



Don Bonham with his sculpture 'Traumfeuer: Dream Fire,' which is made of fiberglass and a found animal skull, during the installation of 'Stranger in a Familiar Land' at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in June. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/DAILY GLEANER

Full-frontal metal jacket

American artist and U.S. Marine veteran Don Bonham bares it all – a life of contradiction, social commentary, confinement and contemporary Canadian art at break-neck speed. Story by Chris Morris

Don Bonham has come a long way from the bad old days of drawing naked women on jail house ceilings in exchange for a few smokes.

But no matter how far the 71-year-old has come from his rough and raunchy early days, Bonham has never lost touch with his personal creative philosophy – to make it as an artist, "you have to show your ass."

There is nothing highfalutin about Bonham the man – a charming storyteller with an infectious laugh who greets everyone like a long-lost friend.

But Bonham the artist, now that's a different story. Through his sculptures, he succeeds in doing what Francis Bacon once described as the ultimate job of the artist – "to always deepen the mystery."

Standing in the middle of a showroom in New Brunswick's Beaverbrook Art Gallery, surrounded by his large, eye-popping

creations, Bonham describes himself as, basically, a landscape artist.

"I consider myself a North American, 20th-century landscape artist, and this is my landscape," he says with a grin, looking around at his eerie half man/half machine creations.

"It's not ducks and wildlife." Bonham was at the Beaverbrook to help launch the first major retrospective of his body of work. The exhibition, *Don Bonham: Stranger in a Familiar Land*, at the gallery until Sept. 16, features 84 of his imaginatively original, finely crafted figurative fiberglass sculptures that skillfully blend human and mechanical forms into something otherworldly. Encompassing three rooms, it also features many drawings, collages, prints, photographs and films in addition to the sculptures.

"I love technology – it's mankind that I can't stand," Bonham says.

Terry Graff, the gallery's deputy director and curator, can barely contain his excitement about the show.

Graff has known and admired Bonham since he was a student at Fanshawe College in London, Ont. Bonham, an American who spent many years working and teaching in Canada, was an instructor of fine arts at the college in the 1970s.

Bonham is the first American visual artist to be appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy. "We're really pleased to have this show," says Graff, who curated the exhibition. "It's an important show for Canada because Don occupies a really unique place in Canadian art, a very unusual place."

Bonham's work – featured in everything from *Playboy* magazine to prestigious New York galleries – has made him an artistic sensation in both Canada and the United States. But Bonham – who traces his family's roots to Acadians expelled to Louisiana – has never let success go to his head. Truth in art is his touchstone.

"You go to these universities and you think, 'Well, I'll do this or that.' But that's not what it's about. It's about finding yourself, and I realized I was something of a greaseball. I loved technical things and cars, and I started doing things like that, thinking in those terms. That's when I became relevant as a visual artist," Bonham says. "It's when you



MIG 29, 2005, being installed at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

turn back into what you are ... You have to question yourself, 'What do I have to say? Is it valid? What's it about? How can I say it? How can I deal with it?' I have said that to be a good artist you have to show your ass. I think that's true. You have to be able to put it out there."

Bonham really does put it out there in sculptures that remain unlike anything else.

Graff is confident people coming to the gallery to see Bonham's work will be blown away by the originality and complexity of the pieces, from a small cube-shaped human head with a vent on the top, to the neatly fashioned, 16-foot-long MIG jet fighter with a woman forming the nose and part

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of the body of the aircraft.

There's also a helicopter with human legs instead of wheels for landing, and wonderful, esoteric motorcycles and racing cars with the sensuous shapes of women forming parts of the bodies of the machines.

Included in the show is a flashy racing machine emblazoned with the name of Bonham's alter-ego, Hermen Goode and the Aesthetics Racing Team (ART).

Bonham's sense of fun was in full play in the 1970s when he designed the snazzy-looking racer, with breasts where the steering wheel should be, and took it to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, ostensibly to

try for a new world speed record. It's important to note that although some of Bonham's pieces look like they could fly or drive, they don't, so he was quickly disqualified at Bonneville.

But the event, and other staged situations he has masterminded, gave Bonham the opportunity to dramatically illustrate the interplay between art and life.

"It was just a way of showing people how to look – that's all good artists do," he says. "It's like pointing them in a direction and saying, 'Look at this!'"

One of his more touching creations is *Monument for the Children of the 20th Century* – a sarcophagus with wheels that make it look like a child's toy.

"We don't know how many millions of children we killed in wars over the past century," Bonham says. "I'm not politically correct. There are some things that really irritate the shit out of me and killing innocent people always bothers me."

In many ways, Bonham is a man of contradictions.

His flying machines are the largest and most visually stimulating sculptures in the exhibition, yet, whenever possible, in real life, he avoids flying. He travelled to Fredericton from his home in upstate New York by train and car.

Many of Bonham's sculptures are viscerally anti-war, like the sarcophagus in the children's monument, and the *Esoteric Obus (Smart Bomb)* in which a woman's head and arms form the front of the bomb. But Bonham is a former U.S. Marine who served with distinction in a number of theatres, including southeast Asia.

Although his sentiments now are strongly anti-war, he has only kind words for his

DON OCCUPIES A REALLY UNIQUE PLACE IN CANADIAN ART, A VERY UNUSUAL PLACE.
TERRY GRAFF, BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY

experience in the marines. Coming from an impoverished family, the U.S. military provided Bonham with the first real home he ever had, and it gave him confidence.

"It really made me believe that I could do the impossible – they teach you that in the Marine Corps. It was good for me."

Now with a host of medical conditions that, in a very real way, have made him part machine himself, he still feels kindly toward the Marines thanks to the generous help the United States provides to its war veterans.

"VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) is pretty plush, so I have a nice little retirement fund, and I can work in my shop and not worry every minute."

"Also, I have really run up the hospital bills in the last year – two new knees, a new hip, two stents – you name it."

He has so many bones screwed together and pieces of metal in his body, he is referred to as "the Evel Knievel of the art world."

After he left the marines, Bonham's drinking and brawling often landed him in trouble, and occasionally in jail.

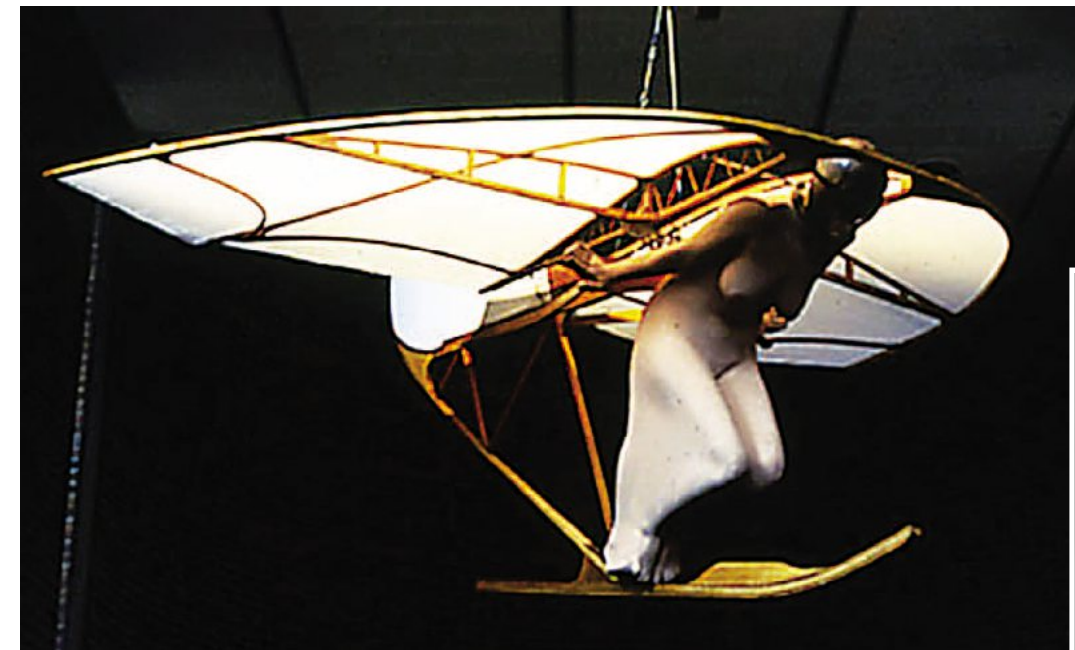
That's where he realized his artistic skills had tangible value.

"I didn't have any cigarettes when I was in jail, and if you don't have cigarettes you can't get a clean cup, you can't get a clean mattress, you can't get anything."

"So they asked me what I did, I said I was an artist. 'Oh, wow. An artist! Can you draw a nude woman?' Yeah I could do that. How many cigarettes?" So, we worked it out – I



In August, 1972, 'Bonneville' was taken to Salt Flats, Utah, for the 24th National Speed Trials. Because it couldn't start, Hermen Goode Aesthetics Racing Team was disqualified. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



'First Flying Machine,' PHOTO: SUBMITTED



'Esoteric Obus (Smart Bomb),' 1986. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



'Bird of Paradise,' one of Bonham's fiberglass and wood series from the 1990s. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER



'Twentieth Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality,' 1993, made of fiberglass, wood and metal. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

I CONSIDER MYSELF A NORTH AMERICAN, 20TH-CENTURY LANDSCAPE ARTIST, AND THIS IS MY LANDSCAPE ... IT'S NOT DUCKS AND WILDLIFE.
DON BONHAM, ARTIST

"Americans never think of that. They think, 'Oh, our sister up north. The Canadians are just like us!'"

"But, all of a sudden, there I am, trying to find a beer store. I walk into a grocery store and ask for a six-pack of beer. No way ... So, yes, I was a stranger in a familiar land. It is a different nation. I like it that way."

The VA assistance is one of the main reasons Bonham returned to the United States a few years ago after living and working in Canada for 23 years. But he took back the art of working in fiberglass that he learned largely from a craftsman at an Ontario boat

yard who he would pay with bottles of whiskey.

He is now so skilled in the medium that on one of his works, *Traumfeuer "Dream Fire"* – a bright yellow racing car – he has hand-built everything from the helmet on the animal skull to the roll bar and steering wheel.

"It's a labour of love," he says of his art. After a tumultuous career, Bonham says, in the twilight of his life, he has found peace and contentment.

"The other day, after when we shipped out all the pieces for the exhibition and I watched my life's work going down the road, I was looking out the window of my studio and I thought, 'What a beautiful place I've got,'" he says of his home on the Hudson River, not far from West Point, an United States Military Academy in New York.

"This is my dream. I'm 71 years old and I'm living my dream. It's great. I realized, really, how lucky I am. We all have a tendency to piss and moan a lot, but I have to say, I like what I do." ☺

Chris Morris is the *Telegraph-Journal's* Provincial Bureau Chief in Fredericton.



'A-Racer,' PHOTO: SUBMITTED



A self-portrait in sculpture. PHOTO: TERRY GRAFF



'Rhinetochtor,' 1985. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



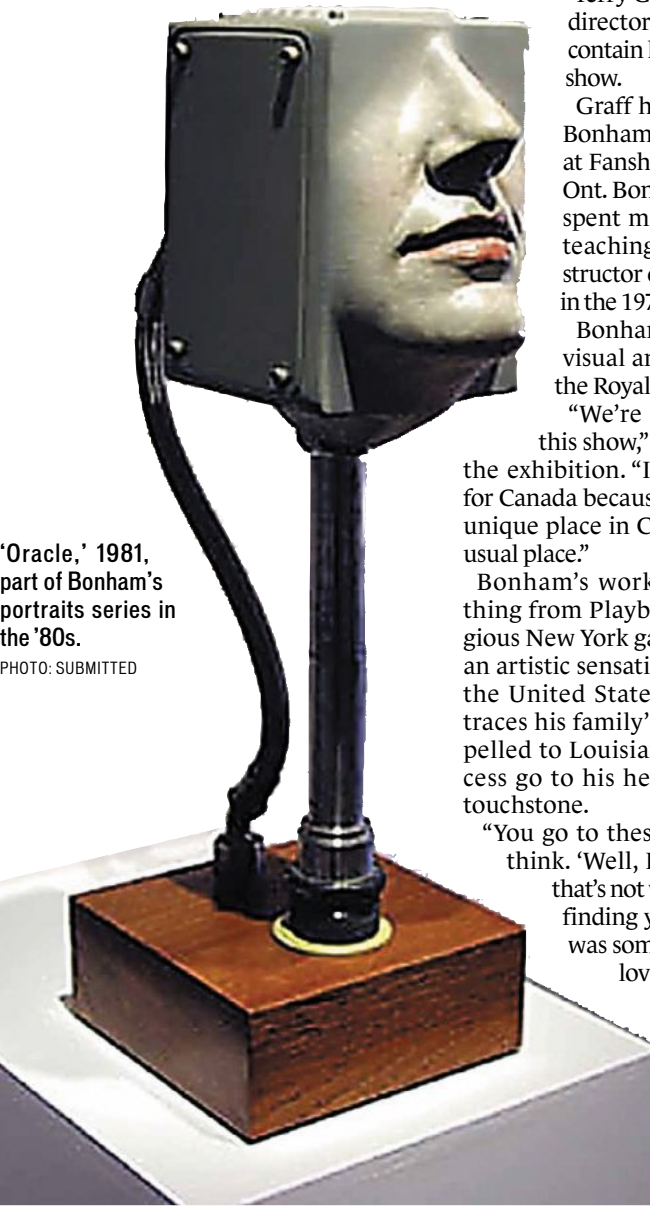
'Dora,' part of Bonham's more traditionally figurative works. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



'Noxon,' 1985. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



Bonham's 1970 'Maggie-Cycle,' part of the racing division of the Hermen Goode Aesthetics Racing Team. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



'Oracle,' 1981, part of Bonham's portraits series in the '80s. PHOTO: SUBMITTED