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Blastotene

MAN ABOUT TIME

By STACEY VREEKEN

Artist Michael Leeds innovates, surprises

Michael Leeds is fascinated with time.

The time when we left our agrarian roots and embraced industrialization expressed by the Art Nouveau movement. How we are just a grain of sand in the vast panoply of time. And most importantly, the time when art startles your senses and opens your mind to new ways of looking at things.

Leeds' attention darts in myriad directions but you could loosely call him an assemblage artist. He works in stained glass, having created the neon, glass and metal Santa Cruz Cinema 9 tower, uses found objects to create motorcycles that could roar to life at any moment, and co-designed a vehicle so innovative that it premiered at the prestigious Concours d'Elegance.

"He is such an incredible genius artist," says Marti Selman. The Selmans own the Glass Gallery in Santa Cruz and feature Leeds' work. "He comes up with stuff no one would ever think about. He picks up stuff at the flea market and he can look at something that you and I would think of as nothing, but he sees something in there that he calls 'juicy.' Ten to 20 years later he'll use it. He's really a Renaissance man when it comes to found objects. He's also a wonderful drawer and painter. There's no end to what he knows how to do."

"I see myself as a provocateur," says the soft-spoken, sandy-haired man whose demeanor suggests introvert.

Until you look at his art and experience that moment of surprise for yourself.

Nothing is as it seems.

"Isn't that what an artist is supposed to be?" asks Leeds. "Art in general is taking things and putting them out of context to provoke response."

It's this state of surprise that opens a deeper connection, creating a dialogue with the artist, your perceptions and ultimately yourself.

Leeds has this dialogue regularly. He sees himself as an anachronism, out of place in time, but trying to greet each new moment in life open, with the confidence of experience. "Every choice you make is the death of a million other possibilities," is a favorite phrase as he tries to approach each project, each moment, not quite knowing what he's going to do, trying to live the surprise of his art.

Pointing to a huge motorcycle called Roadkill at rest in a garage amid twisted pieces of metal, antique tools, blinking signs, mirrors and industrial objects literally dripping from the walls, he says, "I bring the components into proximity and let them decide how they belong together."

He says this with so much conviction you halfway expect the objects to jump up and start flying around the room like the Sorcerer's Apprentice in "Fantasia."

"I personally cull from the environment because each object says so much about the culture of its time," he goes on. "Something made in 1930 tells us where we were at that time, the quality of the workmanship. What were they used for tells us about the people who used them," he says with the tone of an anthropologist.

Leeds uses these parts out of context. "It looks like the 'idea' of a motorcycle. People have an idea of what it looks like. (Then) the viewer experiences a threshold, where they come to understand something is other than what they thought it was. You teeter-totter on the threshold.

"That's the moment I'm focusing on. I can then affect people, to see the world in a new way, maybe from then on they'll see the world differently...."

THEN TO NOW

Like his media, Leeds' vision runs in many directions, both forward in time to innovation and backward into the past to "pay tribute to ancestors." His design of the Blastolene series of vehicles is the perfect example.

To create the oversized, rounded shapes that characterize the automobiles he co-builds with Oregon glass artist and hot-rodder Randy Grubbs, Leeds studied metal work with a master builder who specialized in custom cars. These masters were dying off, but by apprenticing himself and restoring antiques, Leeds managed to glean techniques and use them to create the flowing lines of Big Bertha, his first in the hot rod line.

"Every choice you make is the death of a million other possibilities."

"I needed to learn the art of crafting cars before they died," he says. "I've created a new car using the art of the old cars, honoring the creators."

That honor shows in the teardrop fender of Bertha, the sweeping Art Deco lines that gives you a visceral feeling of movement, the coachwork at its finest.

Grubb and Leeds are planning a series of 10 Blastolenes, oversized hot rods built with semi-truck, fire truck and tank parts, whatever the two can find. Avid car collector Jay Leno snapped up the Blastolene Special, the first vehicle Grubb and Leeds collaborated on.

"If you can bring an accumulation of knowledge, historical influence, what you know has more significance to you," he says.

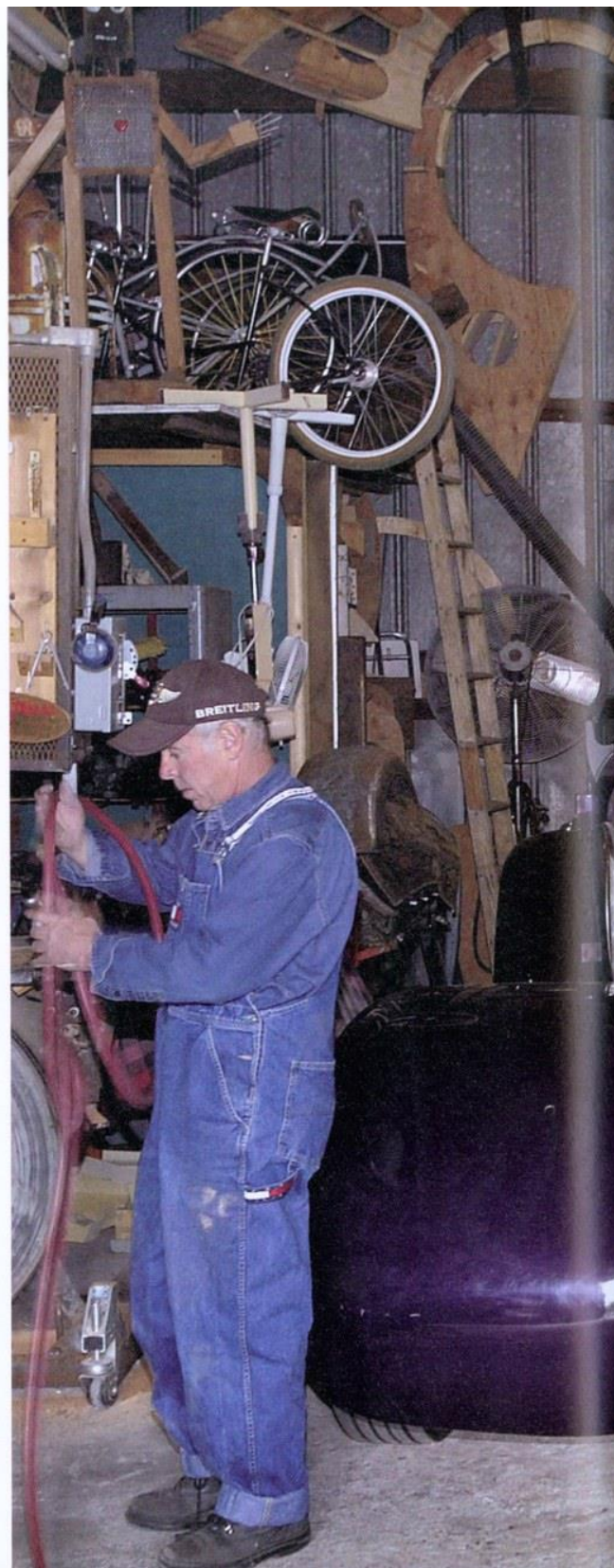
It's an interest in design and art that goes beyond cars. "I'm tapping into the collective idea of what the whole experience should be."

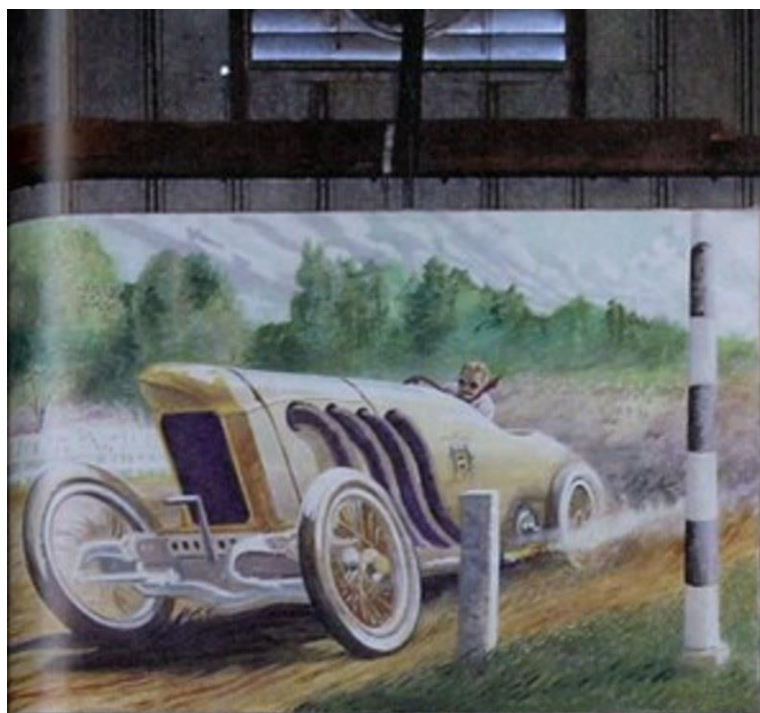
Leeds also needed innovation in his own view of vehicle design and how they operate.

Working with highly toxic materials, Leeds concluded he "had to take personal responsibility for my art" and begin using alternative fuels. Big Bertha runs on propane and his newest project, a Peterbilt turned hot rod called Sneaky Pete, will run on biofuel. It will have an onboard fuel processing plant that enables you to process fuel right from a grease trap.

"I can build something, take pleasure in it and I can do it with a clear conscious," he says. "It forced me to metamorphose, out of my passion for what I'm doing, I had to change."

His artwork reflects the hand-crafted era but assembled in a new way moving forward to the next movement.





WHERE TO SEE MICHAEL LEEDS' ART WORK:

- * Neon and stained glass **Santa Cruz Cinema 9** sign tower on Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz. In order to avoid the proposed stucco and plastic front, Leeds underbid the job, which actually cost him money.
- * Just up the street at the **I.D. Building**, now housing the Sock Shop, the Art of the Shoe installation was created with brother Mattie Leeds.
- * **The Glass Gallery**, 123 Locust St., exhibits Michael Leeds glasswork.
- * B702 Blastolene 702-cubic inch displacement

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With its distorted and extended fenders, Big Bertha is designed to give the visceral feeling of movement.