



# BRANDON VICKERD

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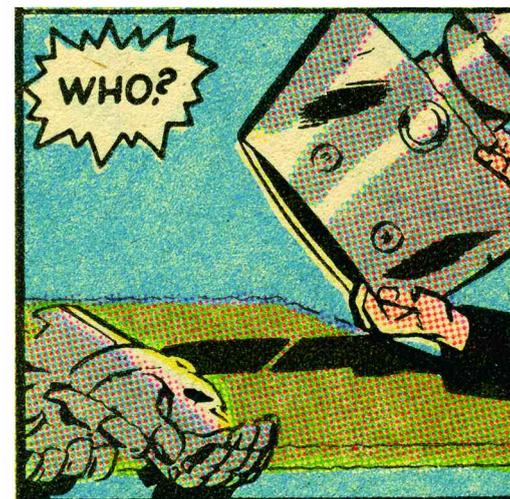
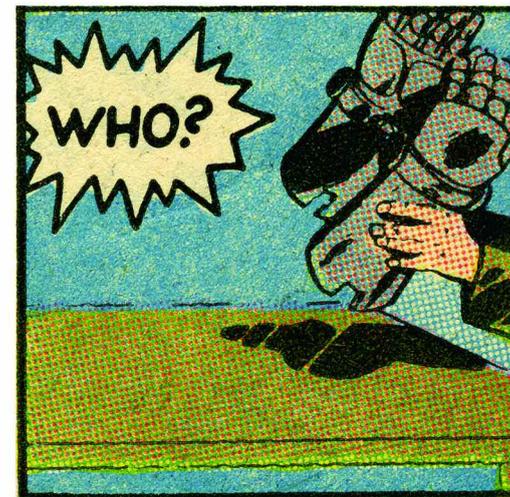
## TALES TO ASTONISH

by Mark Laliberte

Toronto-based artist **Brandon Vickerd** is a sculptor whose varied projects encompass robotics, site-specific interventions, metal fabrication and foundry processes.

His recent work draws influence from contemporary mythologies and subcultural sources, such as heavy metal music and comic books.

*Interview conducted October, 2010*



① "... he was turned to steel ...", 2006 — steel, automotive paint ◀





**You once stated that all your best ideas were “mistakes”. Can you talk about this and elaborate on the mystery of creative starting points?**

My inspiration often comes from a misreading of an object or a phrase. For example, a few years ago I would pass this tree in my neighbourhood everyday on my way home from work, and there was a white piece of sheet stuck on a high branch. When the wind blew it made me think that it looked like a ghost. After a few weeks of being fascinated by this “ghost” in the tree, I pointed it out to a friend who didn’t understand at all what I was seeing. This made me think about our cultural symbol for a ghost (a bed sheet draped over a body) and how it is instantly recognizable, yet completely ridiculous. If it is

possible to return from the afterlife as an apparition, why would the spirit of the dead appear as a hovering bed sheet? The idea of a recognizable cultural symbol that looks nothing like what it symbolizes became stuck in my head and eventually evolved into the *Chrome Ghost* sculpture.

**Thematically you are always finding new ways to explore what might best be described as contemporary mythologies. What is your relationship to the heroic?**

I believe contemporary mythologies are crucial — our shared stories do more than entertain, they create social cohesion through shared references. As stories proliferate and are repeated (through media) the repetition fixes meaning and provides a model for the behaviour of the individual within the group dynamic. The heroic has always been a prominent feature of mythology, and I am interested in stories of the individual putting the greater good above their own well being, whether we are talking about Jesus Christ giving himself over to Pontius Pilate or Spock dying of radiation poisoning while fixing the warp drive in the second *Star Trek* movie. I am interested in our cultural depictions of the heroic in pop culture, and how this informs our understanding of the masculine. Notions of masculinity in our culture seem to be at a point of conflict: on one hand we are drawn to the heroic, but at the same time these symbols of the heroic are couched in irony or presented as pure campy fantasy. It seems to me that both strategies result in a cultural inertia that manifests itself as a prolonged adolescence. My recent body of figurative sculpture is partially invested in an examination of the failure of the heroic and the tragic nature of being mythologized.

**Do you worry about how mainstream pop culture might dominate or limit the reading of a piece such as “... he was turned to steel...”?**

It does concern me and there are pieces I have decided not to make or not to show for precisely this reason. I do not want to be making art that is only interesting to a certain subculture, or that exists as an inside joke. There is a point before I commit to building a sculpture where I consider the many possible readings of the work,



① *Dead Astronaut*, 2008 — poplar wood ▶



and the limitations of the references. Ultimately I have to imagine what a viewer without the right cultural references might see in a work; with “...he was turned to steel...” I figured at the minimum the viewer would see a slightly sad giant robot. The great thing about working in the genre of figurative sculpture is that the viewer instantly has a point of reference: their own body. The physical characteristics of sculpture, such as scale, material and gesture can be utilized to impart a pathos that subverts the monumentality of the piece, and that is felt regardless of the reference to comic book culture.

**Critic Terence Dick called your works “eye catching on first glance then heart breaking given time”. Is this element of loss a driving factor in your grand narrative?**

The element of loss resonates through everything I make — on occasion, I look back over my body of work, even to my art school days, and there is always a sense of loss, morbidity or unfulfilled potential. I am conscious of this undertone, but I do not consciously seek to perpetuate it. It is simply there. Even with this interview I realize that I am referring to this series of sculptures as figurative, yet there is no figure in any of the works, they are simply empty shells or impressions of figures. In all my work there are always elements of death, failure and technology — I would also like to say humour, but maybe I am being hopeful.

**Theatricality seems to play a significant role in your approach to making art — the objects you make function as props in a social construction. How do you utilize spectacle in your work?**

Creating a spectacle is simply speaking the language of the viewer; the key is to sustain the viewer’s engagement through content after the initial awe. In all my works the spectacle is an entry point, the hook that pulls the viewer in and convinces them to spend a significant length of time with a work; hopefully the work can sustain a conversation with the viewer once the awe of the spectacle has passed. I think this strategy is a response to a plethora of visual stimuli competing for our attention everyday; we live in the age of the spectacle, of instant and simultaneous stimulation — it’s a lot to compete with.



① *Chrome Ghost*, 2007 — steel, chrome, paint ▲

**Tell us about the *Dead Astronaut* ... what motivated its creation?**

The idea for the *Dead Astronaut* is a cross-fertilization of different sources. It was partially influenced by a text I read a few years ago about the number of astronauts and cosmonauts who died during the space race of the 1960s — Russia and the USA had lost over a dozen men trying to beat each other to the moon, but minimized the tragic events at the time. The idea that these spacemen were heroic in life, but forgotten in death resonated with me. The sculpture also has references to the cover illustration of a few science fiction novels I had when I was a kid, which featured images of astronauts dying on alien worlds; one was called something like *Ghosts in Space*. It also makes reference to a scene in the film *Alien*, when the body of a dead astronaut is found with his helmet smashed.

It is a fairly common image in pulp/pop culture. All these references are important, but the work is ultimately about the failure of the project of modernity — despite all the lofty goals of unending progress and technological mastery, modernity still resulted in our heroes dying alone, floating in the cold empty expanse of space or burning to death in the oxygen enriched atmospheres of tin space capsules. The work is intended to suggest the death of any romanticized future predicated on the boundless opportunities of scientific discovery.

**Choice of materials is always significant for a sculpture, it guides the entire process of making a work. Why did you choose to make this piece using wood?**

I was thinking about the history of 17th century wood statuary found in cathedrals in Europe and parts of North America. The idea of using wood as a material for a monument struck me as humorous; although it will last for a long time, it is not nearly as permanent as bronze or stone. Does that mean the ideas or narratives depicted are less important? Is wood the poor man's monumental material? I was also drawn to working with the warm, rich and lustrous surface of wood — it provides a solid contrast to the metallic surfaces of some of the other pieces in the series.

**Many contemporary sculptors have moved away from monumentality — the recent Power Plant exhibition, *Nothing To Declare*, for example, showcased artists that revel in “humble materials and everyday processes”. How do you feel about this trend?**

I believe this move away from monumentality poses some interesting academic questions regarding the value of labour in art; it reveals a scenario where the artist is feeling burdened with actually making things in an age of post-conceptualism, post-studio production. We are awash in worthless pre-fab **Ikea** furniture and mass produced junk; engagement with materials simply is not valued or taught. It seems natural that this would result in the introspective and self-reflective examination of materials and processes that characterizes the move towards the ‘unmonumental’. This approach to investigating the value of craft is not unsimilar to

the investigation of material and craft in my work, except that I am concerned with the other end of the spectrum, attempting to achieve a cultural critique through hyper-craftsmanship. I think both approaches have something to contribute to a cultural discourse.

There is also the argument that a post-monumental approach to sculpture signals a reluctance to participate in art that makes assertive and bold statements, and that this mirrors the uncertainty of our post-modern, globalized culture mired in collapsing financial markets and uncertain futures. Monumentality speaks in the language of absolutes, and to subvert the monument is to subvert the notion of absolute. I try to achieve this in my work through irony and humour.

I do have issues with how this ‘move away from monumentality’ is being presented by some curators, artist and galleries. Welding, wood-working and casting bronze are “everyday processes” — doing something neurotic with scotch tape and cellophane simply is not. I am sincerely concerned that this sort of claim devalues craftsmanship even further, and distances the majority of the public. This doublespeak signals a retreat to an introspective form of elitism that is dangerous. As artists, especially in a heavily subsidized country like Canada, we have a responsibility to a larger cultural project. We occupy a very privileged position and should be tasked with contributing to a discourse beyond the self-contained dialogue of the art world. ✎

