

Max Cleary
Whittling Chip
December 5, 2025–February 1, 2026



Five Churches in a Strip Mall on Pasadena Avenue presents *Whittling Chip*, a solo exhibition of sculpture by Max Cleary, on view December 5, 2025–February 1, 2026.

Referring to the history of craft, the natural sciences, folklore, and speculative fiction, this new body of work considers how information is inscribed into objects and how a visual language iterates through time.

Installed on the walls of the gallery are a series of mosaics composed of pieces of industrial grade graphite framed inside found cabinet drawers. The motifs depicted in the mosaics vary, ranging from church architecture to mechanical diagrams. Set into their deep wooden frames, their shape and size recall reliquaries or miniature shrines, their jigsaw faces evoke puzzle boxes and stained glass.

At once folk and futuristic, their ambiguity as objects reaching across time is dependent on Cleary's choice of material. Graphite is a crystalline form of pure carbon, itself atomically fundamental to all known life. But in graphite's current, processed form it is used in modern tool-making. Utilizing scraps and off-cuts from industrial machining, Cleary's traditional hand shaping of the graphite tiles nods historically to the vernacular, ritualistic wood carving of Tramp Art.

The mosaics are materially connected to a sculpture standing in the center of the space – a disemboweled antique cabinet whose parts have been stripped for crafting. Perched within the carcass of empty shelves are three cast aluminum canaries.

Used until as late as 1986, "pit canaries" were carried into mines to detect dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. If historically canaries were a fragile, organic component in a mechanism of human safety, Cleary imagines a mythology where the living tool has evolved toward self preservation and the birds have adapted to thrive in their hostile environment. What's left of the cabinet allows for another interpretation that undercuts its optimism: it is an exhausted object.

Max Cleary (b. 1991) is a Los Angeles and Honolulu based artist working across the mediums of photography, sculpture, and painting. He received his MFA from the University of California Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited across Los Angeles, Miami, Honolulu, Seattle, Santa Barbara, and Portland, with recent solo presentations at The LINE Hotel (LA), Other Places Art Fair (LA), Winston's (LA), and Kaiao Space (Honolulu).