

The Private World of Viktor Tinkl

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The Private World of Viktor TINKL

Margaret RODGERS

The Robert McLaughlin and Mississauga Galleries are to be congratulated for prizing some of Viktor Tinkl's art into the public forum. Since 1965, the Tinkl's schoolhouse-home has become integral to his artistic endeavours. After years of extensive exhibition activity, and a secure position in the Canadian art establishment, he has left the public gallery world to continue his life-project, creating a permanent venue for his own work and also that of his partner Judith's quilted art.

From a myriad of extraordinary creations, curators Linda Jansma and Rob Freeman decided to concentrate on two central works, *The Meeting* and *Circle*, finding

thematic connections in them to many areas of the artist's vast and prolific oeuvre. Additionally, they have included some earlier pieces and had Tinkl execute two site-specific wall drawings in the Oshawa gallery space. Indeed the exhibition possesses the illusion of continued expansion as it progresses, mirroring its source at the artist's much-celebrated Sunderland home.

Circle from 2006 displays a biker bar aesthetic, with its ring of grimacing fox head skins that are both horrific and hilarious. The mouths are pried open with cans sliced and twisted to form bared teeth. Heads jut forward, mounted on up-ended rectangular Thompson water sealer cans, their obligatory skull and crossbones icon reading like T-shirt logos. Also evoked is



granny's fur coat, in its day the height of fashion, with its little heads that came together at the collar, most certainly wreaking nightmare-havoc in small children everywhere. These characters menace each other effectively, without diminishing the underlying chuckle of the artist.

In *The Meeting*, two rows of figures are face to face, grinning maniacally with the aid of denture moulds attached to a variety of heads made from books, olive oil cans, wooden blocks, and so on. Each individual suggests lively interaction with its weird colleagues, possessing a multiplicity of detail that compounds upon the whole. Close examination reveals quotidian fragments such

as old linoleum, calendar pages, photographs, cutlery, examples of the endless detritus of living. It is as if an entire junkyard was miraculously animated into a semblance of order.

Seasons shows most wonderfully the artist's celebration of his marriage to Judith. Made in 2001 for their 35th anniversary, four wheels exhibit photographs from their life together, the four seasons depicted in natural imagery from their surroundings, and the seasons of life in evidence through suggestive images and objects portraying babies, fireworks, cakes and quilts. The Judith-component is surrounded by a collection of figures including the Pope, Death, various animals, and Viktor, who is sporting a spec-

Viktor TINKL, *Köpfe Mother*, 1978. 208 x 53 x 38 cm. Michael Cullen, Trent Photographics.

←
The Meeting (detail) 1999. 259 x 304 x 114 cm. Michael Cullen, Trent Photographics.



tacular erection. Turn the crank and the sculpture is set in motion, a perfect metaphor for their full lives.

The exhibition title *Making Things* is based on Viktor's claim that he is a "thing-maker" rather than a sculptor. The word "thing" is somewhat problematic, given that the artist's subject matter defies the dominance of the object. The work is an exclamation of humanity, a celebration of the forces of life — sexuality, love, play, birth and death. The things are what he uses to express an exuberant and joyful life force.

Fauve-coloured wood, scarified with tin can lids and jagged incisions. The properties of the lids are exploited — their distinctive ridges still identifiable but also forming surface patterning on their wooden ground. Accentuated by the nails that encircle each metal surface, they hug the wood with arcs and discs that suggest Cubist-derived composition. Connections can be made to the way Picasso also used his personal life as raw material, but Tinkl's vision feels decidedly more celebratory. There is a comfort level

exist in the world that Tinkl has created from similar materials. Originally planned as utilitarian buttressing and an aqueduct system, it evolved in fanciful extrapolation into gargoyles, familial characters, and all manner of creature. While some cement appears in a few of the smaller works on display in the gallery, most of it is built into his property and unable to be moved. In compensation, the exhibition catalogue includes a photographed walkabout and artist interview. Beyond assemblage and Art Brut

aside, aside and now I have a good bush cord of these fascinating configurations of wood. But do I still want to get involved in making something with them? Not particularly. Making things to exhibit them, there's no point to that so maybe they will just remain as potential things."²

Where the 1978 *Köpfe* grouping displays Cubist and Fauve qualities, later pieces take off into a category of their own, combining all of the artist's training and experience with a far-flung creativity, dismissive of convention and defiantly personal. The phrase "an excess of meaning" might as easily be attributed to the range and content in Tinkl's work as it is to that of Montreal artist David Altmejd.³ There is a speculative interstice — space for the imaginary that defies categorization and is imbued with raw, edgy energy. The affective combination of humour and the grotesque resonates against the messy and ambiguous nature of real life.

The exhibition title *Making Things* belies the fact that Tinkl's constructions go far beyond "thingness." They are vigorously animated and brimming with life forces. Both human, in their embodiment of the things that we throw away, they are also human in the sense of their representations. Peopled in mythic proportion, they contain and evoke through material and subject, a vivid and heightened sensibility. ←

Re the exhibition *Viktor Tinkl: Making Things*
Curated by Robert Freeman and Linda Jansma
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery 12 July–9 September 2007
Art Gallery of Mississauga 25 October–5 December 2007

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NOTES

- 1 Wikipedia.
- 2 "In Conversation: Viktor Tinkl and Linda Jansma" *Viktor Tinkl: Making Things*, exhibition catalogue (Oshawa, Ontario: RMG and Mississauga Galleries, 2007) 18.
- 3 Quoted in exhibition catalogue for *Crack the Sky: La Biennale de Montreal 2007*, 54. Catalogue text adapted from a bilingual essay in: Louise Déry, *David Altmejd: Métamorphose/Metamorphosis*, Galerie de l'UQAM, 2006, 112 p.



Viktor TINKL,
Circle (detail), 2006.
132.5 x 132.5 cm diam.
Michael Cullen, Trent
Photographics.

While autobiographical elements provide content there is a subtext relating to the materials themselves. Tinkl's use of found objects is not only inventive but also transformative. He sees and employs the inherent energy in things, often in bits and pieces not otherwise considered especially evocative.

Intuition anchored in a Modernist perspective brings to mind the sculptures of Picasso or any number of artists over the last century who made witty assemblages with found objects. *Köpfe* of 1978 displays Modernist cool, the group consisting of three wooden busts made from

in these earlier pieces that could arguably relate to a known visual vocabulary within the Modernist project, albeit redefined and personalized.

Tinkl acknowledges the inspiration of Art Brut or Outsider Art, defined by Jean Dubuffet to describe art created outside the boundaries of official culture. Profoundly influential was a 1980 visit to the site in France where Naïve artist Ferdinand Cheval (1836–1924) spent thirty-three years building his *Palais Idéal*, constructed from stones and held together with chicken wire, cement, and lime.¹ Echoes of this connection

influences, there exists in the work an unabashed use of the subject matter of intimate family life, raised to mythological levels. This is coupled with the notion that no material is too prosaic to employ. However Tinkl points out that his impulse to make every last thing into something else is waning with age. In the catalogue interview with Jansma he says,

"... yesterday I looked at all the logs that I had saved for their strange and unusual shapes. I used some of them, but as the firewood came in, more and more of them accumulated and I put them aside,