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### Penny for Your Thoughts

*Nate Larson's work at The Weston challenges you to believe*

**By Selena Reder**

A well-dressed peddler steps into the Weston Gallery and opens a bag of tricks. *Poof!* A cloud of smoke, and out flies holy water, fortune cookies and wax ears. In his exhibition *Miracle Pennies and Other Stories*, artist Nate Larson presents 20 large pigment prints and four video works as a body of evidence. And with this evidence he challenges us to believe the unbelievable.

The series *Miracle Pennies* documents an elaborate attempt at attaining wealth and, ultimately, God's gifts. But it is the other stories that interest me most, because they present a series of unexplained phenomena.



**Nate Larson's "Fortune Cookie"**

Larson chooses photography as his medium "because of the links to the documentary tradition and the perception of truth," he tells me in an e-mail. But truth and perception pose two conflicting realities. In his work, we find that our eyes deceive us.

The work is also textual. Language can act as a great manipulator of truth. The video work "Spirit Script" holds apocalyptic messages encrypted in gibberish. Larson pushes a glass of holy water over a page of nonsensical words in order to translate messages from the beyond.

"Account for yourself. The end is nigh!" Out of nowhere comes this message. Larson first read these words in a BBC article. (See for yourself at [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2854189.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2854189.stm).)

Two fish cutters allege that a carp said these words just before its death. Hearing this story, many believe it is God, in the form of a fish, warning against war with Iraq.

Is it a message from the beyond or a tall tale? If we ask Larson what he is willing to believe, it's hard to get a straight answer.

In the video "Soothsayer" Larson removes pebbles from his mouth, one at a time, enough to fill two small vials. I watch it replay several times and wonder how it is possible to hold that many pebbles in his mouth. I see no evidence of a jump cut. So I ask him if it's magic. He says it's a dream.

"The video is an attempt to replicate the continual flow of rocks out of my mouth," he says. "The rocks seem like they could be related to teeth, which in researching dream symbolism seems to be about a loss of power."

It's not the answer to my question, but a more Freudian response, and I like it.

Larson tries his luck in "Fortune Cookie." He has read an article in which 110 people won the lotto by playing the numbers from their fortune cookies. Larson saved his fortunes and played the numbers in the Illinois lottery. He wins \$35.50 after playing the numbers in six different fortunes. The messages in these fortunes begin to roll around in my head until I am forming strange connections.

"There are no ordinary moments," one fortune reads. "God gave man limited ability, but unlimited ambition and desire," another says.

Is that not the theme of this show? Larson cannot really walk on water, communicate with the spirit world or miraculously fall into wealth, but he can try.

"Sell your ideas, they are totally acceptable," the cookie says. And so Larson sells us his miracles, and we gladly buy them.

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**MIRACLE PENNIES AND OTHER STORIES continues at The Weston Art Gallery through March.**

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