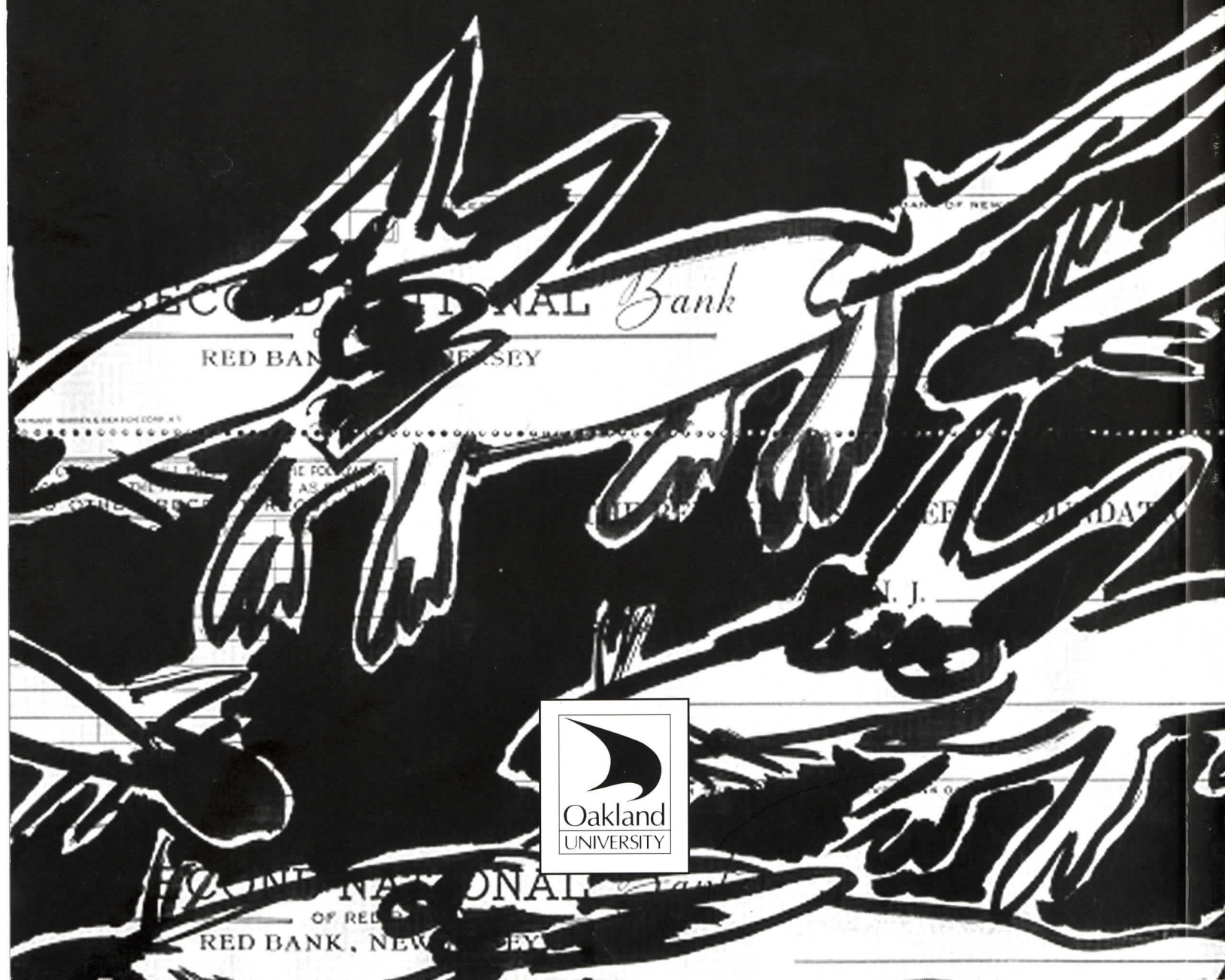


GANGRENE CITY



No Joy in Mudville



An Exhibition by
Eric Mesko
Meadow Brook Art Gallery
Oakland University





No Joy in Mudville



An Exhibition
by
Eric Mesko

October 18 - November 17, 2002



Above: *Quee Quee*, 1998, wood, 12 inches H, Collection of Al Hebert

Previous page left: from the *No Joy in Mudville Series*, 2002, ink on paper, 13 x 10 inches

Previous page right: from the *Big D Book*, 1990, ink on leaves of the Bibliografia Nazionale Italiana, 1962

Front endpaper: *Oils Wars*, traveling exhibition, 1991

Opposite: from the *Gangrene City Book*, 1990, ink on leaves of The Second National Bank Checkbook, c. 1950

Cover: *The Dance of Death: The Mudville Nine vs. Al Qaeda*, 2002, oil stick and latex on paper, 38 x 52 inches



Battlefields and Baseball

When I became an artist I wanted to "be an artist." I've heard some people say, "I'm a painter, I'm a sculptor, etc.," but I wanted to do everything – I try to be an artist at all times.

Eric Mesko Interview, June 2002

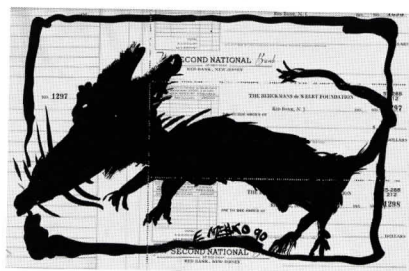
The art of Eric Mesko evokes a powerful sense of memory, place and ideology. These are the chief themes that reveal themselves and the revelation is often abrupt, comic and urgent. His images and structures transmit an emphatic polemic vision. Mesko is an artist on a mission and his vanguard, postindustrial production presents a cultural critique of western immoderation. He is also a nonconformist whose work cannot be neatly placed into a single context, and he is delighted by this dichotomy. Defining Eric Mesko's raw output is a formidable task. Despite the futility inherent in classifying his oeuvre, any critical analysis of his work must first attempt to place it contextually within the contemporary art scene because he operates within this milieu. To accomplish this endeavor it is constructive to describe the outward appearance of his art, but before that, let us briefly examine the contemporary scene.

There are three chief areas of focus in contemporary art. First, there is what can best be described as virtuous academic formalism. Such work is serious and has a considerable critical base born of the orthodox structure of a rigorous institutionalized education. A suitable term for it is *High Art*. The only fitting venue for this sort of work is the "white cube" of the museum/gallery. Like all new art its audience is privileged, but that of *High Art* is especially so because of its esoteric anodyne appearance. Since it bears no resemblance to traditional easel painting or sculpture, an uninitiated audience would not immediately identify it as art. In a 1997 interview with David Sylvester, Gilbert and George put it like this:

We saw that all those sculptures that the other chaps were doing could not be taken outside the front door of St. Martin's [art college, London], that they would cease to live at the moment, they would become invisible to the thousands and thousands of the fantastic people from all over the world that walk up and down the Charring Cross Road.

Second, is the school of *Low Art* or *Lite Art*—Gilbert and George were precursors to this tendency, which is encapsulated in work that is dissident,

ephemeral and shocking. It invariably presents a basic unambiguous visual punch line with few or no layers of meaning and gets its point across quickly, removing the need for contemplation (you get the joke and move on to the next one). This category has done less well in America than in Europe, but the latter is more nude-body-friendly, sarcastic and cynical in its attitudes towards propriety.



Its success is defined by its crude, aggressive, anti-intellectual popular appeal. The art is not very commercially viable, so the artists sell their celebrity by making public appearances, often acting tastelessly, which has become their *modus operandi*. Having shed the respectable veil of critical theory and delved into the slippery realm of sex, gossip and celebrity, from the outset, *Lite Art's* camera-friendly, vulgar popularity has stirred up considerable

media interest, particularly in the tabloids, predominantly in the centralized, intensified London art scene where artists like Damien Hirst, Sara Lucas and Tracy Emin are household names. *Lite Art* wallows in saucy working class bonhomie and vulgarity, but its growing audience still remains chiefly middle-class and privileged. *Lite Art* is perfect for the busy on the go, innuendo savvy, no-time-for-theory, urban professional. When the *Sensation* exhibition crossed the Atlantic to the Brooklyn Museum, it was so steeped in body fluids, nudity and an all-knowing irony that it immediately became mired in a banal conservative backlash.

The third category of contemporary art, *Imagism*, for want of a better term, is represented by the relentless ebb and flow of expressionism versus realism, or the former bleeding into the latter, or vice versa, because depending on the period, vast numbers of typecast artists exploit the now antique furrows of figuration and abstraction. The century of Expressionism is barely over and the opposing and complementary dogmas of the real and the expressed are now an ingrained part of our visual culture. However, this tendency, in its various

manifestations, with its heavy reliance on the traditional hierarchies of painting and sculpture, has curtailed its avant-garde supremacy. In America, particularly Middle America, with all its slow regional permutations, *Imagism* is firmly entrenched and prevails more than any other trend. Unlike *Lite Art*, it is ripe for extended contemplation; one is supposed to plant oneself (as in front of a Rothko) and ponder at length the intricacies of its refined rawness, with all its aesthetic machinations intact.

High Art and *Lite Art* professionals, awash in the media/design circus that now defines the art world, have superseded graying, bluechip *Imagist* Neo-expressionists and realists and are the dauphins and pretenders in the art world of the new millennium.

Where do the distressed, dilapidated handmade forms of Eric Mesko fall in all this? *Studio Mesko* is a low-tech cottage industry and his work has the markings of being peculiarly coaxed into existence with wood, paint, nails and string. Any attempt to place him is going to be awkward because he scorns critical theory, abhors vulgarity, and when he paints it is with all the finesse of a Mexican sign-painter

— drive down the Gulf of Mexico and you will see the cheerful archetypes, heavily outlined in roadside *costa del sol* colors, advertising fishing, restaurants and scuba diving. His paintings — fish, flags, soldiers, which are emblematic and illuminating, are more steeped in the tradition of cartoon comics than twentieth century art. Nonetheless, the influence of German Expressionism is palpable, particularly in his oil drum paintings. Since Mesko is unmoved by *High Art* and all its critical posturing — not to mention its use of advanced synthetic materials, which he also disdains, and since he is essentially dissident and unconventional, his connection with *Low Art* appears promising until one is confronted by the artist's views on propriety. Mesko is no prude, but he has no use for public, intimate confessions or anything that would be inappropriate for children. Mesko falls outside the rigid orthodoxy of modernism primarily because of his unorthodox use of materials (recalling Kurt Schwitters), and one begins to see a connection with proto-pop artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, particularly in his rejection of traditional art supplies and appropriation of side of the road resources — an integral part of his creative process is his scavenger hunt for lumber and stone. "I'm one of the greatest world authorities on the back alleys of Detroit," Rauschenberg juxtaposed traditional and non-traditional materials and processed them within a highly informed Modernist agenda. However, Mesko isn't interested in transforming the significance of an object. Like Johns, in this respect, he is intent upon keeping intact the emblematic integrity of the objects he manufactures — an alligator remains an alligator. He uses materials to produce archetypal objects (houses, boats, fish). He does



not want to transform them into something else. Even considering Rauschenberg's neo-Dadaist leanings, he was/is essentially driven by aesthetics, Mesko on the other hand is driven by polemics.

Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, outlines the theory that knowledge has fractured so acutely that a distinct manifesto is no longer practical, rather knowledge has become shattered into isolated fragments, too numerous and convoluted to construct a single unifying philosophy. The filter of postmodern eclecticism is perhaps the most apt context in which to begin an analysis of Mesko's art.

It might appear convenient, on a local level, to label Mesko as a Post-Cass-Corridor artist because of the postindustrial objet-trouvé aspect of his work and the legitimacy offered by his Wayne State MFA, moreover he has lived in Detroit for thirty years, but associating him with the Cass Corridor group is ultimately impractical. He simply is not that interested in abstraction and his work has too great a sense of history, pictography and politics to fit into the careless matrix of Cass Corridor formalism; Mesko may be circumspect when it comes to critical theory but not so thematically.

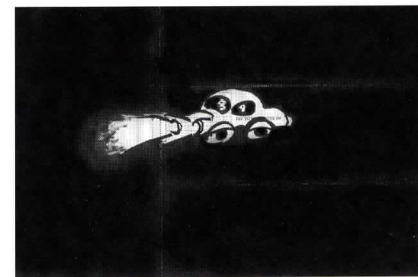
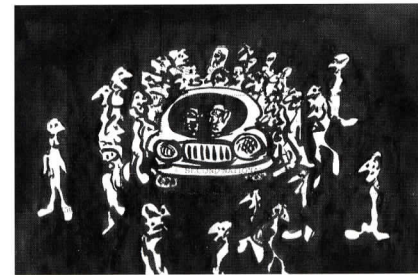
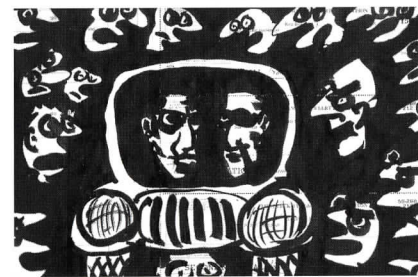
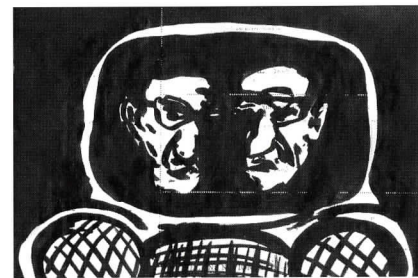
Having failed to place Mesko neatly within the tendencies of an admittedly suspect system of artistic classification, the attempt has nonetheless helped us begin to see that his work is not as straightforward as we perhaps might have first imagined. The initial stark impression (the first contact with his furious cobbled dioramas) rapidly leaches layers of meaning that demand a closer examination. What is revealed, and what is at the heart of Mesko's visual exploration, is the nature, and contradictions inherent when confronting the various models of American identity. Such a preoccupation is pointed and particularly germane amid America's recent identity crisis: America the brave, the avenger, world policeman, innocent victim, corporate bandit (corporate grifter) or head-in-the-sand isolationist — our postmodern vulnerability has never been more palpable.

Artist activists, like Mesko, make the art world nervous because their production is difficult to market. Agitprop is a hard pill to swallow and Mesko, while never vindictive, does not temper his message to make it more palatable. The message advances austerity (anti-materialism and consumer downsizing), patriotism (of the winter variety involving personal sacrifice for one's country and the greater good) and common sense (challenging greed and stupidity while advocating doing the right thing), all difficult concepts to market to a privileged audience. The white cube system favors ambiguous anonymity — the less a work of art reveals, the more mystique it exudes; art with a certain *je ne sais quoi* is impeccable in

this respect. Mesko has the wrong pedigree. His art is the equivalent of shooting bull's-eyes every time; he flaunts his target, strategy and intent. The gallery system has never fully allowed him access (yet another reason he can claim outsider status). He has had to be creative in finding venues to show his work, and to his credit he has had varying degrees of success with non-profit spaces, shop fronts and museums. But it is not just the gallery system that is ambivalent. Because Mesko is so candid and his work so rough-hewn and overtly political, while he has achieved a degree of critical success (and been shown at the Detroit Institute of Arts), he has never fully consolidated his position in the community. Artists like Mesko require a defining infrastructure in which to present their work. All community artists recognize this trade-off: a community artist cannot be elitist. Tyree Guyton, for example, has been very successful in mobilizing the community. Comparing the two is appropriate because both are junkyard artists with a political agenda who, while never lewd, are always outspoken. *The Heidelberg Project* is an authentic brand name backed by the legitimacy of a grassroots political machine. Mesko may be more guarded, but his work is just as powerful. The art world in Detroit is too small and intimate to produce too many stars, nonetheless this exhibition provides Mesko with ample opportunity to distill and project his considerable vision. The art of Detroit is said to be raw and regional, yet the gallery system has always favored High Art aesthetics or anodyne realism over garage art; the rough houses are generally left in the alley.

At some point, scrutinizing Mesko's work through the lens of American folk art becomes inevitable. The supposition that he is a folk artist might take seed were it not that he works firmly in the contemporary system, even if that system has only been partially supportive. He has also had the benefit of an extensive art education, but his work and lifestyle are eccentric enough to plant the *folk* hypothesis, especially with his post-

dustbowl persona, idolization of Hank Williams and shantytown sanguinity. Mesko's work has the unaffected simplic-



from the *Gangrene City Book*, 1990

ity of rusty nails hammered into unfinished wood and a ramshackle down-home frankness, but it is neither naïve

nor primitive. Nor is it entirely benign; it has a bite and certainly it is not decorative; at its core it is more concerned with ideas than notions of beauty - more cerebral than retinal. His set pieces embody no folkloric tradition, other than a poignant nostalgia for the quasi-folkloric, post-war idyll of the *American Dream* (which expired sometime around 1968).

Despite this longing, paradoxically, the *American Dream* presents Mesko with one more dichotomy; it is not a safe haven because he prefers austerity to materialism. He is very critical of luxury without purpose. He is outspoken on this - he will tell you that we've gotten soft, that we put materialism before morality. His work is his chief means of expressing the angst he feels and it is always consciously aimed to challenge political complacency and foolishness. The target can fluctuate, but invariably it is within the parameters of *the system* - *the administration* and its bureaucracy - and the inexorable greedy competitiveness of human nature. If Mesko respects anything, he respects common sense, but when common sense is lacking, watch out for his apoplectic wrath.

Eric Mesko's work is at once a vituperative cultural critique, carrying with it a commanding sense of outrage, but it also broadcasts a biting mockery which although never base, is nonetheless completely without shame. When one looks at Mesko's artistic parade, one cannot help but construe a mélange of contradictions. It is postmodern, yet historical; respectful, yet satirical; serious, yet droll; clever, yet eccentric; iconic, yet iconoclastic. Fail to appreciate one of its characteristics and it will lash out and ridicule your neglectfulness. Mesko's art is like the Italian economy, which is said to resemble a vast floating platform culled and cobbled together over generations out of numerous smaller craft. Try to sink it - torpedo it, and the affected part will simply drop off into the ocean, but the rest will steam off into the haze to survive another day.

Mesko is a propagandist, but there is another dimension; Mesko teaches art to children different days of



Conceptual B Movie: Attack of the Art Monsters, 1995, polychrome, wood
Constructed for the *Interventions* exhibition, Detroit Institute of Arts
Collection of William Bostick

the week at different schools. He works both in the inner city and the suburbs. His conviction about teaching art to children is powerful and persuasive. He argues that there are too many adults with no visual culture. When Mesko teaches, his mission is the cultural enlightenment of children, making them visually aware and visually articulate, and he wants it to be fun and serious at the same time. This fun/serious agenda (an-

other intriguing contradiction) not only permeates his vision of teaching, it also informs his work. Another reason that he has sometimes been frowned upon by the gallery system is that his cheerful silliness (smiling fish, cartoon soldiers, frolicsome flags) has been mistaken for lowbrow whimsicality. The fun in his work is always tempered by seriousness. Mesko knows the message is grave. He makes art about life and death -

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about survival, but his sense of mockery is too ingrained to be suppressed and he allows its presence with alacrity. Teaching children has aided Mesko's sense of humor and humanity. He describes himself as an insider/outsider, but he is essentially an artist/activist, and his art making process percolates into his teaching.

Mesko is incensed one moment, scornful with mirth the next. Only in his meditative work, where he honors a particular epoch in American history, does he permit himself to decelerate into reflective, deferential awe. The period from 1945 to 1950, when his father came home from the Pacific War - when men gathered in bait shops, took their sons fishing and talked baseball scores, is golden and hallowed. But never far off is the stinging political delta force, locked and loaded, mustering Mesko's fixation with challenging all forms of stupidity and greed.

Superficially, it might be safe to assume that Mesko is a sculptor who works primarily in the area of installation art, but his graphic art outnumbers his three-dimensional work. His marks, often wrought with brush, ink, watercolor and oil stick, are insistent and sure and he works with great speed, consciously aware of the power of the rectangle. Mesko is also a decoy, weathervane, bait sign artist, as already implied, mirroring the great traditions of American folk art. Many of his works, particularly his sculptures, find their source in the realm of insignia, crests and emblems; his use of signifiers, flags, decoys, vanes, is at times compulsive. As a painter, he makes robust panel after panel exploring image/themes in rapidly executed, graphic house paint. He is particularly fond of the fish image. To Mesko the fish is not a sacred motif, but it is nonetheless loaded and evocative. It is an image of homesickness, a hankering for the hooked lure, a metaphor for the loss or hope of youth. He also uses the fish as an educational aid when he teaches. He understands the benign utility of the fish; it is accessible to anyone - fish are user-friendlier than complicated four legged mammals. He is also enchanted by the American flag, but it holds no high art allure - not in the sense it would to Jasper Johns. Unlike the profane emblem of the fish, to Mesko the flag is sacred, for he is a patriot and is very quick to define his patriotism. His devotion is that of Thomas Paine - a true believer in liberty will not shrink from service and will defend it no matter what. For Mesko the flag is an ensign for the people and the way of life embodied in the constitution, but he also likes its graphic effortlessness - its redness, whiteness and blueness, such things are what absorb him in his numerous mantraesque flag paintings. This sort of work helps him keep up his artistic morale.

Mesko lived in Bermuda for a spell as a child. He remembers singing *God Save the King*, and speaks fondly of the Union Jack. His fascination with emblematic imagery is inseparable from his immersion in the pomp and regimentation of military life. He spent three years in the Marine Corp. His father was a lieutenant colonel in the marines, hence his many

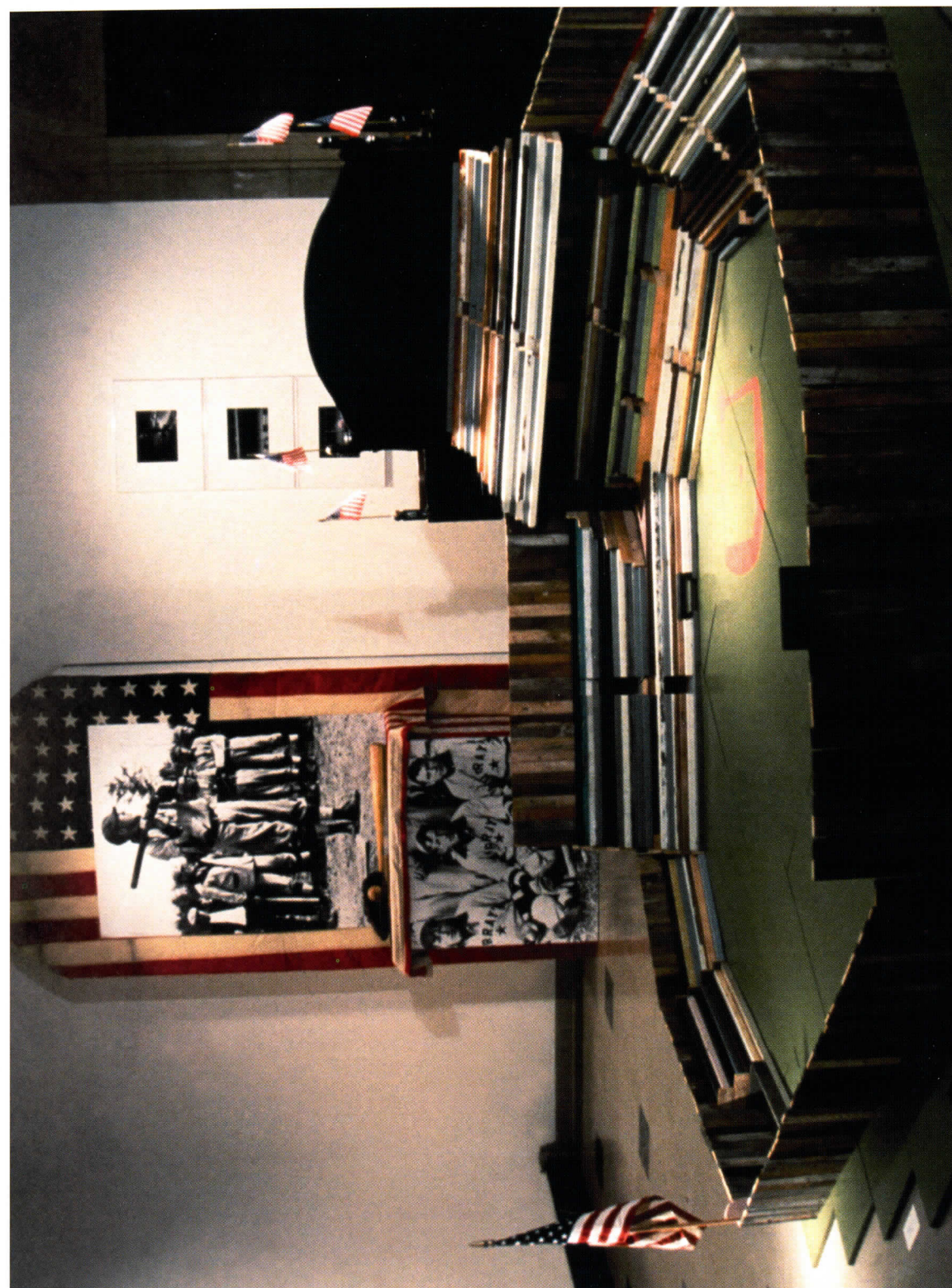
moves to numerous military bases and his sojourn in Bermuda. He often talks about the absolute necessity of asserting one's individuality and yet paradoxically, deeply etched into his psyche exists an overriding sense of duty. Duty and honor is never far below the surface. Mesko's sense of ethics permeates through all his art.

The military, old glory and cowboys are mustered and appear often in his parade pieces. The "parade" form, perhaps another reflection upon his military years (which essentially lasted from his birth until he left the Corp at age twenty-four), is a recurring device in his political work. Figures on horseback marching inexorably forward, also recall Mesko's fascination with cinema - a cast of thousands on a reduced scale.

In this exhibition, Eric Mesko's work is divided into two fields; they are clear and conspicuously different: the field of baseball and that of war. Using the matrix of right angle and square, in the permutations of the baseball diamond and the delta of a B2 bomber, Mesko summons two versions of American Culture. First the physical camaraderie of sportsmanship - and nostalgia for the enigmatic *American Dream*. Second the mantle of being the last great power and policeman to the world. Or to put it simply: memory and ethics. Both are apt, informing headings for his interpretation of the struggle of American life post-September 11.

To call Mesko an installation artist makes him ill at ease, but any such pigeonholing makes him uneasy. Most of his three-dimensional work is ephemeral and deals with a time sensitive issue. Invariably his large-scale work is produced for a specific location. For example, his *Conceptual B Movie: Attack of the Art Monsters*, 1995, was conceived in response to the Detroit Institute of Arts, *Interventions* exhibition and was made in retort to the work of David Smith and Alexander Calder. In the same year, Mesko constructed his *Mudville, USA*, at the Center Galleries in Detroit, which evokes the memory of his baseball-playing grandfather and great uncles who played on the Pennsylvania steel mill circuit. This piece, which is a "life-long work in progress," makes a reprise appearance in its upgraded, enlarged manifestation at the Meadow Brook Art Gallery. Both these major works are examples of the artist delving into memory. The B2 bomber pays homage to his love of B-movies, pulp imagery, decisive action and his premonition of World War III. On the other hand, *Mudville* is Mesko's *Paradise Lost*. That two such incongruous entities can coexist is not so remarkable; think of America during World War II - a land of plenty - a mishmash of mobilization, bravery, movies, swing, sacrifice and mass production. The elements of memory and nostalgia are seminal themes for Mesko.

Topical, timely and thought-provoking, in December 1990, Mesko's MFA graduate show *Oil Wars*, opened just before the outbreak of the Gulf War. In September of that year, traveling to Pittsburgh, he loaded his car with oil sticks and paper, intent on exploring some ideas for his upcoming show.



Mudville, U.S.A. and Shrine to the Great Game, 1995 - 2002 mixed media
Installation shot from *Play Ball*, Center Galleries
Detroit, Michigan, 1995

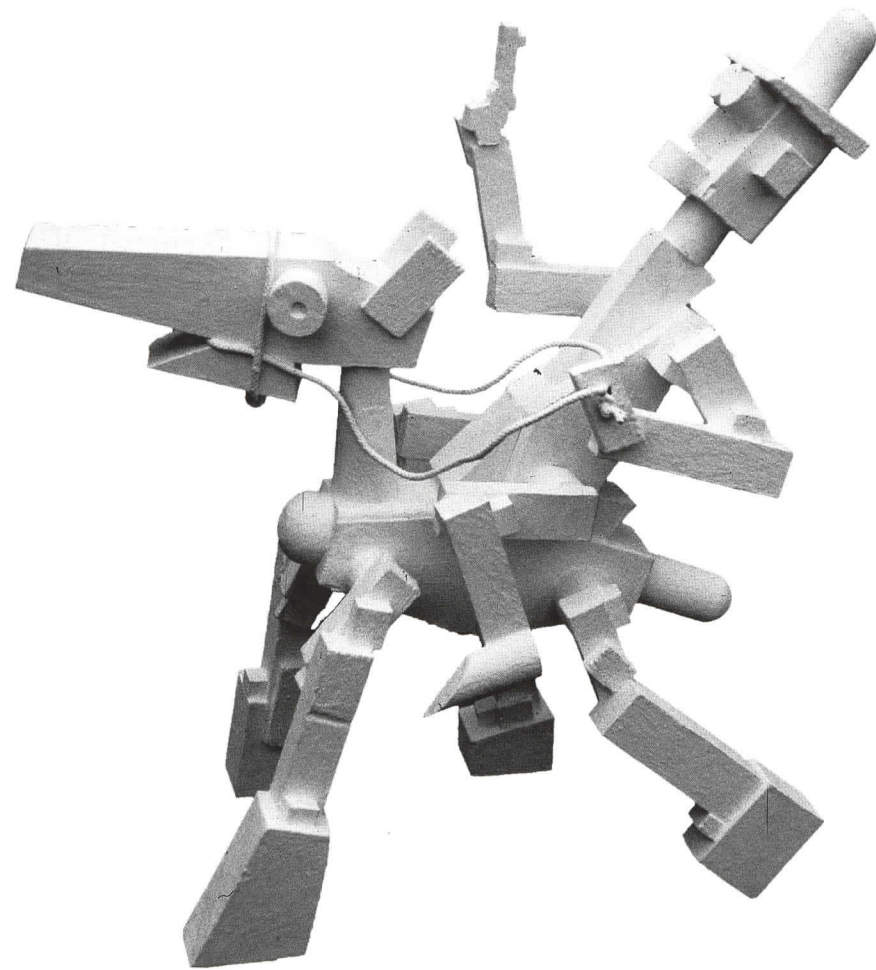
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Driving through the back roads of Ohio, he pulled up next to a rusty fifty-five gallon oil drum – he'd been seeing them on the road all day, and suddenly, thinking of the recent invasion of Kuwait, he decided impulsively to do an oil stick drawing of a helmeted soldier and gun, right there, on the surface of the drum. This initial marking of territory further motivated him to temporarily appropriate over a hundred and fifty oil drums across Ohio, Pennsylvania and Southern Michigan with his pictographs. A friend photographed many of them before driving off and this became the genesis for the theme of his exhibition. The resulting final show involved a life size tank, an oil derrick and numerous pieces of graphic work.

When Mesko is commissioned to make largescale sculptures, since his principle material is wood, even these "permanent" works, like the oil drum paintings, are meant to weather and age gracefully.

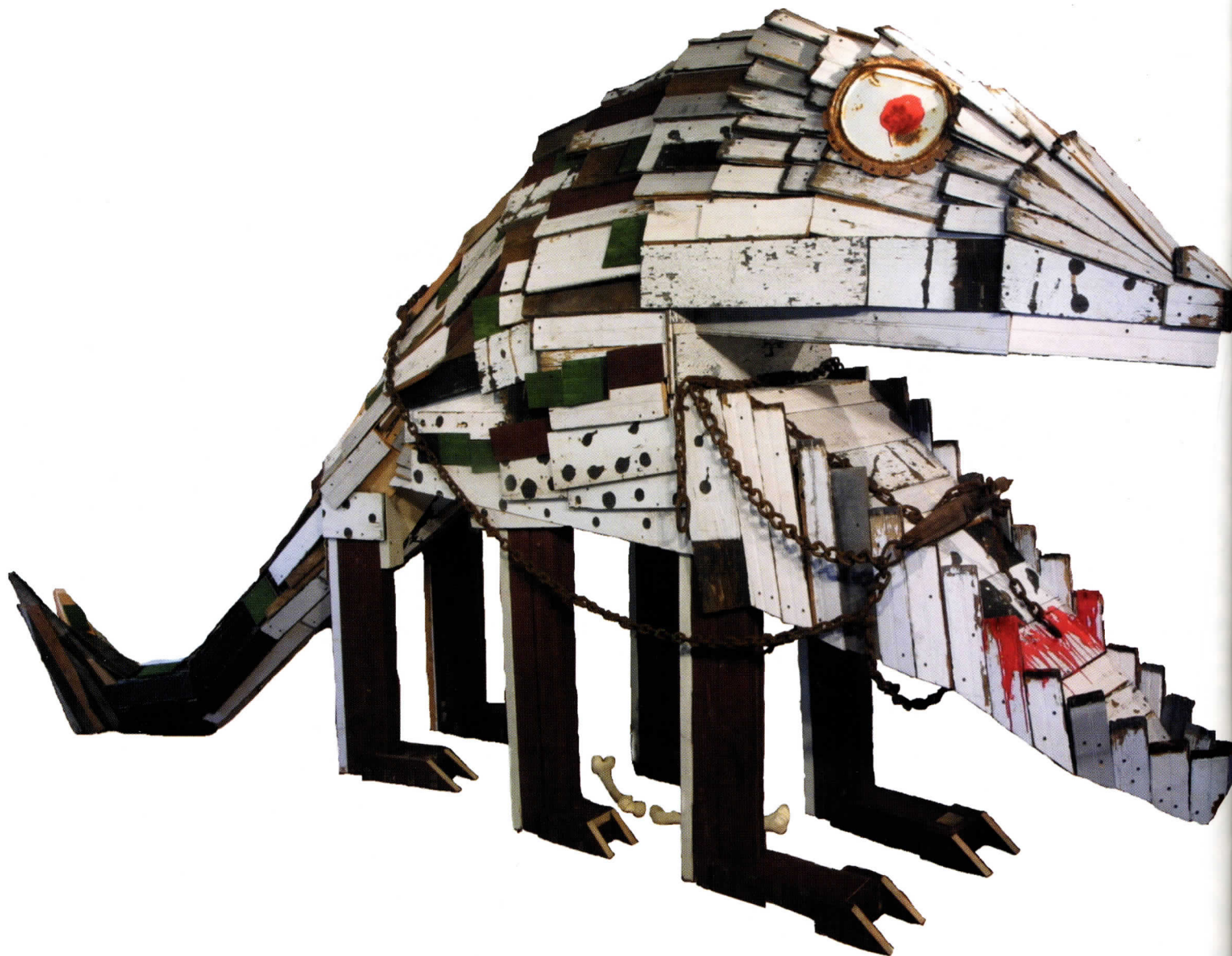
His work, with its preoccupation with tanks, planes and soldiers evoke boyishness; it also evokes childhood dioramas; its dogged determination and attention to detail is wrapped up with the wholesomeness of model making. Mesko's chief concern is always authenticity – does the piece tell the truth, but he is less concerned with realism in an illusionistic sense than with including every shred of salient information. His work's authenticity also lies in its acute sense of place; his output is quintessentially American, its currency Americana.

Some artists work in fits and starts. Mesko never stops. A major part of his process is collecting. He collects books, videos, flags, Hank Williams records, stone, wood, bricks, magazines and newspapers; these are his materials (he refers to it as junk, but values its intellectual and aesthetic richness); finding this material is as much a way of life as hammering out his work in his various studio spaces (he needs a lot of space). The Mesko brand name is not manufactured. It is an authentic convolution, the result of appropriation, accumulation, history and the process of finding a way to get his sense of honor, sense of outrage, turmoil and process of production out into an expression of reminiscence and forewarning.



The Uvalde Kid as The Ghost Rider, 1998, painted wood, 14 inches H
Left: from the *No Joy in Mudville Series*, 2002, ink on paper, 13 x 10 inches





Al Qaeda, 2002, wood & mixed media, 78 x 174 inches

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Interview

Dick Goody: *When you left the Marines in 1967 what were your thoughts on being an artist?*

Eric Mesko: By that time I was ready for college, I'd been thinking about being an artist for five years. I hadn't been ready when I got out of high school.

When you served overseas, did it change your perception of America?

You can't go to a place as poor as Asmara in Ethiopia and not get something out of it. When you see the poverty, filth, poor hygiene and health it does have an effect on you, but my opinion of America didn't change.

In high school were you more interested in comics or literature?

Low culture as opposed to high culture? (Laughs) I combined them - I did very poorly in high school because I couldn't stand it, but I always had a paperback book in my back pocket - Steinbeck, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Graham Greene and the classics - lots of classics - Greek plays - Homer was one of my favorites.

Were cartoons part of your milieu or something forbidden?

No, I loved cartoons from day one. I can remember it was always part of me. I got into political cartoons very early - I had a book

on David Low, the British political cartoonist - political cartoons from WWII. That had a big impact on me. The Donald Duck comic books were also on my reading list.

Is there a difference between you picking up a piece of wood and picking up a pencil and paper?

They're the same thing. When I became an artist I wanted to "be an artist." I've heard some people say, "I'm a painter, I'm a sculptor, etc.," but I wanted to do everything - I try to be an artist at all times.

You don't use traditional art supplies - does oil paint and canvas and so on, disable your means of working?

No, they're so expensive and I couldn't afford them for so long that I just naturally went to cheaper materials. And, I like the immediacy, spontaneity and lack of pretense - the lack of need to waste that \$50 tube of oil paint. I don't waste, but I'm not afraid of my materials.

But the cost is not beyond your means now.

Not now, but I hate the consumer world so much I won't give them the satisfaction of getting my money unless I absolutely have to have their product. I avoid the art stores, hardware stores - all the stores - the corporate world. I use that as the first line of defense. There's more than one war going on right now. There's the war against international terrorism and the war declared on the average human being by the corporations. They want every dime we've got.

Does your work automatically take up a moral position?

If I'm working in a serious vein, yes. It's a progressive, "be kind to your fellow man philosophy," of approaching art that has a social context to it. But not all my work is political; I try to do work that is amusing too.

How have you survived as an artist?

I didn't need much money from an early age. I learned how to adapt. I'm an adaptor and a survivor. A lot of things tried to close in on me when I was young. I learned how to defend myself and I have survived as an individual - as an artist. I'd like to be able to travel more, but not at the expense of changing the way I live, and no, I don't want any donations because I'm too independent! I want to survive on my own. I've got what I need so my sense of independence lets me take care of myself.

When you got your M.F.A., what was different about you than when you left the Marines?

Maturity. Maturity is something that most people need a good dose of to adjust to life. I think that very few people have a real mature outlook when they're young. Not everyone is Alexander the Great. I was on the road for two years after High School and then three years in the Marines. They were good experiences and



they helped me see a clearer path.

Your work often evokes an idolized memory of America - a kind of virtuous down home nostalgia - it has an innocent good old boy twang. To what do you attribute it?

I grew up in the last era in America where idealism still meant something. I still remember some things from the late 40's - things that hung-on from the 19th century. The way my grandparents lived, the way my great aunts and uncles lived and their values and codes of conduct all made a great impression on me as a very young person.

What about the ambience?

The ambience of the world at that time, of my world, the little towns I lived in - the little communities - was so different. The neighborhood store was totally different. It was like a little department store. The innocence of all that is lost but it wasn't a fake innocence because in the late forties there was still a lot of idealism in the country and somehow that was important to me from an early age. My Dad and my closest Uncle were in the Marines - even my Aunt was a Captain in the Marines, so patriotism, duty, sense of country - they weren't false ideals - they were truths taught early.

Often, your work has a sort of ramshackle look - a bankering nostalgic for the long demolished general store. There's a sort of homesickness. What is it that you are trying to get back to?



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In the late forties, the early fifties, a sign by the side of the road was homemade. Now every one looks exactly the same. Before, if you went to a different community, you saw different kinds of things, different types of little artifacts made from wood and stone. I make my sculpture out of the same materials - "real" wood - not plastic. When I use stone, it's real limestone. I use real brick - not cinderblocks. I don't use broken pieces of concrete, but real stuff that has a texture to it - real wood, real stone, and I like that. When I was young objects had uniqueness. Today it's all the same. You've got a plastic cow. You've got a plastic goat in your yard and so does someone else, ten miles down the road. Back then, everything was different from anything else - it was folk art. Today it's all commercialized.

Your work delves into Americana. There's a strong evocation of the Great Depression. There are certain artists who strike me in a similar way - Woody Guthrie, Jack Kerouac - boho artists. Is this a true reading?

Yeah, and Hank Williams. The depression really didn't affect me directly, I was too young, but my grandparents talked about it. It changed their lives totally and I was affected by their stories. I grew up just after WWII. I was affected by the war very dramatically because of all of the military people in my family and where I lived. I was affected by the depression because I remember my Grandparents and my Mom and Dad talking about the problems they'd had. And I was aware of the fact that whatever you've got can vanish quickly - and it's better not to think that you must have more than you need, or want, because then you won't have to give up as much. If you can adjust - live with a smaller amount - you don't need the rest.

Austerity rather than materialism?

Yes - make do! Can do! Do it!

I also see a connection to artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Kienholz and Joseph Cornell. There's definitely a neo-Dadaist connection. How important are these artists to you?

Well they're not ones that I would pick out as having strong influences on me. I like Cornell's little boxes. I like Calder, Pollock, Red Grooms, and lately I've found H.C. Westermann. I was amazed by how much his work appealed to me and how much we seemed to be in each other's head. Then I found out that he was in the Marines in World War II.

Which artists were being bandied about when you were in college?

Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, these were the ones that I liked that were talked about most. Thomas Hart Benton had a show at the D.I.A. - Robert Wilbert (Wayne State University professor and painter) talked about him quite a bit and we were aware of what a great artist he was - he was one of Pollock's main teachers. I like Benton a lot. He's probably the best of that regionalist group. But I also like John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood.

You're talking about "pure" American artists. What about Europeans?

Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello - Renaissance artists. Michelangelo's my favorite - the *Last Judgment*, the heroic scale of it - the church and Michelangelo's counter attack against the reformation. The scope of it! Right above the altar wall, which

wasn't common. Michelangelo put the mouth of Hell right in front of the Pope's face - the gaping mouth of Hell with demons - Michelangelo laid this on him. So when I'm painting a fish on a board, I'm thinking, "What would Michelangelo say if he was standing here behind me?"

Has teaching art to children for fifteen years softened your cynicism about the art world or has it had the opposite effect?

It's given me more patience - more idealism. It's made me a little less cynical about human beings, and made me aware of the spontaneity at the heart of most successful art. The spontaneity that children bring to their art is exceptional. I try to capture that. It's absent in a lot of art. I try to start off with a sort of spontaneous eruption or activity or act, or whatever, and then shift it into the focus I want. Because they're so young, kids have an outlook on life, which is based on the fact that they haven't been hit on the head a hundred times.

And also on the desire for instant gratification.

Instant gratification but also they're more spontaneous. I am amazed at how quickly some of them start their projects - they rip into it - their eyes light up and wham, they start. I like that quality.

Once you said, "I don't preach, but as a teacher, I can pass on some of my philosophies and have some effect." Can you précis those philosophies: what's the Mesko Manifesto?

I'm trying to pass on a lack of pretension and a sense of sincerity. When I get kids for the first time, I'm well aware what their experience is. You can imagine someone saying: "We're going to draw a potted plant today," and that's it - they don't get any more than that. But I put a potted plant in front of them, talk to them about the plant, talk to them about what other artists have done, depending on their age - I don't overload them - we talk about how beautiful the colors are. I show them how we can end up with something that's more than just this one little project. We start off with pencil, we go to crayons, we go to watercolors, then to house paint. We work on the project for a while and then something else comes out of it. My philosophy is: "Try your best, do your best, be proud of who you are, try to do something that you'd be proud to show your mom, your dad, your guardian." And I'm constantly talking about the need to focus, to think about what you're doing while you do it, and to try to be a good person with the other kids around you by not bothering them - but actually helping them. If some kid says, "He's copying off me!" then I say, "You're the teacher, you're helping him, don't be jealous about it."

Do you see yourself as a contemporary artist?

Well, I'm painting now and I'm making sculpture now. Other people are working in somewhat the same field or vein so I don't feel isolated or out of place. I see catalogs from major art shows in New York - the Whitney Biennial. I go to museums, galleries, art shows and I see some things in my vein of art. In that sense I'm contemporary. But I also go farther back for my inspiration. I'm trying to keep alive a tradition of the individual - of relying on your own resources - the kind of enchanting qualities that used to be present in comics and film.

So what's changed in terms of visual art and mass culture?

What's the detrimental thing that's happened?

Sameness - I think if you went back fifty years you'd find more individuality being expressed, as a whole. Now everything's gone generic, most things are very formulaic, very consistent with everything else that's going on. The need to conform is incredibly strong.

Why do think people want to conform?

The closer you're packed in with people, the more you conform. When I was young, the whole world had less than half the population it has now, it's more than doubled in my lifetime. So that means that everywhere there are twice as many people! We're on top of one another - someday the whole world will be Calcutta.

The great themes of the human condition: mind, body, reproduction and death seem absent from your work. Do these themes not interest you?

Obviously you haven't seen my big watercolor: *The Creation of the Universe; the Birth of the Sun, the Moon and the Stars*. It's not in all my work, but it's in there a lot.

You're an obsessive collector of movies. How significant is Hollywood in your work and the way you think?

I've loved Hollywood since I was a kid - not just Hollywood - Bollywood in India and Cinecittà in Rome. I love the movies. Film is one of the highest art form of the twentieth century - at its best, a lot of stinkos out there, but at its best...

Any cravings to go and make a movie?

I've made a few videos. You know that guy Rodriguez? He made his movie (*El Mariachi*) for seven thousand dollars. Give me seven grand and six months off and I'll make a movie.

Some people define art in terms of what it is suppose to accomplish. For example, art is supposed to be radical, serious, surprising, etc. What do you hope your work accomplishes?

I view art as the main expression of individuality in the world. When I was young, before I got out of high school, being an individual was difficult - the Catholic church, my parents, living on Marine bases - the priests, the nuns - all crushing my individuality - they stated that out loud! All that pressure made me want to assert my individuality. Poetry, literature, the arts - painting and sculpture - I saw all those things as the strongest expression of independence.

Individuality versus the mob - what's your conception of the masses, who are they and are they the ones that you want to reach?

To me the masses are the people that don't have whatever it takes to become individuals. They're sheep - followers - they follow through conforming consumerism. I want to appeal to anyone who's interested. But I'm not interested in educating uneducable masses. I've taught adult classes and children's classes. The pay rate is going to have to go way up to get me to teach adults anymore. At least kids have some hope of becoming individuals. Most of the adults that I've taught are "already" part of the collective and no matter what they "think" they're doing, they're not breaking out of that mold.

So let's imagine a room full of individuals looking at your work. Do you want to inspire people or do you want to

challenge them as a prelude to raising their consciousness?

(Laughs) Both, but my strongest interest is not in educating them or angering them, it's more like trying to get them to think differently. All my work that has a social or political context to it is aimed at that. I'm trying to make some type of ironic, sardonic, inconsistency to make people think. I want them to think: "What's going on here?"

What do you think about the avant-garde?

Real art is avant-garde. My art may go back to the past for its roots, but nobody has really done exactly what I'm doing. So I'm making new art. In that sense, I am as avant-garde as anybody else who's making real art.

More than ever, art has to shine in the firmament of mass culture. If only three hundred people see your work is it worth it? Wouldn't it be better to build an installation in a shopping mall?

I've had things in shopping malls. I go where the flow takes me, but the number of people that see my art, no, that's not important. I've got art that nobody has seen. So maybe somebody someday will see it, maybe I'll display it, maybe I'll sell it, whatever, but the fact that it's in my drawer and nobody else has seen it - that doesn't bother me. Except that if I could sell it, I could go to Rome. (Laughs) That's the only reason.

What are you reading right now?

The New York Times every day. I follow the war very closely - World War III! I'm reading about the history of America through short magazine articles on various events that pick my fancy. I rip them out and carry them around in my shirt pocket so I always have something to read. I just read an article on Lincoln's second inaugural. I read Gary Wills book on George Washington and his book on John Wayne. I read constantly.

When you wake up in the morning how do you start working?

Depends, it's always different.

I mean, let's say you've got a nice day ahead of you - nobody's bugging you and you're going to do some work. How do you start? Let's say it's a new project.

If I haven't thought about it at all, then I'm not ready to do it. *It's not like you suddenly go out there and get inspired?*

No. (Laughing) I have a bigger plan than that. I've at least thought about it a little bit and I know where my materials are, what I've got and I think, "How am I going to make this thing and have it succeed?" The starting point is not real difficult, if I'm going to use paper and wood, I just go and get the paper and the wood.

Do you read the paper before you start?

If I'm not sure and I have time then I stall awhile by reading the paper or by eating breakfast. Sometimes I rip magazines. I have a pile of magazines I want to get rid of, I go through them page by page - save a couple pages throw the rest away. Before too long I've got a starting point - an image, an idea, a subject matter. *You often revisit the same theme in your work, for example fish and the American flag. Why is that?*

All artists find some imagery they like and hold on to. The flag is an iconic symbol of America - it's an attractive thing - red, white and blue - very bold, very vivid - it goes back to our colonial



The Last of the Great Salmon, 1993, polychrome wood, 48 x 108 inches

roots – it comes from the British flag – same bold colors. It's got that continuity to it. I view the flag the same way Dolly Madison made the first flag – we needed a rallying point – we still do. "Here's the flag; this represents America." There is something to that. Does that mean it's a sin to burn it? If the flag is ripped and burnt and torn, dispose of it, but it doesn't mean that you take the flag and say, "that stands for America," and then spit on it. That's a no. It stands for The Constitution. It stands for The Bill of Rights – it stands for democracy and that's a damned important thing. And I like the way it looks. I alter it a little bit - before 1912, the flag was much more of an individual thing. There were no rules as to where the stars went. There were some flags that had the stars in the shape of a star or a circle or two circles. Then in 1912 they said it was going to be in "this" shape. So, if you look back at American folk-art - I have a nice book on the folk-art of the flag - you find all kinds of variations which are very beautiful.

Much recent art is spectacular and attention seeking with an all-knowing irony, it's often obscene, soiled (often with body fluids) and contrary. How do you feel about that?

I don't think it's necessary. I want my art to appeal to kids and adults. I do believe in being good. It's a plus.

What's your biggest regret?

How too few people take art seriously: how few people in the world have placed any value on the creative process - how few people in the world put any value on creative thinking, or creative manipulation of their senses, or to extend their senses - hands, eyes, voice - in any individual creative act - how few people have any concept of culture at all. There are many reasons for this. Television doesn't help. The commercial aspects of it are horrible. But it's pure laziness.

Do you remember your parents getting their first television set?

Yes, because they did it real late. I was seventeen before we got a TV in our house. My Mom didn't want it. She saw it as a detriment. It is! People make such poor choices of what to watch. If kids today were to watch old B-movies, the world would be a better place by far.

Could that account for your views on individuality?

It's part of it, sure. I grew up with a different attention span and a different focus than the other kids my age.

Do you think of yourself as being eccentric?

Of course, yeah. All artists are eccentric, but I've been told I'm one of the most eccentric people - I've been told by "many" people I'm the most eccentric person they've ever met! And some of these people were "eccentrics." (Laughs)

Do you see yourself as a folk artist?

I prefer the term, "Inside, outsider." "Outsider" means someone outside the establishment - outside the art circle - someone who doesn't have a formal art education. I started art when I was a child without an art teacher, without art

classes. I didn't have an art class until I was a senior in high school. The point is I got started as an outsider. Then I went to college and received an academic art training and became an "insider." The training was important, but I try to keep the "outsider" quality. Those that just look at the major artists for their inspiration, I think they're getting very little from the "outside." I had an exceptional early education in the pop culture of our country - comic books, cartoons, movies - especially B-movies of course - culture that's on the fringe.

What movies have really impressed you?

One of my favorites is *Once Upon A Time In The West* - Sergio Leone's epic Spaghetti Western. It looks to classic westerns, but it reinvents the genre entirely. It's opera. It's Greek Tragedy. It's Shakespearean. It's mythology - it's extremely complex and it's art. I love *The Godfather* movies. *La Dolce Vita* - *Seven Samurai*, and if we shift gears into the B-movies, you can't beat *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Charlie Chan at the Opera*, and one of my all time favorites, *Hopalong Cassidy/Bar 20 Rides Again*.

Let's shift gears again into baseball.

When I was young I had tremendous respect and admiration for my Grandfather. He was a real down-to-earth person with no pretensions. Baseball was one of the most important things in his life. My Grandmother told me that the most memorable day of her early life was when they took a day trip to Philadelphia, about a hundred miles away, to see their first major league baseball game. This was on their honeymoon - never been on a train before. And the second most memorable day was when they could afford to buy a radio to listen to the big league games. Baseball was such a major part of my Grandfather's life. He played in uniform for thirty years on the amateur baseball teams of the coalmines and steel mills that he worked in. He was a catcher and his brother was the pitcher. On my tenth birthday he bought me a catcher's mitt. He was offered a minor league contract but wouldn't give up his job - he had family to support. Baseball was talked about everyday when I was growing up.

Is your exhibition going to be an Operatic Shakespearean Greek Tragedy?

Not so much Shakespearean. My art is very Greek in a tragic ironic sense and mythological in the heroic sense - World War III is certainly a Greek Tragedy - there will be no real closure and no happy ending.

What are we going to call the exhibition?

No Joy in Mudville - it comes from the poem, Casey at Bat. Casey plays for the Mudville Nine and all hopes are on him. But the hero can't save the world every time. Casey strikes out. We have to face our future head on and accept our tasks with determination - just read the *New York Times* front page for a week - the following week's columns will be worse. Before Al Qaeda is totally defeated another daemon will take its place. There is no closure - no joy in Mudville.



Eric Mesko at his studios in Ferndale and Detroit, constructing *Al Qaeda*, August 2002

Eric Mesko

Selected Exhibitions

- 2002 *No Joy in Mudville*, One Person Exhibition, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI
- 2002 *20th Anniversary Exhibition*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI
- 2001 *Actual Size*, Detroit Contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Zeitgeist Annual*, Zeitgeist Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Quo Vadis*, Swords Into Plowshares Gallery, Curator & Participant, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Zeitgeist Annual*, Zeitgeist Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Mixed Media Constructions*, One Person Exhibition, PCCA, Rochester, MI
- 2000 *Actual Size*, Detroit Contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Vote 2000: An Installation by Eric Mesko*, Museum of New Art, Pontiac, MI
- 2000 *Empty Bowls Project*, Swords Into Plowshares Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1998 *Meijer Sculpture Competition*, Semi-Finalist, Fredrick Meijer Gardens, Grand Rapids, MI
- 1998 *Eric Mesko and Maurice*, (two person exhibition), Zeitgeist Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1997 *Art in the Spirit of Detroit*, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation
- 1996 *Field of Dreams: Art and Baseball*, Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, E Lansing, MI
- 1996 *Box Benefit*, Willis Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1996 *Artists Detroit*, University Art Gallery, Western Illinois University, IL
- 1995 *The Chair: Deconstructed/Reconstructed*, Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak, MI
- 1995 *Artists' Billboard Series*, Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 1995 *Interventions*, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
- 1995 *Fire*, Michigan Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1995 *Play Ball*, Center Galleries, Detroit, MI
- 1995 *Michigan Annual Thirteen*, Mt Clemens Art Center, Mt Clemens, MI
- 1995 *Exit 55: Work From Hamtramck*, PCCA, Rochester, MI
- 1995 *In/Justice*, Curated by Carol Jacobsen, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 1995 *Box Benefit*, Willis Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1993 *Fish or Cut Bait*, One Person Exhibition, Marygrove College, Detroit, MI
- 1992 *Tough Times in Texas*, One Person Exhibition, Urban Park, Detroit, MI
- 1989 *Last Days of Detroit*, One Person Exhibition, Willis Gallery, Detroit, MI

Education

- 1990 M.F.A. Painting, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
- 1989 B.F.A. Painting, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

United States Marine Corps

1964-1967

No Joy in Mudville

An Exhibition by Eric Mesko

October 18 - November 17, 2002

Back endpages: Installation shot from the *Oil Wars* traveling exhibition, 1990
Pages 6, 7, 15: Untitled from the *Gangrene City Book*, 1990, ink on leaves of The Second National Bank Checkbook, c. 1950
Page 16: *Oil Wars Oil Drum Project*, Michigan, Ohio & Pennsylvania, 1990, oil stick on oil drums (photographs by Michael Willowby)

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