reVIEW

Andrew Bell

MOTORWERKS 3: SINISTER REFINEMENTS

HAVANA GALLERY, VANCOUVER

APRIL 1 - 25, 1999

by Laura Bucci

Moterwerks is an ongoing project by Vancouver artist Andrew Bell that tells the story of a fictitious world overcome by consumerism, political propaganda, and 'entropic sexual remodification.' Part of this story was previously told in a slick set of eight trading cards. *Sinister Refinements* is a continuation of this narrative (third in the series) and involves wall pieces in mixed media.

For *Sinister Refinements*, Bell has employed textured plaster, layered with oil paint and varnish, and stained with tar, to create rich and complex imagery. The characters in the *Moterwerks* story include superheroes as well as drones. A disguised figure/body is always the central element in the images. Although the figures may appear futuristic and invented, they are in reality composites of heroes of our recent past. They have already existed as real life aviators or in WWII propaganda films, as have the paraphernalia they wear: gas masks, aviator's helmets and goggles, and officer's gloves.

"Every weird thing that I've come up with has already happened 50 or 60 years ago," Bell admits. For example, his *Genocide Clown Blockade* features a man wearing a gas mask with Mickey Mouse ears. This idea evolved from conversations with his mother. Bell learned that during WWII in Britain, gas masks with Mickey Mouse ears or animal faces were made for children to encourage them to wear these awkward protective apparatus and perhaps think of them as part of a game.

In *Sinister Refinements*, heroes' and drones' faces are rarely completely exposed. Their gazes are firmly set on a distant horizon, perhaps awaiting a command. In some instances, they are arrogantly posed, powerful in their military uniforms. Here Bell draws parallels to the blind admiration and respect accorded to authoritarian regimes.

Bell's interest in political disinformation and consumerism started in childhood as he watched television and movies and read comic books. Fascinated with hero images, he later began to question the messages behind his entertainment sources. This has evolved into an analysis that inevitably includes advertising and marketing strategies.

Some of Bell's influences include George Lucas's *Star Wars* movies, the painter and comic book artist Kent Williams, and Joel Peter Witkins's photographs of disturbing subjects, such as freaks. The common thread between these artists is their interest in creating or filming out-of-the-ordinary characters. Like them, Bell creates unique looking figures, but he does not borrow directly from his mentors. It is predominantly the ideas they convey, and the cunning use of their tools, that lend shape to Bell's art.

Bell's characters seem to be engaged in a fetishist ordeal, where the fetish is heroism dressed up

with military accessories, hero costumes, and patriotic insignia. These characters abide by a prescribed set of laws. They have no opinions, only a mute obedience, as exemplified by the man portrayed in the middle panel of *Heroic Legion of Decency*.

The photo-based images are the artist's own creation, but Bell has appropriated Chinese text for several works. The text is perceived as yet another propaganda tool, as a slogan that compliments the character's image—or so one might think. Bell says he knows the meaning of the superimposed texts, but he does not provide a translation. In fact, he purposefully rearranges their proper order. He says he is interested in viewer's reactions to not knowing what is written. The foreign calligraphy could be interpreted as a means of establishing the presence of a foe within the fictitious story, a threat we do not understand. When I suggested this to Bell, he questioned my negative interpretation, proposing that the text could be a positive manifesto against violence. Our interchange led me to wonder whether my reaction to the text was a product of learned behavior.

Although viewers will devise their own complicated narratives, Bell's project addresses the messages we come to believe through a variety of means, whether they be toys, political campaigns, or corporate marketing strategies. The measure of success for *Moterwerks* is its ability to develop a following that will be watching for the next product. Previously, Bell has produced *Moterwerks* lunch boxes, t-shirts, trading cards, sculptures, and two-dimensional wall pieces.

By successfully creating the illusion of necessity, Bell creates a self-mocking commentary on our cultural values—values that nowadays seem to be synonymous with consumerism. He communicates his messages by using the same tools apparent elsewhere in our society, but by emphasizing the methodology, Bell shows to what extent our thoughts are influenced. •

Laura Bucci is a 1992 NSCAD graduate. She is a photographer and also works at Diane Farris Gallery in Vancouver.

Heroic Legion of Decency, mixed media, triptych, each panel 32" x 42", Andrew Bell. Photo by Gavin McKenzie.