



TALES TO ASTONISH

DONOVAN BARROW

BRANDON VICKERD

KEVIN YATES

TALES TO ASTONISH

IS AN AFFECTIONATE PASTICHE THAT JUXTAPOSES OPTIMISTIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE SPACE AGE WITH THE UNDERLYING ANXIETIES OF THE MODERN ERA. CAPPED BY THE APOLLO 17 MOON LANDING IN 1972 AND THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL IN 1989, THE COLD WAR PERIOD RADIATES A SENSE OF WONDER AND UNEASE. BRANDON VICKERD, KEVIN YATES AND DONOVAN BARROW, TAKE THEIR CUES FROM THIS TENSION AND PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO ITS REPRESENTATION IN PERIOD MEDIA: SCIENCE-FICTION, COMIC BOOKS, PAPERBACKS AND B-GRADE MOVIES. MANY OF THESE ONCE DISPOSABLE MASS-MARKET COMMODITIES HAVE BECOME SCARCE AND DESIRABLE COLLECTIBLES, MEMENTOS THAT INCITE NOSTALGIA AND THE PROMISE OF A UTOPIAN FUTURE UNFULFILLED.

BESIDES PROVOKING A VICARIOUS THRILL FOR FANBOYS AND GIRLS ALIKE, THE ARTISTS EXCAVATE THIS TEEMING CULTURAL LANDFILL AND DREDGE UP IMAGES AND ARTIFACTS THAT RESONATE WITH CONTEMPORARY SENSIBILITIES. HERE ARE POP CULTURE ARCHEOLOGISTS CONFIDENTLY MINING THE DISPOSABLE RELICS OF THE MODERN AGE. THE ARTISTS RESCUE AND PRESERVE THESE UNLIKELY ICONS FROM SEMI-OBSCURITY AND THE IMPOSITIONS OF GOOD TASTE. FROM FLASH GORDON TO IRON MAN, THEY BLUR THE INDEFINITE LINE BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION, APPROPRIATION AND ENTERTAINMENT TO REFLECT THE STRANGE AND FRIGHTENING WORLD OF TOMORROW THAT WE FIND OURSELVES LIVING IN TODAY.

IVAN JURAKIC, ORIGINATING CURATOR

RECOMMENDED SOUNDTRACK:

DAVID BOWIE "SPACE OD DITY"
THE POLICE "WALKING ON THE MOON"
KLAATU "CALLING OCCUPANTS OF INTERPLANETARY CRAFT"
GARY NUMAN "ME! I DISCONNECT FROM YOU"
THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW ORIGINAL
SOUNDTRACK, "SCIENCE FICTION/DOUBLE FEATURE"
THE B-52'S "THERE'S A MOON IN THE SKY (CALLED THE MOON)"
PIXIES "MOTORWAY TO ROSWELL"
REM, "IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT (AND I FEEL FINE...)"
PETER SCHILLING, "MAJOR TOM (COMING HOME)"



The works presented in the Tales to Astonish demonstrate a familiar contemporary art modus operandi, that of sourcing and hybridizing selected elements from the long history of American popular culture. The title of the show is intentionally derived from a mid 20th century science fiction anthology and the sculptures and paintings exhibited reference iconic cultural imagery and even low-brow, or cult, entertainment. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

At the same time, it is useful to consider how these works function outside of those pointed pop culture references. After all, even the most recent reference here draws from a fairly terrible and not very well-known film from thirty-one years ago. So, how much do the works rely upon their source references and how much do they reside apart from them?

A case in point is Brandon Vickard's cast aluminum surfboard. Leaning against the wall, it looks simultaneously lonely and spectacular. It serves as an icon for dynamic sport that represents rugged individualism. As it appears here, it can be read as a gleaming symbol of just that. It's an open question whether there is more to be gleaned from its presence if one knows that it belong to the Silver Surfer, the herald of Galactus, who arrives at a planet long enough before his master to inform said planet that it's about to be eaten.

Admittedly, that may add a layer of geeky tragedy to the piece, but it may be as interesting without any of that.

Surfboards, by their very size, relate to the figurative scale of the body, so even on their own, they become minimalist

symbolic referents of the people that use them. tame them, or fall off of them. With this piece, as with the other sculptures by Vickerd, its sheer materiality and presence before us significantly outweighs any pop culture references that may exist. We can readily find plenty of references over the past fifty years to dead astronauts, but doesn't the primal fear of outer space register immediately when a large sculpture of one is standing before us? That it's all wood suggests an entity dead so long it's calcified into another chemical form. Either that, or it is a kind of wooden Indian propped in front of the dimstore of failed culture.

Vickerd's remaining sculptures share this impactful physical demeanor. His larger-than-life robot is drawn from a multitude of robot references and we don't need those to relish, and stand in trepidation, before this heroic (or anti-heroic) statue of technological Frankensteinism. Like much of technology, it's big and shiny and sexy and looks like it could easily destroy us. Perhaps it will. Perhaps that's why Vickerd's most "traditional" sculpture, that of a ghost, is wrought in chrome. A chrome ghost is the most concise way to comingle a reference to the future with a kind of primal fear.

In a series of paintings and sculptures produced collectively by Donovan Barrow and Kevin Yates, the artists draw from the climactic scene of the 1980 cult film *Flash Gordon*, based on the original movie serials. Their sequence of paintings and sculptures mimic both the frames of a film and those of a comic book, the artists depicting the deterioration of the villain's warship *Ajax*, which has been commandeered by our hero





in order to penetrate a lightning field and sacrifice himself to save the Earth. Naturally, Flash does not die, the Earth is not destroyed, and the villainous Ming is defeated. Knowing this, the paintings and sculptures are emblems of heroic sacrifice against, we presume, all odds.

Not knowing this does not diminish very much of this tale. With the sculptures each framed in the same position against each successive painting, there remains a sense of persistent heroism against a violent and hyperbolic environment. It is more weirdly dreamy and phantasmagoric that there is a physical sculpture set between us and the painted surface. Propped atop an antique table, it's like a display in a historical museum. And even though it's intended as a sequential set of images and objects, its pace is also museological, cutting entirely against the narrative speed we have become accustomed to with contemporary filmic action sequences.

Like Vickerd's sculptures, there is a strangely reverent air about it all, the natural history museum of imagined futures. They are all visually dynamic and exciting, while simultaneously suggesting a dark, destructive power. And it's this darker undercurrent that, collectively, remains one of the more intriguing elements of *Tales To Astonish*. There is some undeniably buoyant and boyish geekdom at play here, but there are many ominous threads as well. If you wanted to genrefy it, you might call it *Future Dread*, a dreamy concoction of fear and wonder.

JOHN MASSIER
VISUAL ARTS CURATOR





DONOVAN BARROW was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1976 and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received a BFA from the University of Victoria in 2001 and MFA from Hunter College in New York City in 2005. He has had a recent solo exhibitions at Rare Gallery, (2008) and (2006). He has had recent group shows at Cambridge Gallery, Ontario (2010); Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto (2008) and (2006); Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York (2008); Suzanne Tarazieve Gallery, Paris (2007). www.donovanbarrow.com

BRANDON VICKERD is a Toronto based sculptor and Professor of Visual Arts at York University. He received a BFA from NSCAD University in 1999 and an MFA from the University of Victoria in 2001. In the past several years his exhibited projects have been diverse in form and content, including site specific interventions, public performances and object based sculpture, such as *Dance of the Cranes* (Toronto, 2009). Public works such as *Satellite* and *Northern Satellite* engage the public in a discourse about our conflicting ways of understanding landscape. In gallery exhibitions he employs the language of monumental figurative sculpture, subverting dominant cultural narratives by creating monuments to popular culture characters (*Dead Astronaut*, *Chrome Ghost*), an examination of sculpture as a catalyst for critical thought through the creation of spectacle. Vickerd has received numerous awards and grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council. Recent and upcoming exhibitions include *Memento Mori* at Art Mur Gallery (Montreal, QC) *Clutch* at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery (Waterloo, ON) and *Dance of the Cranes* at Franklin Furnace Archives (Brooklyn, NY). www.brandonvickerd.com

KEVIN YATES (b. 1974, Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada) graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in, and completed a Masters of Fine Arts degree from the University of Victoria. He has taught sculpture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the University of Oregon, and currently works as professor of Visual Arts at York University in Toronto Canada. Yates has garnered attention for his sculptural work, whether finding inspiration in a crime scene, or tracing the sense of dislocation that results from too frequent relocation. He likens his work to film stills: objects that hold space like a "pause" allowing the viewer time to examine and inspect. Yates is particularly interested in the cold relationship that exists between tragedy and the scrutiny of the viewer. His installations confound the expectation of knowing-through-seeing, setting the stage for a perpetual mystery. Solo exhibitions of his work have been staged across Canada and the US at Artspeak (Vancouver), Anna Leowens Gallery (Halifax), Optica (Montreal), YYZ (Toronto) and Ditch Projects (Oregon). His work has also been featured in prominent group exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada, Musée d'art contemporain, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Art Gallery of Alberta and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, among others. Yates is represented by the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto. www.susanhobbs.com/yates.



images, front to back

Brandon Vickard
Dead Astronaut (det), 2008
polar wood

Kevin Yates & Donovan Barrow
War Rocket Ajax, 2010
acrylic, wood

Kevin Yates & Donovan Barrow
War Rocket Ajax, 2010
acrylic, wood

Kevin Yates & Donovan Barrow
War Rocket Ajax, 2010
acrylic, wood

Brandon Vickard
Chrome Ghost, 2007
steel, chrome automotive paint

Brandon Vickard
Dead Astronaut, 2008
polar wood

Brandon Vickard
"...he was turned to steel, in the
great magnetic fields...", 2006
bent and welded sheet steel,
bronze, automotive paint

Brandon Vickard
Silver Surfer, 2010
cast aluminum

All images courtesy the artists.
War Rocket Ajax and Dead Astronaut
by KJ Bedford

TALES TO ASTONISH originally exhibited
at Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge,
Ontario, Canada, curated by Ivan Jurakic
July 9 to August 21, 2010.



HALLWALLS CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER 341 DELAWARE AVENUE BUFFALO NY 14213

HALLWALLS' VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM IS SUPPORTED BY GENEROUS GRANTS FROM THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL OF THE ARTS,
THE CITY OF BUFFALO AND THE ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS.