

LUCAS ELMER

Santa Carla, 2011
Woodcut/Lithograph, 14 x 11 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CARL SCHIFFMAN

Gold Dust— Summer 1955

Remembering a lost era
in San Francisco history

I had been working as a fruit tramp in the orchards south of San Francisco when the season ended and left me unemployed. Artists talk about a figureground relationship. For me, the ground of this sixty-year-old narrative is forgetfulness. The images I retain leap out at me from pure oblivion. As though I have been picking cherries this very afternoon, I find myself in the pit at the target end of a wooden lane, people are rolling balls in my direction with considerable force. I am sitting on a padded shelf behind and well above the target. I have to lift my legs out of the way to keep them from being hit by the pins when the ball strikes.

Not that it affected my getting hired, but I knew something about bowling. I had bowled for years with friends on 96th Street near Broadway, had been on a team in a high school bowling league that met once a week at lanes near Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. (I was fair for a spindly kid, an average in the upper 140s; years later, I rolled a memorable 252 on lanes in Hamden, Connecticut.)

The technology of the lanes was more advanced in California than it had been in New York, although still only halfway to the completely automated lanes we have now. My responsibility was for two adjacent lanes that shared a single ball return. The fallen pins would have to be cleared manually after each roll, but rather than being set by hand, the pins were put into a rack above the target area and then the entire rack was pulled down at once. There was a pedal at the back of the lane, just behind the last row of pins, that you stepped on at the same time you pulled down the rack. A row of tiny metal pins, matching tiny holes in the bottom of the wooden pins, would rise up to secure the pins' balance and make sure they were perfectly aligned.

Because the bowlers paid—and, more importantly, tipped—by the line, that is to say, by the complete game, it was in our interest as pin boys for the games to go quickly and for the bowlers to do well. Our skill consisted in the speed with which we could clear and rack pins and lift the bowling bowls to the height where the return track began, gravity then carrying the balls back to the rack at the bowlers' end of the alley. Even with two alleys going at once, which was generally the case, the work never got exhausting. The most difficult part was lowering the rack to set up for a new frame. The racks were poorly lubricated, unnaturally heavy, resisted being pulled down.