

David Hansen's Essay on Three Legs

How can we take a fix on Wicks? Where do we locate his objects and performances?

For a start, his work is clearly rooted in artistic tradition. The recent works on paper call to mind Leonardo's flying machine and deluge drawings while the title of Self-Destructing Machine, provides a direct link to Jean Tinguely. There are also softer resonances, mere suggestions of stylistic or conceptual relationship: the skeletal attenuation of his 1987-88 "flying machines" parallels that in the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, while the distorted fibreglass body of Grounded Figure seems to carry an (ironic) echo of Stelarc's suspension series, the "events for stretched skin".

Despite occasional appearances in mainstream media "check out this nut" stories, Wicks' performance work is likewise firmly grounded in historical precedent. From early this century, the dada and surrealist movements promoted a blurring of the line between art and life, and the Arthur Wicks who wanders through shopping malls with his face caked in mud, who spends solstice nights camping on the roofs of art buildings, who labours in a pedal-powered wooden helicopter is an inheritor of, and a participant in, this stance.

The other important device Wicks has absorbed from surrealist tradition is the notion of the familiar made unfamiliar. The commonplace can become monstrous by a small but fundamental alteration of material, function or behaviour; witness respectively Meret Oppenheim's fur cup, saucer and spoon, Marcel Duchamp's urinal-as-art, Salvador Dali's melting watches. This brings us to a second taproot, a second source of Wicks' inspiration. He lives and works "in the sticks", in the New South Wales country town of Wagga Wagga, and his recent sculpture in particular is strongly evocative of his familiar environment, regional Australia.

The metropolis is protected from entropy by a sheath of concrete, plastic and continuous redevelopment, but in the country organic and climatic forces are visibly at work: haybales sprout green, dead logs grow fungus, wooden buildings silver and splinter, fenceposts split and sag. The decay which is ever-present in country life is countered by the inhabitants by the famous "she'll be right" attitude and by a host of "making-do" repairs and recyclings.

In his many animal and vegetable forms, in his use of found materials and in his shonky construction, Wicks shows great sensitivity and allegiance to his surroundings. His thin, rickety constructions can even stand (shakily) as metaphors for the predicaments of rural Australia, for the fragile ecology of the Murray-Darling basin, for the precarious economics of primary production.

There are of course simpler (less obtrusive) readings: the machines derive from familiar country things, however mutated. They are ring-barked trees, or the carcasses and scattered bones of dead animals. Transformer 4 - Destabilizer with fixed Point is a television aerial.

It should be noted that country television usually means the ABC and one other commercial channel. But while we cannot receive SBS, almost every country pub has a satellite dish for Sky Channel. We are connected to the stars, and what do we receive? Mud wrestling. Such bathos brings us to the third root, the final, balancing leg of the tripod: Wicks' delight in the bad craziness of the universe.

The paradoxes of physics, especially the really tricky bits beyond Newton and Einstein, serve the artist as symbols for the great existential conundrum, the conditional and absurd situation of our lives. His machines do not work, or rather they are inefficient to the point of apparent pointlessness. Transformer 5 - Self-Portrait with Target and Transformer 1 - with Payload have non-aligned wheels on their three legs; arms technology is going nowhere.

There is an even more obvious mechanical flaw in all of these recent "flying machines". The artist could easily have suspended their apexed, focal "capsules". Instead, he visibly acknowledges the sculptor's old enemy, gravity, and has them connected to the floor through their leg-roots. They are not shiny, speeding satellites, but (un)natural growths, or to use the title of a 1988 painting, Organic Machines.

In this lies some sense of the artist's self-proclaimed mission as late twentieth century alchemist; Wicks works as an illustrator of and a mediator between organic and inorganic processes. He humanises the space between us and our technology (in the recent machines), between us and the earth (as when he buried himself in a geological fault line in the San Andreas series of 1982) and between us and the heavens (by mapping the sky in his role of "Solstice Voyeur").

Thus connected, can we rise above it all? Can we fly? Arthur Wicks/Everyman furiously works the pedals of his helicopter

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