

Steve Hansen's TROJAN VESSELS

by Glen R. Brown



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1–2 *Red Boy*, 13 in. (33 cm) in length, handbuilt stoneware, glazes, underglazes, oxides, washes, fired to cone 8 in oxidation. 3 *What Would Duchamp Do*, 5½ in. (14 cm) in length, wheel-thrown stoneware, glazes, underglazes, oxides, washes, iron-oxide decal, multiple firings.

Ostensibly bolted together from a jumble of gray machinery parts, weathered-tin advertising signs, salvaged funnels, and ribbed spouts of gasoline cans that have known better days, the *trompe l'oeil* bricolage vessels of Steve Hansen suggest a can-do resourcefulness that recalls the clever recycling and retooling strategies of pioneers, refugees, and castaways. Necessity and the constraints imposed by limited resources rather than a taste for patchwork aesthetics seem to account for these eccentric containers—but that impression is mistaken. Hansen has long explored the oddly appealing visual effects of makeshift constructions in sculpture and has only been pursuing these qualities through functional forms since late in 2013. Moreover, he has for some time cultivated a conceptual content that relates to but is ultimately separable from issues of function and form. If his works at first glance seem circumscribed by the demands of physical labor, on closer inspection they reveal an equal application to intellectual problems concerning the role of context and perspective in the construction of meaning.

A professor of art at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, Hansen deliberately blends his affinity for academic subjects—particularly semiotics and art history—with reflection

on what he describes as his “workaday blue-collar lineage” as the son of a housing contractor and grandson of a contractor and farmer. Moved by the sense of place conjured in the writings of Northern Michigan native Jim Harrison and the lyrics of Wisconsin folk singer Jeffrey Foucault, he has sought to embody in his own work the atmosphere of a barn workshop governed by a pragmatic Midwestern resourcefulness. “In my family, if you wanted a car you bought two wrecked ones, you cut them in half, and you joined them together,” he jokes. “I thought about what it would be like if my grandfather had made a teapot. He was a Seventh-day Adventist and didn’t go in for anything with caffeine in it. I don’t know if he ever owned a teapot—but if he made one, what would it look like?”

In providing a speculative answer to that question, Hansen has relied on his skills to produce the gritty appearance of grime and rust on metal that gives his sculptures a feeling of age and use, as though they were indeed inventive constructions cobbled from odds and ends a generation or two ago. He even engages in a bit of salvaging and recycling of his own, fashioning the parts of his vessels from a mixed clay body of scraps picked up in the studio classrooms where he teaches. A different kind of scavenging is evident on the surfaces of his works: a gleaning of images—or, more often, image fragments—from pop culture, advertisements, historical archives, and sports memorabilia. In his earlier work, he carefully painted these by hand, but since the fall of 2013 he has created decals by laser-printing digital images that have been desaturated or otherwise manipulated in Adobe Photoshop to impart to them a sense of temporal distance.

While the decal images appear to have been arbitrarily fragmented by a process of cutting up lithographed signs or vintage sheet-metal toys, Hansen carefully considers their scale, color scheme, and patterning in relation to the surfaces they occupy and the larger forms that these surfaces compose. His goal is irresolution between the impressions of artful arrangement and ad-hoc construction: an ambiguous appearance that seems less than artistically controlled yet more than randomly derived. This ambiguity is crucial

to the conceptual side of

Hansen’s art, since it prevents his works from seeming heavy handed in their reproach of unjust social perspectives, despite the obvious moral questions raised by his juxtaposition of certain images and text.

“I look for images that have a politically incorrect edge to them,” he explains. “They’re usually a little bit sexist, a little bit racist.”



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Some such images are the usual suspects: for example, the brand-name popularizations of Old South stereotypes of African Americans—Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben—that artists such as Robert Colescott began deconstructing in the 1970s. Hansen’s whacks at these stereotypes manage to avoid staleness however, largely because one can imagine them as merely fortuitous consequences of someone’s having screwed together random sheet-metal parts to create serviceable vessels more than half a century ago. In *Uncle Ben’s Log Cabin*, the peering eyes, broad nostrils, and the glossy cheeks and forehead of Aunt Jemima connect with the coral lips and diminutive chin of Snow White to create a Mammy-Princess hybrid that befuddles expectations. In the eccentric teapot *Superblack*, the upper visage of the Cream of Wheat chef, crowned with his trademark *toque blanche*, unites with the lantern jaw and pearly smile of Superman to unsettle easily digested stereotypes of servility and heroism. While the reverse sides of these vessels carry text—apparent labels for Log Cabin Syrup, Uncle Ben’s Rice, and Black and Decker power tools—Hansen leaves interpretation of the amalgam images to the viewer.

In *Red Boy*, recipient of a 2014 Niche Award, Hansen addresses the thorny topic of Native American mascots for sports teams. Protests, petitions, and lawsuits in recent years over collegiate and professional team trademarks have raised public awareness of the

after it was officially discontinued as culturally insensitive. In *Red Boy*, however, Hansen incorporates a logo that even ardent supporters of tradition must surely recognize as patronizing: the Cleveland Indians’ logo of the toothy, sly-eyed “Chief Wahoo.” Flanked by the word *skin*—a fragment of the Washington Redskins’ controversial name—and set atop the soaring, rocket-powered body of manga character Astro Boy, the head of Chief Wahoo is recontextualized to underscore its absurdity.

While such works as *Uncle Ben’s Log Cabin*, *Superblack*, and *Red Boy* incorporate familiar, relatively recent, and often garish advertising and popular-culture imagery, Hansen has also produced quieter vessels in which the less-widely recognizable imagery is presented in simulated sepia tone to reinforce its historical nature. In *Native Face Jug*, a stubby spouted vessel with a ring handle and prominent joining plates, Hansen connects two historical female portraits to form a single face, half Native American and half European. The haunting hybrid image is elusive as a source of narrative. Does it invoke the line between civilization and savagery in order to expose that distinction as a construct? Is it an indictment of melting pot metaphors of social integration that fail to address the uneasy, forcibly united nature of the American population? Is it an attempt to rectify a historical tradition that has been taken to task for the blind spots perpetuated by Eurocentrism?

Is it more abstract in its compass, reflecting on the fragmented condition of the self, the schizophrenic nature of an identity that is construed in the postmodern sense as a constant product of recontextualization?

The significance of context to the generation of meaning is clearly a central concern of Hansen’s vessels, so it is hardly surprising that he should acknowledge the seminal role of Marcel Duchamp in exposing the work of art as a contextually contingent product rather than an object defined by an un-

changing essence. His mug *What Would Duchamp Do?*—which bears an image of the famous Ready-Made *Fountain* on one side and on the other a portrait of the pioneering conceptual artist embraced by a curling wreath of smoke from his ever-present pipe—in part pays homage to an artistic hero. More important, it provides insight into Hansen’s tendency to use his work only to



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often degrading undertones of names and images that for many fans had previously represented only tradition. Debate continues, even among Native Americans, as to the appropriateness of some aspects of that tradition. In 2012, for example, members of the Spirit Lake Sioux filed suit in an unsuccessful bid to reinstate the University of North Dakota’s team nickname, the Fighting Sioux,



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4–5 *Superblack*, 12½ in. (32 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, glazes, underglazes, oxides, washes, fired to cone 8 in oxidation. 6–7 *Uncle Ben's Log Cabin*, 12½ in. (32 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, glazes, underglazes, oxides, washes, fired to cone 8 in oxidation. 8 *Native Face Jug*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, glazes, underglazes, oxides, washes, iron oxide decal, multiple firings.

hint at potential interpretations rather than employ it as a platform for unequivocal statements about meaning, perspectives, and social issues. The point ultimately concerns the control of meaning. “For me the cup isn’t really a Ready-Made,” he observes, “since there are a few steps involved in creating it. But you could go to the gallery and buy the cup, then treat it as a Ready-Made. It’s meaning is out of my control once it goes to the gallery.”

Implicitly an invitation to the viewer to extemporize meaning from the bits of images that compose Hansen’s art, this confession is simultaneously an acknowledgement that meanings are formed largely through contextualization. Comprehending the derogatory in certain imagery may require a shift in perspective, a circumvention of blind spots that only occurs when the grounds against which that imagery appears have been made strange: as fragmented and disorienting as teapots jerry-rigged from vintage advertising signs, salvaged oil cans, and rusty machinery parts. “We’re constantly encountering information that we’re processing, whether or not we’re aware of it,” Hansen asserts. “You can enjoy these pieces just for their sense of humor, or you can enjoy them because of the *trompe l’oeil* qualities, but they also make you reconsider images that you’ve seen so many times that you don’t really think about what they mean. That’s absolutely the purpose. It’s like the Trojan Horse.”

the author *Glen R. Brown is a professor of art history at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.*



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