



Stephan Bircher

Theatrical Absurdity



The Drawers - Headbones Gallery

Contemporary Drawing, Sculpture and Works on Paper

Sculpture

**Stephan
Bircher**

Theatrical Absurdity

Commentary by Julie Oakes

Artist Catalog, 'Theatrically Absurd Sculpture - Stephan Bircher'
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Rich Fog Micro Publishing, printed in Toronto, 2007
Photography, Layout and Design, Richard Fogarty & Stephan Bircher

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ISBN 978-0-9782458-X-X

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Micro Publishing
Toronto Canada

Stephan Bircher - Contemporary Shamanism

Seeing a Stephan Bircher sculpture in the dark, the thrill of creepiness in the passing blur of bones and feathers arrests the distracted progress from A to B. Immediacy reigns over distraction and the moment is realised. Interest sparked, a closer inspection courses with exclamations of amazement, horror, delight, repulsion, fascination and an overriding glee at having been aware enough to notice. There is a privileged singularity when first confronting a Stephan Bircher sculpture, a sense of luck, of having been in the right place at the right time and because of the compounded destiny, of being rewarded with a sensation. How is it that these strange, often macabre sculptures have been placed in the path of city dwellers? Simple they're the product of a rough savvy coupling between the primal urge to create from the discards of life and technological acumen. They're modern voodoo dolls, contemporary shamanism and theatrical twists of genius from an artist who sees the world as his oyster and plucks his pearls with a pop.

Keith Richards, younger and ravished, could have held a candle to Bircher's dynamic physicality. As narrow as his boney creatures, he appears to be a cross between a gypsy and a rockstar. His figurines are equally hip and stylish, half naked and streamlined. *Star* wears a pair of speckled harem show pants made of crab parts. *Courtesan*, with a purse dangling from her wrist and a crook to her seductive, street-corner stance, is lit by intense red and blue as if her aura is expanding to draw in the johns. Or contemplate the wild expression on the little guy hooked to the turning silver globe, being flipped around, sliding down every now and again, then riding up to the top where he appears madly exhilarated, visually cackling with his successful turn in fate. It is an apt metaphor for the human condition.

The cabinets can be as effective as the pieces as in *Carousel* where the doors open out to frame the scene. It is another dimension within the cabinet, where players of a similar ilk rotate on a carousel to the sounds of a Swiss oom-pa-pa circus-like band. They maintain their hierarchical places as they bask in a changing twilight, going from apple green to rose red as the illumination transforms their characters.

Bircher himself is cosmopolitan, originally from Switzerland with an evident clock-maker's gene presiding over his influences. In Europe, he proposed and built interactive educational environments so that children could understand the existence of a mole, virtually, as they explored the burrows of an earthen landscape. He is a theatre lighting designer and technician and has worked with The Caravan Farm Theatre in British Columbia where this year the production has a real horse as the star, *ablue* horse, lit magically to enhance the indigo equine.

His studio is like a science lab. There are tables with trays of arranged bones, boxes of bird feather's, butterfly wings, beehives and dead insects, shelves of clear plastic drawers with electrical components, rusted machine parts in piles, jewels, junk and things without reference to a naive eye. The caldron in the corner set upon a wood stove looks like it is straight from a production of

Macbeth. He freezes road kill that friends and neighbours give to him and then removes the flesh once it has partially thawed.

Pointing at his caldron with a long and elegant finger, Bircher's sonorous voice with his lilting Swiss accent describes his process. "I zimmer the bones, five times, in and out, in and out and zen on za last time, bleach ..."

There is the haunting feeling that he is perhaps a wizard and the studio with the background whirl of boney creatures on trapezes or being zwinched from up to down and back again, is on a stage.

When the dead are raised, re-arranged, mixed together, slotted into recognizable activities, lit to their greatest advantage and then elevated to the status of Fine Arts by a mad creator; the dance of death begins with a sad familiarity. Viewing the antics that the skeletal hybrids are engaged in, *our* little lives become less fragile as we watch *them*. The mutation from death to a reinvigorated life gives an immediate sense of relief that strikes back the fears of mortality and allows an appreciation of the moment - the exact moment in front of the sculpture - to over-ride the knowledge of our own inevitable end. This is the world of the Theatre of the Absurd, black comics and satire where the weight of living with the awareness of death recedes in the immediacy of the wonderful moment.

The assemblages engage time despite the frozen moment on the stage of life as the character transforms from the original form-follows-function to form-making-suggestions. This packrat version of claiming art supplies is superseded by expertise however and thus the assemblages rise into the world of phenomenal objects. These pieces are laboured over with attention paid to details that went unnoticed in their original existences.

The dancing-death imagery, lit as if on the stage of life far after it's allotted term, brings Bircher's expertise to bear on a world over which he has total control, from the writing of the script, to the set design, costuming, lighting and grand finale of the amazing macabre moment of fame.



Freak Carousel (detail 1,2,3,4) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 17x18x28 inches, 2006









Flying School (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 48x17x36 inches, 2007



Janitor's Nightmare (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 18x24x24 inches, 2007



Sisiphus (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 10x10x21 inches, 2007



The Globe (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 15x15x24 inches, 2007



Pre-Historic Hairdo (detail 1&2) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 22x10x20 tall inches, 2006





The Courtesan (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 10x12x17 inches, 2006

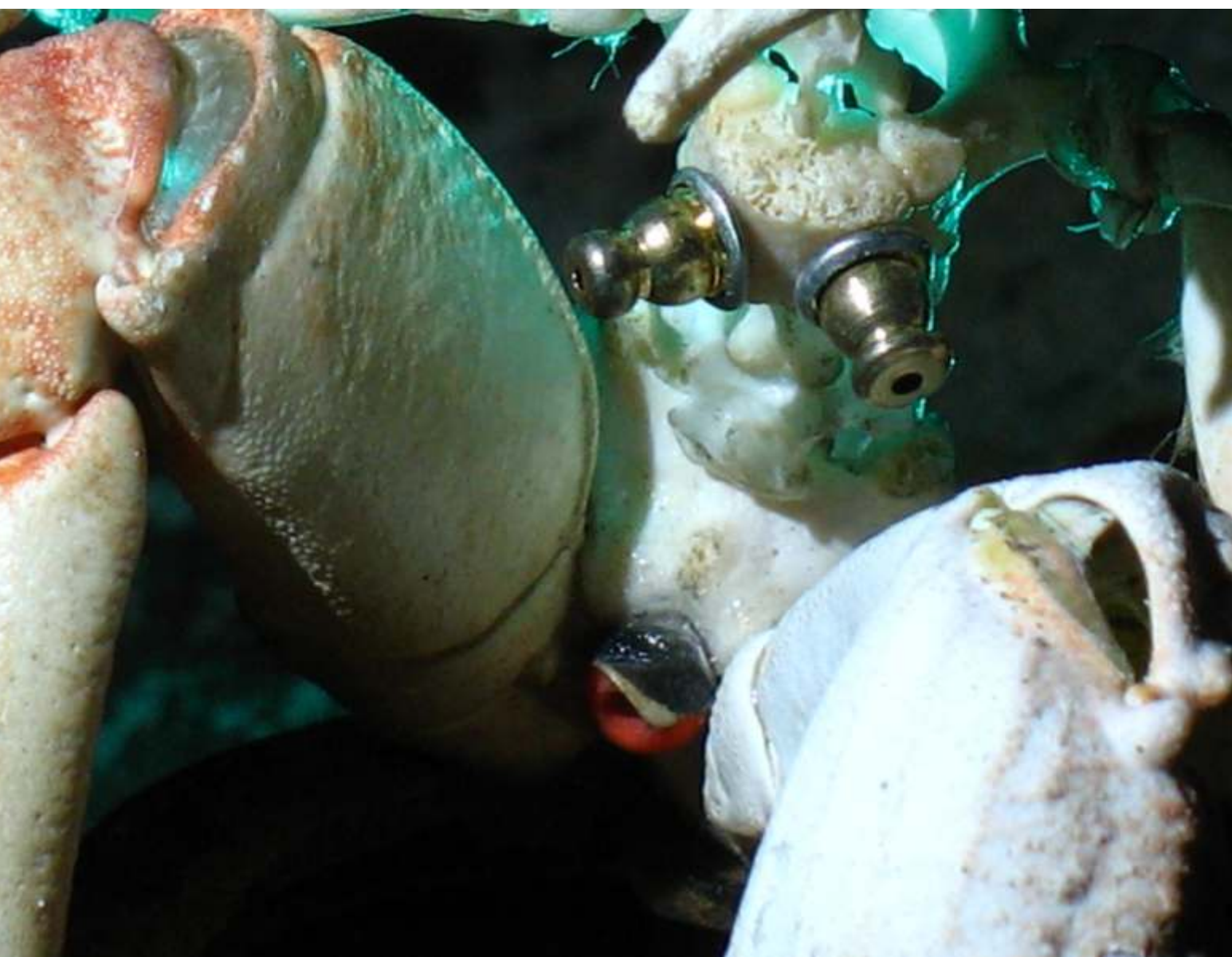


Whore of Babylon (detail 1&2) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 16x14x21 inches, 2006





Odyssey and Siren (detail 1&2) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 16x17x22 inches, 2006





The Lovers (1&2) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 10x8x7 inches, 2005





Feldmarschall - mixed media, found objects, bones - 17x18x28 inches, 2007



Lopvent (+ detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 7x8x13 inches, 2007





Pentesilea, The Amazone (+ detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 8x10x13 inches, 2007





The Star (+ detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 6x9x20 inches, 2007





Step Into Nowhere (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 12x5x12 inches, 2007



Insect (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 13x11x6 inches, 2007



The Hunt (detail) - mixed media, found objects, bones - 11x7x9 inches, 2007



Shaman - mixed media, found objects, bones - 7x7x9 inches, 2007



Stephan Bircher - The last word...

HEAVY BUT FRAGILE

The background of the sculptures is a balance between heavy rusty old metal junk parts and the fine found pieces, bones specifically.

From road kill to bone sculpture. I am not a hunter. I don't kill animals for that. Road kill is the most convenient way to get those bones. The process to get the bones is not a question of gross or not gross. It is an intense change. At the start the animals are still beautiful. Out of the freezer, it still looks like the animal, for example, a dead duck. When I start to cut it up, rip it open, it gets to a creepy part. First there are beautiful feathers, and then when I rip out the feathers it becomes chicken skin, like the chicken we eat. Then the cutting starts. That is a heavier step for me. The creepiest is when I have to get out the intestine and the brain. The brain is a tough experience. After, I take the bones and clean them, with a tooth brush, other brushes, little knives, scrachers, whatever. When they are mostly clean you cook them. Some I cook 2-3 times, some 4-5 times - until they are cleaned of meat. The tendons are tougher and take longer. In the last cooking process, I add bleach. That makes them white and nice. Then I lay the dry white bones on a black sheet - the wonderful thing is to see the whole animal again in beautiful white shaped bones which are an amazing structure. Bones are accurate and specific. Mammals have all the same bones. Rabbit, cat, mouse, dog, all have the same bones with different shapes. It depends how he walked around, what his specialties were.

That's the fragile part mostly the spine bone of a coyote is pretty tuff. Then there are the fine parts like crab pinchers, wasps, the.....flowers that fly?...butterflies. The bones are glued together. It's fragile, not a sculpture out of stone. The heavy parts are all welded. And it's rusty and when they sit on a table so I add felt.

For me the creative process is a process where I live in my shop with a layout of all the parts and found objects. The heavy metal parts are from our human culture and the fragile parts are out of nature. The sculptures grow out of the atmosphere of being in there. I don't make drawings or plans, it is a growing process. And then the lights are for sure a special part too my other special gift in my opinion. Lights create a lot of tension and atmosphere. It supports mainly the meaning and feeling I have with the sculpture. Special light, special angle, special mix of color gives it another atmosphere. And it forces me to think about the technical side, where lights could be built in, before I start to build the fragile sculpture.

I think the spirits of the animal's bones are in the sculptures of mine, they are happy about that.

Stephan Bircher

Professional Experience

2003-	Set and Light design for Canadian Theater. Caravan Farm Theater, Leaky Heaven Circus, Runaway Moon and others.
1993-2003	Technical director of the “Junges Theater” Basel, Switzerland
1991-	Design and construction of the “Pandamobile” for the Swiss World Wildlife Fund, a series of kinetic hands-on educational modules illustrating bio-diversity:
1991	<i>Aquamarinus (Undersea life)</i>
1994	<i>Sous Le Sol (Life in the Subsurface)</i>
1997	<i>Wolf (Re-Integration of Wolves in Switzerland)</i>
2001	<i>Regenwald (Rainforest)</i>
2004	<i>Arktis (Changes in Climate)</i>
2006	<i>Water - A Challenge for Mankind</i>
1990-1993	Set and props designer for theaters in Switzerland.
1982-1990	Secondary School Art Teacher, Basel, Switzerland

Exhibitions & Commissions

July 2007	Ashpa Naira Gallery, Vernon, BC, Canada
Oct. 2006	Headbones Gallery, Toronto, ON, Canada
Jan. 2006	Fugitive Gallery, Vernon, BC, Canada
April 2005	Fran Willis Gallery, Victoria, BC, Canada
1986-88	Commission, Basel Canvas Street lamps Paintings, Basel, Switzerland
1985	2nd Prize, Swiss Cartoon Competition, Basel, Switzerland

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