

Mark Soppeland's
The Shrine to the Suspension of Disbelief
and other visionary images

By Marian Hollinger

To enter the world of Mark Soppeland's art is to enter a transportive world of wit, commentary, colour, and exquisite craftsmanship. No viewer will be left without an opinion, visceral or intellectual response to the pieces. Soppeland's work is no "easy read," for the artist uses a multitude of large and small objects to fashion his guardians. Sports trophies, samovars, tea kettles, standard lamps and a host of other objects, entirely too numerous to mention, form the literal foundation of his work. Tiny, beaded necklaces, plastic toys, hand-blown glass—nothing is beyond Soppeland's note as a potential part of a new piece. To tour his basement workshop is to wish to remain for weeks, simply looking carefully at each collected item. There is an intricacy to the artist's work that suggests he has discovered how to go back in time, to a more leisurely period when artists would work at length to create elaborate, beautifully-crafted pieces. Although Soppeland's work is not at all Victorian, his detail harkens to that time, which brings this discussion to the topic of Steampunk.

Steampunk is a sub-genre of fantasy and speculative fiction that became prominent in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although the works refer to a period when steam power was the chief means of generating energy, most of the contemporary or nearly-contemporary pieces associated with Steampunk are not steam-powered. They might not be "powered" at all, but rather designed in such a way that they conjure images of authentic and idealized Victorian machinery. Attention to detail is paramount to Steampunk, and its plethora of metal, added parts and wood suggests Victoriana.

While the term has been used in conjunction with Soppeland's work, his pieces contain much more social commentary and art historical reference than is typical for Steampunk creations. Each of Soppeland's works assumes a new identity in its construction as it accumulates layer upon layer of material and, with that, layer upon layer of meaning. Soppeland speaks of his work as possessing magic and his role that of the magician. Every viewer who interacts with the Guardians will experience some of that magic, unfolding work by work.

In the gallery, the Guardians emit light, warm and inviting. In fact, the Guardians seem altogether friendly and protective, unlike, for example, the Easter Island Moai figures, menacing sentries for a devastated population, reflecting the terrible loss of their resources and culture. Soppeland's figures, in contrast, seem welcoming, comforting to the viewer who can imagine an interaction with them, which certainly sets the Guardians apart from the many ancient cultures to

which they refer.

As a part of his light sculptures, Soppeland also creates shrines which function visually a little like the reliquaries of the medieval period, but filled perhaps with beads, toys, and other cultural detritus which seem to mark them as closer relatives to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, than to the medieval European tradition from which they came. The sensibility in the shrines is similar, for the medieval works were often covered with small gems or semi-precious stones and lead crystal, bearing small, hinged doors which opened to precious relics of saints, but here it is paraphrased in terms geared to express images of contemporary cultures. At the same time, for art and other historians acquainted with material cultures, the references are clear and make one appreciate the artist's deft hand at re-interpretation.

However eloquent a writer might be about the artist's work, Mark Soppeland was there first, with succinct explanations of and references to his own pieces. Of *The House of Second Sight*, he says, "In 1988 I began developing a group of mixed media figurative sculptures which I called Guardians for an installation at art Behind Bars in Cleveland, Ohio. Evolving from earlier work, the Guardians incorporated my ongoing interest in the use of found objects, light, and a concern for installation[al] sculpture. The Guardians address many concerns. In the creation of these works, I perform the roles of conceptualist, designer, craftsman, historian, philosopher, and magician. Although I will occasionally identify specific issues with which I am concerned, it is the multi-leveled interrelationships that define the complexity of our existence that are at the heart of the work."

Soppeland continues about his work, saying, "Guardians are part of the modernist traditions of exploring the potential of art. They synthesize multicultural arts and crafts influences with Western formalist and historical issues; they attempt to reflect the complexity and duality of the postmodernist world. As such they are romantic and pragmatic, primitive and modern, timeless and timely. Working with found objects the sculptures make intentional references to the work and concerns of Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Alexander Calder, and Robert Rauschenberg. The use of discarded material is a logical response to a society that has never been as wealthy, or as wasteful."

Further, Soppeland says, "My work reflects what I believe to be an elemental human need for the activities involved with the search, possession and transformation of the object. Presentation, engagement and exchange are the completing acts to this process. A variety of historical and modernist approaches, with their inevitably diverse commentary on the use of the existing object, are also referenced in my work. The use of the found object brings multiple levels of symbolic and cultural baggage to a meeting with efficiency and historical process."

He goes on to state of his piece, featured prominently in the current exhibition, *Guardian of the Suspension of Disbelief*, "The Guardians are symbolic representations of the world of dreams, the world of ideas, and the world of culture. The Guardians use light to transform themselves and their environment. Through their use of light they become ethereal, inviting the viewer into the realm of magic. In their surface, form and materiality they assert the beauty and

importance of the world of the physical. Existing at the intersection of these two worlds, the knowable and the unknowable, the works are designed to function as symbolic intermediaries who carry messages, reminders, and maybe more. Art may not be magic, but it can be a powerful mirror of what we want to believe. People will see what they want to see.”

For art historians, what we see and what we want to see is the history of art in a microcosm. Each piece evokes a stream-of-consciousness application of the materials, the juxtaposition of those materials, with the signs and symbols of art and cultural histories.

Perhaps the most important concept in Soppeland’s work is expressed in his statement that, “I am engaged with the rather unfashionable idea that art can enlighten. As an artist and a teacher I have always tried to make work that was accessible, that is to make art that most people could approach and find some relevant meaning. The idea (at least one of them) of my work is that once the viewer is engaged, a collection of clues have been installed in the work that have the potential to direct the viewer to observations and awareness they had not yet consciously discovered. I try to create work that can function as a bridge to higher levels of awareness.”

In that endeavour, Mark Soppeland succeeds absolutely. It was once an imperative for art to enlighten. This is a notion that had its inception in Classical Greek art and was battered, but not quite lost, in the much later generations of Modernism. To see an artist of our time reintroducing that concept, and using it so subtly and so subversively is an exquisite treat. Exhibition viewers will find themselves returning time and again for one more experience with the Guardians.

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