
BONHAM

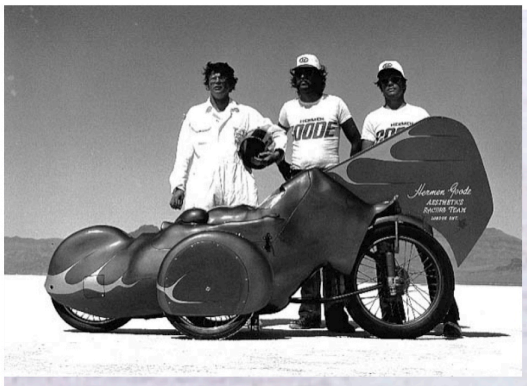
“I’m here – deal with it.”

Edward Lucie-Smith on Don Bonham

Aesthetic Sculpture

Racing Machines - Aviation - Portraits

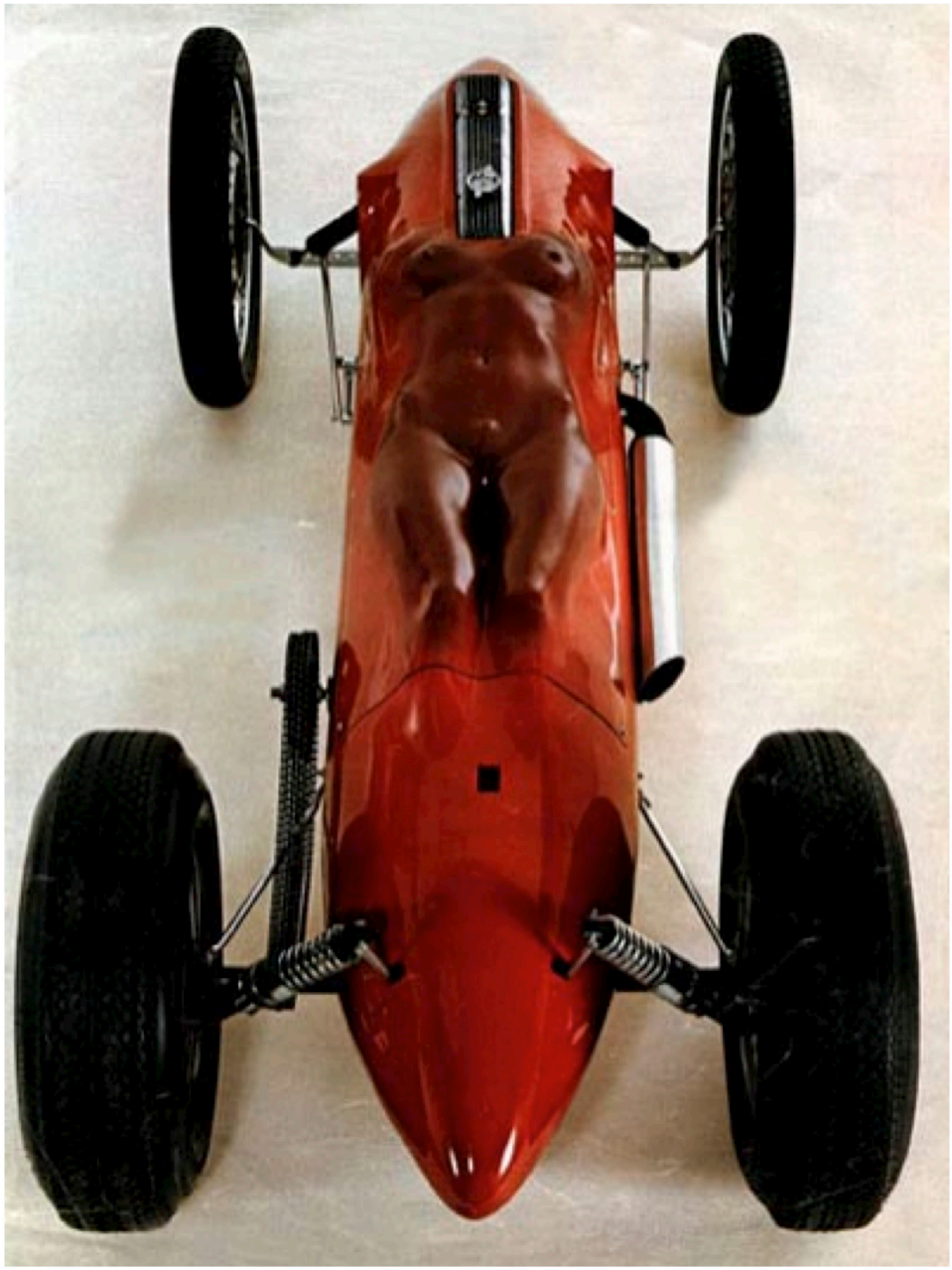
by Don Bonham

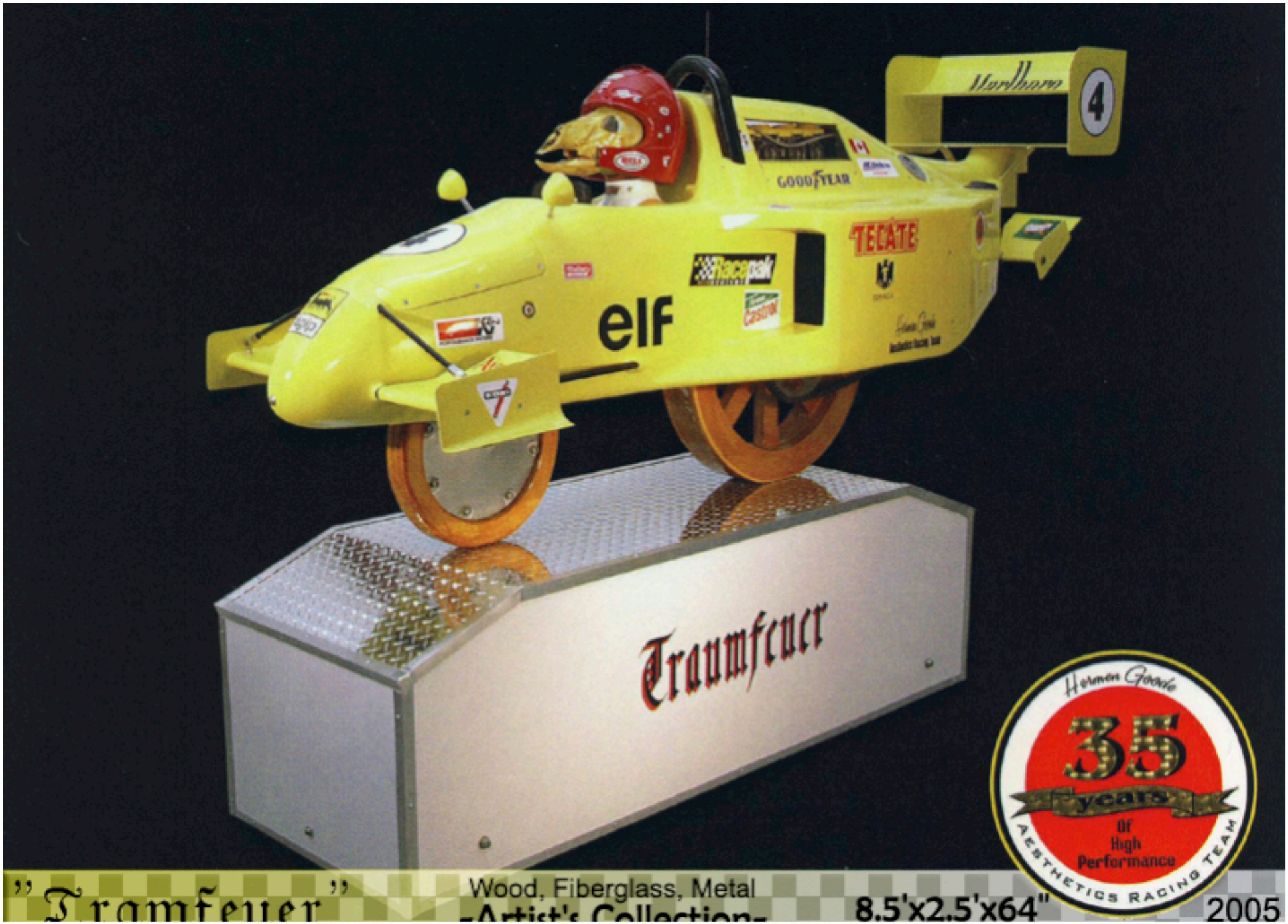

Hermen Goode
AESTHETICS
RACING TEAM
LONDON ONT.

About the Herman Goode Aesthetcis Racing Team

about Bonneville

about Bellytank





"Traumfeuer" Wood, Fiberglass, Metal 8.5'x2.5'x64" 2005

-Artist's Collection-

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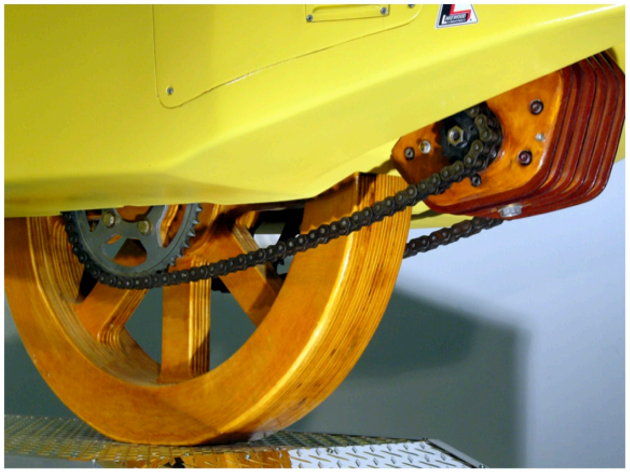


Hermen Goode
AESTHETICS RACING TEAM
LONDON, ONT.
"The Spirit of London"
Leroy Goode
U-50


Hermen Goode
AESTHETICS RACING TEAM
Corey Goode
STP
MISS
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"The Spirit of London"


Hermen Goode
AESTHETICS RACING TEAM
LONDON, ONT.
U-50

DON BONHAM

It's not often that an artist prompts simultaneous and I think equally valid comparisons to Ed Kienholz and Leonardo da Vinci. The link to Kienholz is fairly obvious. He was an outsider artist, very much in your face and proud of being so, who mysteriously became an insider. Bonham's reputation has evolved in much the same way. In Kienholz's case, much of this shift of reputation took place after his death, when he wasn't around to cause trouble to the authorities. Currently, as I write this, there's a huge Kienholz installation on view at the National Gallery in London – a riff on the brothel quarter in Amsterdam as this existed a quarter of a century ago, in the early 1980s. The National Gallery justifies its presence within their hallowed halls by pointing out the link to Dutch 17th century genre pieces that represent procuresses and brothels. However, it's probably just as well, for curatorial peace of mind, that the artist himself isn't still with us.

Temperament and reputation are not the only things that prompt one to compare the two artists. Both often use similar techniques, though Bonham, rather than making installations, makes three-dimensional objects that can be classified as 'sculpture', now regarded by many as an obsolete category. Neither is afraid of using non-traditional techniques and materials – in Bonham's case he is an aficionado of fiberglass, a material more closely associated with industrial design than it is with art, though it enjoyed a certain popularity with other sculptors in the late 1960s. As Bonham himself points out, using fiberglass wasn't something that was taught in art school. He learned how to use it working on an assembly line for Ford Thunderbirds. Rather aptly, one of his aviation sculptures has the title Twentieth Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality. It is a helicopter apparently composed of the fused bodies of several nubile young women. The six legs dangling from the body of the helicopter suggest that the machine is also some kind of malignant insect. The head of the pilot, visible within a transparent canopy, is an animal skull.

What prompts the comparison to Leonardo are, of course, the Renaissance artist's drawings for flying machines, which also often seem to propose a fusion between the human and the mechanical. Sculptures such as Twin Prop Pusher and First Flying Machine, in both of which a nude female figure powers a fragile contraption, apparently by muscle-power alone, are obvious riffs on some of Leonardo's best known sketches.

Yet they also differ quite radically from Leonardo's apparent intentions. First, and most obviously, Bonham, living in an age of advanced technology, knows that the inventions her offers are wholly impractical. Leonardo believed his might work. Secondly, there are both sexual and political implications that are entirely of our own time.

Bonham has a well-established reputation as a ‘bad boy’ artist. It’s not simply, that during his youth, he spent a few stints in jail, “drawing on the ceiling” as he now says to interviewers. It is also that he is very much part of pop culture – in fact, much more firmly integrated with it than celebrated Pop Art practitioners such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, both of whom, if one examines their work in detail, preserve a slightly chilling distance from their source material. Bonham is committed to the pop ethos, he revels in it, and he gets a lot of pleasure, I suspect, from offending bien pensant elements in his potential audience.

Airplanes are by no means his only subject. He also makes cars, boats and motorcycles, and he has been involved with the Hermen Goode Aesthetic Racing Team, an outfit that offers a Dadaist parody of events at places such as the Bonneville Salt Flat’s speedway in northwestern Utah, famous for many attempts at land speed records. The activities at these sites were filmed, as a branch of performance art.

When contemporary artists aim to offend – as they often do, offence being something that contributes mightily to their street cred as members in good standing of the avant-garde – they usually direct their fire at a single homogenous group. Bonham believes in equal opportunity trouble-making. For example, many, in fact perhaps the majority, of the sculptures he makes are calculated to arouse the ire of feminists because they objectify the female body. It’s no accident, for example, that his work figured in a 1977 issue of Playboy, at a moment when the wars between the magazine and militant feminism were at their height. One can also say, however, that he satirizes the speed fanatics who cluster at Bonneville, and makes fun of the macho culture they belong to. The equivalence between fast cars, or fast motorcycles, and sex is of course well established in popular culture, most specifically in North American popular culture, but machines in this case are usually thought of as extensions of the male body, or, to put it bluntly, as extensions of the penis. Bonham contradicts this iconography by turning his machines into women.

This leads one into a piece of territory that has already, it seems, been fairly thoroughly colonized by Pop Art – the comic strip. One staple image in comic strips is the android, the machine that is half-human, or that has pretensions to be human. The android, though generally male, can also be female.

These mechanical creatures inhabit a very specific segment of comic-strip territory: the realm of Science Fantasy. Science Fantasy, however, now occupies a much larger and more amorphous area in the contemporary imagination than the mention of comic strips might imply. There are Science Fantasy narratives that offer the nearest equivalents we have in the contemporary world for the Greek and Roman epic, the magical world of the Odyssey (as opposed to the Iliad) in particular. One thinks, for example, of the three major authors of the so-called Golden Age of Science Fiction - Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. Their stories were for the most part written when SF was an outcast literary genre; that is to say, at a time when it was considered to lie completely outside the boundaries of serious literary creativity.

What thrilled readers of these books were not only the epic sweep of the narratives but the fact that they presented a vision of a fantastic, metamorphic future, where familiar things assumed both new functions and new shapes. It is obvious that there is a link with Bonham's work here – he can be thought of as someone who gives aspects of these imaginings a concrete visible form.

Science Fiction writing has now on the whole turned to different paths. Yet in changed guise this world of the imagination survives. The kind of fantasy SF addicts once found in books, magazines and even in comic strips they now discover more easily in the cinema, on the television screen, and in video games. James Cameron's new epic movie Avatar is a case in point. Bonham inhabits this essentially democratic universe much more comfortably, I suspect, than he does the world of Post Modern high art, with its preference for the theoretical and the abstruse.

One can nevertheless trace a fairly complex art historical lineage for his work. I have mentioned Leonardo as a remote, yet at the same time obvious, ancestor for the kind of work he produces. In fact, his sculptures belong to the tradition of the 'grotesque', which stretches back as far as Greco-Roman art. They also belong to the related tradition of caricature.

Once the art of the Greeks had passed its classical phase, and entered the epoch of Hellenism initiated by the conquests of Alexander the Great in what we now call the Middle East, and in Central Asia. This brought the Greeks, and Greek art, into contact with nomadic cultures, such as that of the Scythians, which routinely combined animal forms to create new images that did not exist in nature. If one looks at the bronze harness-trappings made by the Scythians one can see examples of combinations of this sort.

Similar combinations appear in the minor arts of the Roman Empire. Examples are the seal stones that experts in the subject describe as grylli. Grylli combine human masks and various animal heads to make designs that represent composite monsters. The taste for these was apparently established in the late Republican and early Imperial epoch by a Greco-Egyptian painter called Antipholos, who is mentioned in Pliny's Natural History (Hist. Nat. XXXIII.41). Antipholos's inspiration may have been the representations of Egyptian deities that combine human and animal forms, such as the standing figures of a jackal-headed Anubis.

Similar combinations appear in the art of the Middle Ages – in the margins of illuminated breviaries, and in architectural carvings, for example the stone waterspouts or gargoyles that adorn great medieval churches.

The idea takes on new life with the invention of printing, which begins the great age of European caricature. Making caricatures is a form of artistic activity that has often been misunderstood by art historians. The inclination has been, especially among specialists in Italian art, to confine the word 'caricature' to a form of exaggerated or deliberately grotesque portraiture. Drawings of this sort were produced by the brothers Annibale and Agostino Carracci in the closing years of the 16th century then, a little later, by the great sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini.

In fact, though the satire of personal appearances is certainly part of what caricaturists do, their activity can usefully be defined in a much looser way. A famous print by the German artist Erhard Schön (c.1491-1542), produced c.1530 in defense of the movement for religious reform, depicts The Devil Playing a Monk as a Set of Bagpipes. The swollen head of the monk becomes the bag that the devil fills with wind. This is exactly the kind of transformation – the inanimate becoming the animate – that one finds in Bonham's sculptures of machines.

From the time of the Renaissance onwards, caricaturists making political and social points felt free to depart from the conventions of representation that were the norm in 'serious' painting and sculpture. The satirical artist was free, if he felt like it, to offer images of things that could never exist in reality. This radical reshaping of appearances was – and this seems ironic – at its height just at the time when High Art was dominated by Neo-Classicism. Some of its wildest manifestations are to be found in the prints of the English satirical draftsman James Gillray (1756-1815).

Not all of Gillray's images are transformative, but those which transform expected appearances are amongst the most memorable things the artist produced. For example, in a print made in 1791 he changed the map of Britain into an image of Britannia as an aged harridan, seated upon a monstrous fish.

The interesting thing is that, more than a century before the rise of the Modern Movement, Gillray's public accepted these transmutations without demur. Contrary to the elaborate theories put forward by many leading art historians, Modernism did not offer completely new ideas about representation. What it did instead was to break down an ossified system of categories. High Art absorbed methods of representation from low art. Bonham's work is the product of this collapse of long-accepted barriers.

In order to see how he fits into this pattern, one has to think about three different types of development. One, as I have already suggested, was the rise of Pop culture. Pop was from its beginnings closely allied to the mechanical. It is a culture of images produced by mechanical means. It is no surprise to find that Bonham once worked on an automobile production line, and learned an important part of his craft in doing so. His art identifies with industry and wears, so to speak, a kind of industrial disguise.

However, one can also think of him as a belated member of the Surrealist Movement – something that can also be said about Ed Kienholz. Surrealism believed in the power of free association and encouraged the exploration of the artist's subconscious. Bonham's sculptures are far from being loose and improvised. They are meticulously planned and made, and exhibit the fastidious refinement of surface that one would expect to find in a top-of-the-range sports car from a major luxury brand, such as Ferrari. They are, nevertheless, clearly the result of an associative process.

The members of the original Surrealist Movement, based in Europe in the troubled epoch between two World Wars, were often thought of as artists who explored the private recesses of their own psyches, leaving public events to artists of a different persuasion. In fact, this was far from being the case. Insofar as it belongs to any stylistic tendency, Picasso's Guernica is a Surrealist work. Dali's Autumn Cannibalism (1936), one of the most celebrated of the painter's earlier paintings, is an anguished commentary, parallel to Picasso's, on the then-raging Spanish Civil War.

Many of Bonham's sculptures, based on his experiences serving in the military in South-East Asia, have an equally obvious political message. Looking at his helicopter pieces, one thinks of some of the more memorable lines from the Vietnam movie Apocalypse Now. For example, this exchange:
Chef: Why do all you guys sit on your helmets?
Soldier: So we don't get our balls blown off.
Or, better still, this:
I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a straight razor. That's my dream. It's my nightmare. Crawling, slithering, along the edge of a straight razor … and surviving.

It would, of course be a mistake to think of Bonham simply as a traumatized survivor. He uses his chosen idiom to tackle a broad range of subjects – love and mockery of the machine, attraction to and fear of women.

It's perhaps worth dwelling a little on the latter characteristic since, as I have previously said, many of his sculptures can be seen as things that objectify the female body, in a fashion offensive to feminists. Yet his representations of women consistently show them as powerful beings. Portrait busts of women, such as Dora (1985) and Petra (1993) tend to present them as dominant personalities. This dominance is rooted in aspects of the Science Fantasy epic convention, where warrior maidens of this sort are often amongst the important characters in a particular narrative. They are beings who grapple with galaxies. In Bonham's representations of them, it is noticeable that they often see without eyes – a condition that, paradoxically, suggests their status as visionaries.

A recent giclé print, The Flight of the Valkyries, showing a swarm of Bonham's signature helicopters, makes the point that these warrior maidens have their roots in Norse and Germanic myth, as transmitted to us through the Ring Cycle operas of Wagner. Here is another unexpected source for his art. The print has obvious links to the work of the leading Science Fantasy illustrator Frank Frazzetta. Frazzetta, in turn, is a direct descendant of the Anglo-Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), a major figure in the European Sturm und Drang, who frequently made use of German mythology as a starting point for his work. Interestingly, Fuseli had a well-developed penchant for images of dominant women.

One of the fascinations of Bonham's work is that, while at first sight seeming to be completely contemporary, because it manifests itself at the intersection of two genres – Pop and SF – that have had particular significance for the visual culture of the present day, it also turns out to have deep roots in the past.

Despite the rise of Pop, a serious weakness of the Post Modern epoch in art has been its impulse towards elitism. Great structures of interpretation have often been erected on what, in almost any other field of creative endeavor, would be recognized as notably fragile foundations. Bonham's sculptures are not like that. They are embedded in tradition, yet are obviously very much things of the present.

They have a visceral impact that doesn't demand too much in the way of explanation. When we look at the art of the past, we take this emotional impact for granted but we have almost stopped looking for it in the art of the present. What Bonham makes can, in current circumstances, seem raucous. He forces his audience to look at, and perhaps think about, issues that it may not wish to confront – war, sexuality, the ambiguous nature of machines, mankind's wish to integrate with machines. And he does this in a swaggering, quintessentially macho way that only half conceals a finely honed sense of irony.

In the mid-1930s Max Ernst, another leading member of the Surrealist Movement, painted a series of 'airplane flytraps' in which images of flight and of forest vegetation were combined to create metaphors for feelings of entrapment and the fear of death. Bonham does without the vegetation. His sculptures often belong to the tradition of the memento mori – in one or two cases they are actually tombs or cenotaphs. At the same time, however, his work has tremendous vitality. It glories in the idea of speed, in the notion of endless flight. At the same time it glories in its own jocular, no-holds-barred inventiveness.

Its essential message is, "I'm here – deal with it."

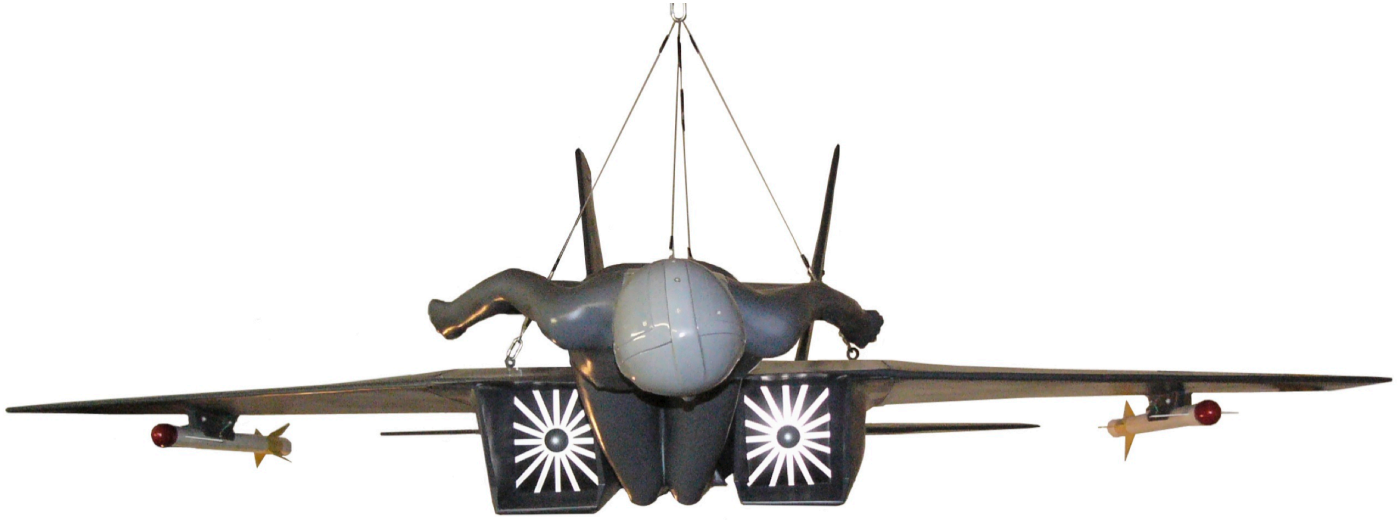
Edward Lucie-Smith

British writer, poet, art critic, curator, broadcaster and author of exhibition catalogues.

"Mig 29"

Fiber Glass & Wood
11’6”x11’6”x5’6” **2005**

Aviation and other flying things



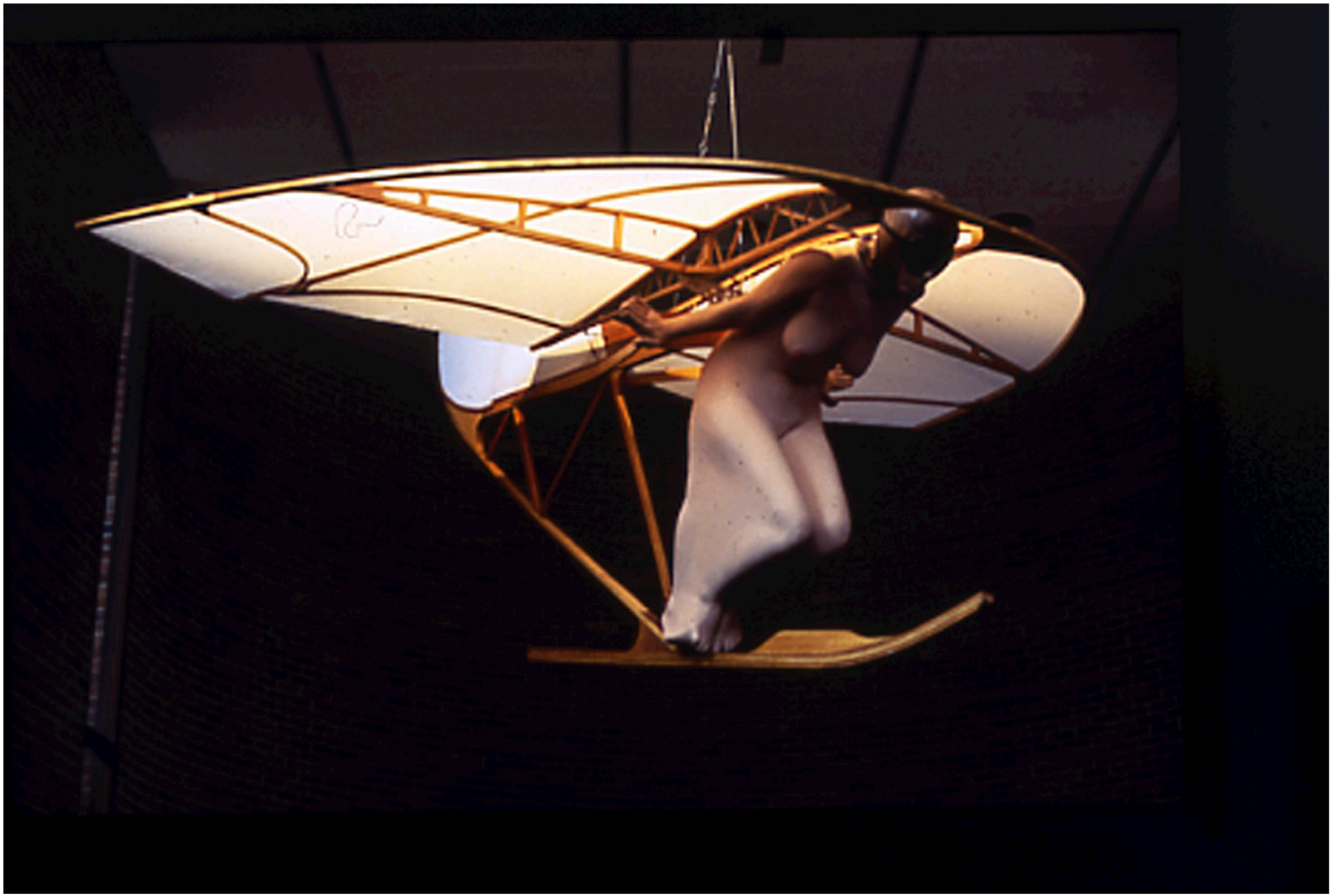

09

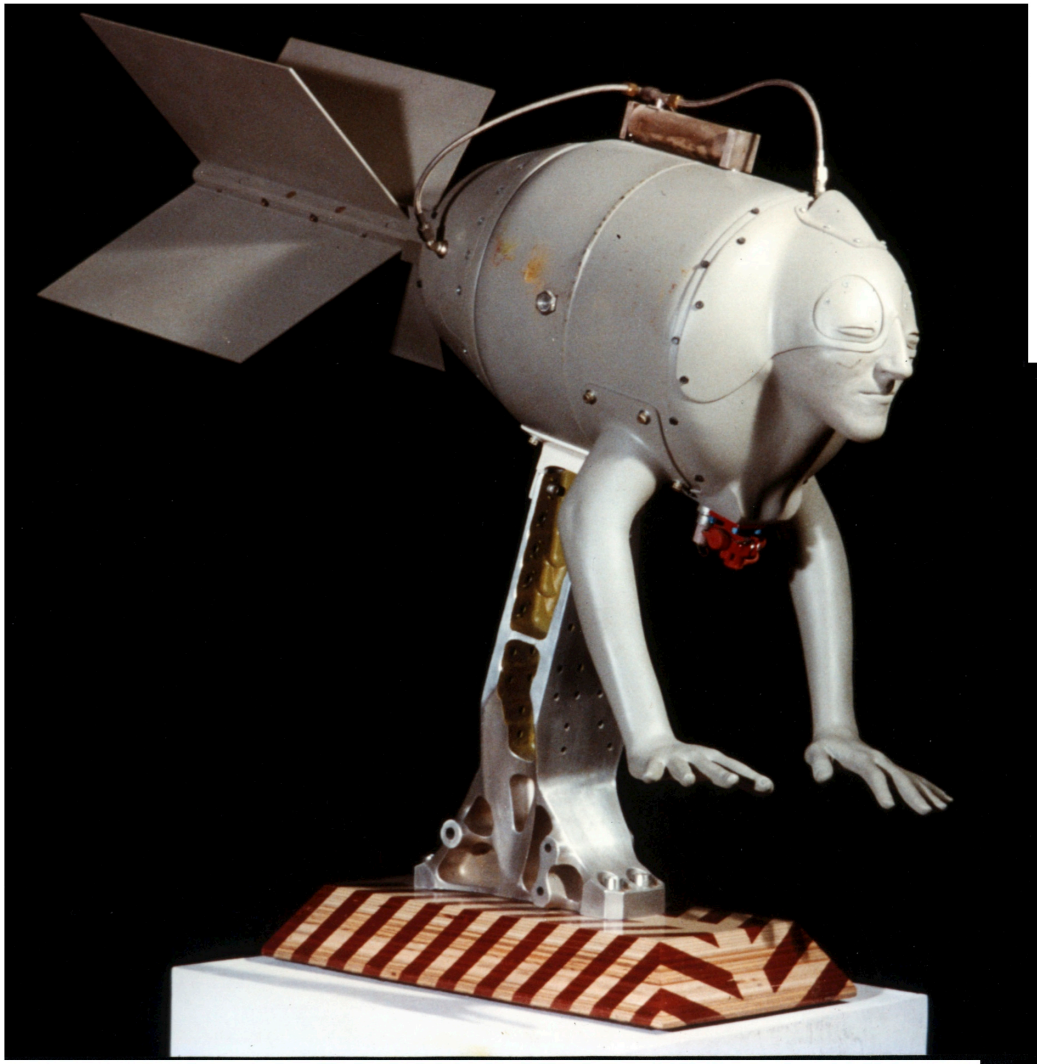
"Twentieth Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality"

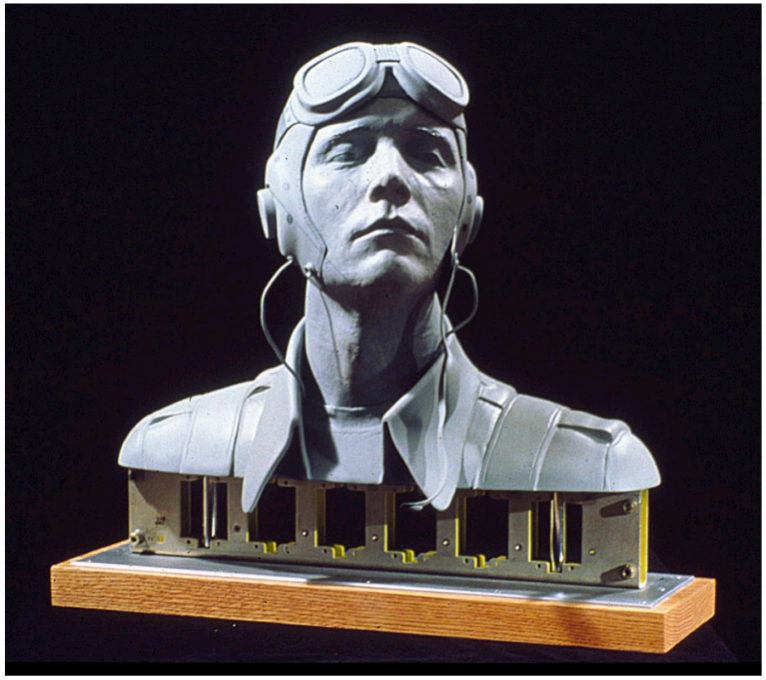
FiberGlass, Metal, Wood, Mixed Media **-Artist's Collection-**

150"x84"x60"
1993


NO STEP
NO STEP








IN
MEMORY
OF
THE CHILDREN
WHO PERISHED
DURING THE
WARS
1901-2001
MORT


MORT

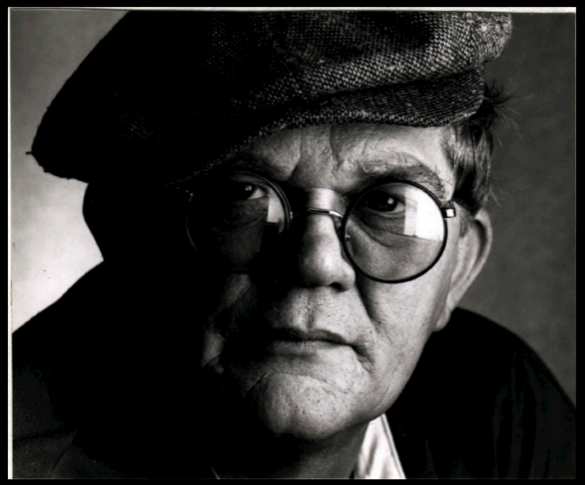
Self Portrait

Don Bonham was born at the height of the Oklahoma oil boom in Oklahoma City. He had a turbulent adolescence and was "encouraged" by the local authorities to join the service. Bonham enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps where he found his first stable home. He served in an elite Recon unit in S.E. Asia and was honorably discharged to enter the University of Oklahoma as an Art History Major.

Bonham left the University and moved North to pursue a career as a professional artist. Over the last 25 years he has had studios in Montreal, Toronto, Florida, and most recently in New York City. Bonham's visionary forms have been exhibited in Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Florida, Montreal, Toronto, and Paris. In addition his work has been included in numerous group shows across Canada, the United States and Europe including the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. Bonham was the first American Visual Artist to be appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy. In 1997, he was awarded the Alex J. Ettl Grant from the National Sculpture Society, for lifetime achievement as a sculptor.

Bonham maintains a studio in the Hudson Valley, near the Storm King Art Center.

For more information please visit
www.DonBonham.com



Don Bonham - 1985 Toronto Canada