be filled or empty, the consequences are dramatically different. As a water basin, it is life and sustenance; empty and discarded, it is a remnant.

In the sculpture *Pomona to Famosa*, a four-point post and lentil construction supports a worn engine, as well as a neon tube that illuminates the back end of the sculpture. Although the references suggest early California Hot Rod culture, the sculpture has an embedded story that is personal yet evocative of the passing of time, where permanence is transient and histories that have been forgotten are remembered.

Of the many works in the exhibition, *Cherry* is perhaps the most atypical in its use of color, combination of text and object, and largely made-by-hand status as opposed to being constructed of found materials. Its calligraphic and atmospheric quality stylistically evokes Ed Ruscha in some respects yet also departs dramatically with Ruscha's aesthetic with the incorporation of sink and faucet. The double spicketts in the sink have an oddly sexual quality, and given the combination of cherry and faucet, the work echoes a certain Robert Gober or Duchampian quality. The placards relate the work to roadside fountain drink stands once found in rural areas before the proliferation of fast-food restaurants and service stations. The signage can certainly point you in one direction, yet the work even independent of text, is powerful, suggestive, and intriguing.

Perhaps the sculpture with the most definitive historical



*The 15 Panels of Remembrance, Loss and Lasting*, 2023-2024. Machine sewn cotton rope, cotton thread, and wooden clothespins, 160 x 72 x 60 inches. Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art..



*Cherry*, 2025. Galvanized steel, steel, brass, and paint, 62 x 72 x 11 inches. (Sign painting by Kyle Johnson, Juicebox Signs, Santa Cruz, CA.) Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art.

reference is *Her Armoire*. The work is based on the life of the pioneer Ellen Baker, who traveled from the east coast across the Donner pass in 1837 at the age of 16. Her journey was both remarkable and transformative. The armoire, fabricated from steel plate, is an homage to both the journey as well as a curious counterpoint to the more industrial reconfigured objects in the show. Its arabesque lines have a certain domestic delicacy, which is undermined through the use of steel as opposed to wood. Equally, the positioning of *Her Armoire* with the back forward while the front faces a corner in the museum defies its domestic origin and essentially negates any possible functionality.

The show is a rich and diverse exploration of subjects and themes that Anderson has been working with for several decades. The excellent catalog and essays by both Victor Gonzales and Maria Porges offer a broader context and understanding of all the work in the show. In Anderson's work, there is a ruggedness and directness to the sculpture that is much like Bakersfield itself. The work speaks to finding beauty in objects that others might not—a sentiment that is the power of David Kimball Anderson's sculpture, and like the song:

*I am California, can't you see  
Wherever you roam, you'll always want me* ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living on the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Zolla Lieberman and serving as the South-Central California Region Editor for the New Art Examiner.



*Her Armoire*, 1991, Steel, 74 x 48 x 24 inches. Photo courtesy Bakersfield Museum of Art.