

Kim Adams *Bruegel-Bosch Bus*

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KIM ADAMS *BRUEGEL-BOSCH BUS* GIL McELROY

Cars have come to define culture, and the Volkswagen — be it the car (the “bug”) or the van version of the vehicle — has long been a thing of both cultural and political extremes. The progeny of German fascist social experimentation in the 1930s, the “bug” all but shucked off the horrors of its totalitarian origins and, oddly enough, became synonymous thirty-some odd years later with the North American counterculture. The Volkswagen van, stereotypically adorned with flowers and peace symbols, came to be synonymous with social liberation, an inexpensive home on wheels noisily rattling across the continent in search of transcendence and freedom from the tyrannous yolk of the almighty dollar. Funny how Hitler’s totalitarian vision of a “People’s Car” actually became one.

That being said, Kim Adams’s sprawling *Bruegel-Bosch Bus* is a wickedly pointed reminder of the long-suppressed and truly horrific costs of the industrial and technological revolution that made Western culture — and counterculture — possible. Beneath the patina of peace, love, and understanding of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the self-centred consumerism of the 1980s, lurked social totalitarianism and ecological disaster, and with his *Bruegel-Bosch Bus* Adams brings it all home to roost. From virtually every nook, cranny and recess of a decrepit old Volkswagen pickup truck (basically, the familiar van version of the vehicle with a truck bed in back) oozes a riotous world in miniature, spilling out and surrounding its host vehicle like some all-consuming cancerous growth. As the work’s title might suggest, it is hardly an earthly paradise Adams has created. Rather, we are given the hellish version of things. It’s as if Adams has pulled back the thin veneer of Western civilization to expose the festering carcass beneath. Polite it ain’t.

It is not, however, without

humour, however black it may be. Though the vehicle is up on blocks, unable any longer to support itself, it is, indeed, equipped with a driver. Seated behind the steering wheel is a full-size plastic skeleton, about the only component of this entire sculptural assemblage that isn’t in miniature and actually corresponds 1:1 to the scale of the vehicle. Adams has equipped it with a gender: between its legs, tucked up beneath the pelvic bone, sits a small model cannon, it’s long, narrow barrel rising up in a militaristic erection.

Surrounding the aroused skeleton is a portrayal of hell decidedly of twentieth-century humanity’s own making, a miniature construct entirely populated with beings and creatures of contemporary popular culture and department store toy sections. There are the not-unexpected appearances by movie monsters like Godzilla in the guise of plastic toys, but this is really the world of the contemporary action figure; Batman, Robin, and Spiderman all figure within it, as do dolls of characters from blockbuster films like *Toy Story*. A figure of John Lennon even makes an appearance, equated within Adams’s world to World Wrestling Federation figurines because consumerism and mass merchandising make it so.

But there’s more than a broad nod to pop culture going on here. The world of dolls and figurines is but a small part of the microcosm that spews forth from the confines of the bus. Adams takes on issues bigger than fantasies of the Hollywood dream machine, like the very processes and consequences of Western industrialization. Using products that are an integral part of the hobbyist’s world of model railroading — the H/O gauge world of miniature —, Adams has constructed a sprawling apocalyptic landscape where the deterministic world view that served so well for the last two hundred years has utterly broken down. Like some child’s toy railroad run amok, H/O scale railroad lines orbit about the exterior of the VW, linking together scale model industrial buildings, power-generating stations, storage silos, and conveyor belts, all clinging to the



sides of steep hills or mountains coated with the bilious effluents and waste products of the kinds of processes in which the market-driven forces of consumerism transform earth, air, fire, and water into commodities of WWF action figures and the like. Not too far away is the single scene of overt resistance to the socioeconomic progress of it all. A miniature roadway and train track are blocked by equally miniature overturned cars, sandbags, and shipping containers. Armoured vehicles and ranks of tiny police dressed in full riot gear or on horseback advance upon the scene and the few dissenters who await them. Resistance is, of course, futile.

Still, it occurs and even finds an art world reiteration in Adams’s microcosm; a toy dump truck unloading its wastes over one of the cliffsides echoes Robert Smithson’s *Glue Pour*, a piece he did in Vancouver in 1969. And Adams’s reworked narrative of the development of the Western industrial world includes the point at which abandoned industrial sites and warehouses have been occupied by artists seeking inexpensive studios and accommodations. It is evidenced here by Adams’s inclusion of miniature works of art — some Richard Serra steel sculptures, a

floppy, outsized Claes Oldenburg hamburger resting on a railroad flat car, and some enormous pills that can only suggest some of the work of General Idea — parked along the terraces of a scale-model urban locale.

Bruegel-Bosch Bus is an enormously messy metaphor for planetary degeneration as the devouring maw of industrialization razes the planet and, cancerously, begins to turn in upon itself in a frenzy of auto-consumption (no pun intended). Adams is into the fourth year of a projected ten-year cycle of work on the piece, and so here, at about the midway point of things, we are proffered a “state of the disunion” message, a cheeky glimpse into the utter rending of societies and cultures.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton has purchased *Bruegel-Bosch Bus*, apparently planning to give it a room of its own. There is a clear risk, here. To solidify the process of *Bruegel-Bosch Bus*, to immutably fix it as a work of art, would be to rob the work of the bulk of its impact. The whole point of a cancer, after all, is its very growth. ■

Kim Adams: *Bruegel-Bosch Bus*
Oakville Galleries
Oakville, Ontario
May 5, 2001–August 12, 2001

Kim Adams, *Bruegel-Bosch Bus*, 2001. Work in progress. Mixed media. Variable dimensions. Collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Photo courtesy of the artist.