

Going for a ride in the age of auto

Three exhibitions explore the car in our culture

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

VANCOUVER SUN

It's still early days but the start of the 21st century is looking more and more like the beginning of the age of auto anxiety.

With the international price of a barrel about \$81, the going price around Metro Vancouver is about \$1.17 a litre. Every time we fill up the gas tank, we feel the pinch in our wallets and wonder how much more it will cost next time.

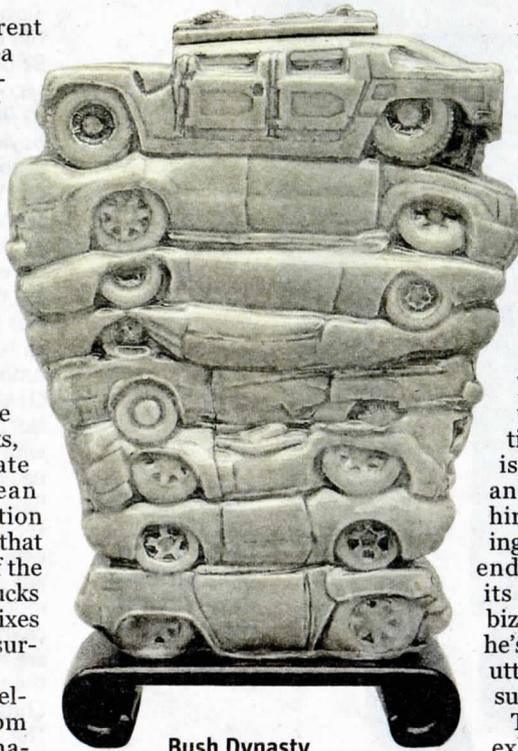
And these days, we also know that putting fuel in our car means more than it once did. Every time we hold a gas nozzle in our hands we become part of a global supply and production chain. On one level, we know that the fossil fuel that fills our gas tanks is somehow linked to global warming and maybe even the people killed in the two Gulf oil wars. On the other, we have to fill our gas tanks to deal with practical matters such as getting to work, buying groceries, or taking the kids to hockey. It's enough to make anyone want to tune out and switch on *Glee* at the first opportunity.

Not surprisingly, artists are among the canaries in the mine noticing what's going on around us. In three exhibitions in Metro

Vancouver, three very different artists have put either the idea of cars or their physical presence in the foreground of their work. So far as I know, none of the artists was aware of what the others were doing. The connections came about only because of something I noticed in the three exhibitions I attended.

On South Granville at Bau-Xi Gallery, Val Nelson has a show of paintings and drawings. The paintings continue her exploration of nature parks, decorated rooms, and ornate spaces in historic European museums. Inspired by intuition and the kind of unusual links that come from dreams, several of the paintings combine cars and trucks with furniture in a way that mixes the outdoors and indoors in surprising ways.

In *Fringed*, for example, Nelson has painted a living room in the process of transformation that improbably includes a boat that appears to be floating. *Pushme-Pullyou* has a pickup truck pulling a trailer in a campground decorated with an armchair and a table. In *Applying Sunscreen in the War Gallery of 1812*, Nelson has created perhaps



**Bush Dynasty
Vase/Celadon
Humvee, a ceramic
sculpture by Marcus Bowcott.**

the most ornate garage I've ever seen.

What initially drew me into the painting was the way the vibrant

red on the walls on the sides angle toward the back to create a feeling of depth. The painted walls are themselves covered with depictions of paintings with at least three showing military figures on horseback, including the biggest one at the back of the room.

Below, on the floor of the vast and opulent room is a man putting on sun lotion. Painted loosely but with enough detail to identify what he's doing, the man is in khaki-coloured shorts and an orange shirt. Beside him are two cars: One is facing front, the other has its rear end toward the viewer with its trunk open. The scene is bizarre: The man is acting like he's outdoors in a campsite and utterly unaware of his palatial surroundings.

The room is based on an exhibition in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, which was built to celebrate the Russian victory over Napoleon Bonaparte's French army in 1812. At the time, men riding on horses was one of the era's most potent and virile symbols; until recently, the car and its multiple horsepowers was

one of the unquestioned symbols of power and influence.

Nelson's juxtaposition of cars and horses made me think how the car's days as a pre-eminent symbol of western affluence might be numbered.

Applying Sunscreen puts cars in a space they're usually not welcome in.

What the painting suggests is that cars as cultural objects have worked their ways into our interior physical and psychological spaces like never before. It's a powerful contemporary image about the car and what it means in our culture.

Its beauty as a painting heightens rather than detracts from its subtle content.

In an entirely different way, cars are an integral part of the work of artist Marcus Bowcott. In an exhibition at the Evergreen Cultural Centre, he's created both paintings and sculptures that more explicitly draw connections between cars and their effects on the environment.

It's not often that a work of art makes me laugh but that's what *Bush Dynasty Vase/Celadon Humvee* did when I saw it Sunday evening.

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VISUAL ARTS

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A ceramic sculpture, it depicts several squashed Humvees in a shade of green I associate more with Martha Stewart than with a tough-looking civilian SUV modelled after a military vehicle. Bowcott challenges Humvee marketing by taking on the symbols of the excesses of the George W. Bush era in the U.S. As ceramic objects, they look solid but are really quite delicate — just like the vehicles themselves which rely on wars to keep their fuel flowing.

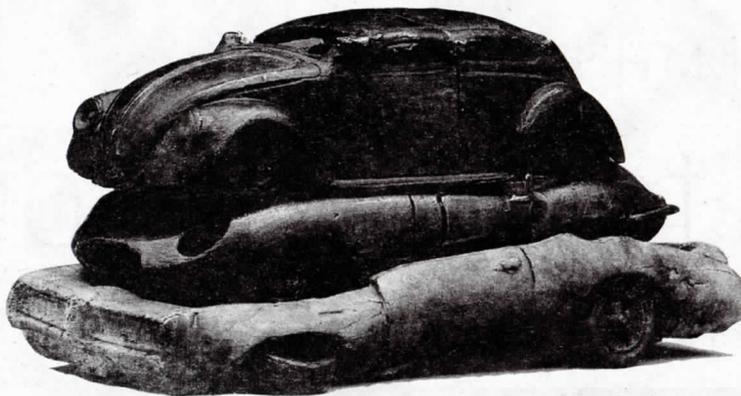
It was one of several of his ceramic sculptural works that included *Le Triomphe de l'École de Chicago*, a biting reference to the market fundamentalism espoused by Milton Friedman and other economists at the University of Chicago, and *The Three Graces (Jaggy in the Middle)*, a bronze of stacked and crushed vehicles: a Volkswagen Beetle on top of a Jaguar on top of what looked like a Pontiac Firebird or a similar

kind of muscle car.

Working along the North Arm of Fraser River years ago, Bowcott was haunted by images of abandoned and forgotten cars half-buried in the mud. In the exhibition, he draws on comparisons between the logs stacked in booms in the Fraser and stacks and bundles of cars.

The painting *On the Beach* balances two cruise ships on the open ocean with an island of vehicles. The mound of metal in the ocean made me think of its resemblance to the bizarre Pacific trash vortex — the swirling mass of plastic, sludge and garbage swirling around the central North Pacific Ocean.

At Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Brian Jungen has finished the first phase of his new exhibition. He will be adding to the work in the coming months until its completion in January. While Jungen's work is completely different from either Nelson's or Bowcott's, it does use both the idea of cars



The Three Graces (Jaggy in the Middle) is a bronze by Marcus Bowcott.

and their parts in his work. As in his previous works — which have included making Northwest coast masks out of Nike running shoes and whale skeletons out of white plastic chairs — Jungen is combining handmade materials with ready-made objects.

Among the finished portions are strange banner or sail-like creations of dried animal skins wrapped around car fenders sitting on white freezers that serve as plinths. On one side of one of

the works are round skins that have been connected with numerous thick, threadlike animal sinews. Looking at the skins wrapped around the car parts and listening to them tightening, I couldn't help but think they were trying to embrace the metal underneath. They looked like they wanted to incorporate the fenders and take them over, but they can't because they're not strong enough.

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At a glance

VAL NELSON

My Divided Attention

Where: Bau-Xi Gallery, 3045 Granville St., to Dec. 2

When: Mon.-Sat., 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; Sun., 12 noon to 4 p.m.

MARCUS BOWCOTT

Cut Blocks, Stacks and Bundles

Where: Evergreen Cultural Centre Art Gallery, 1205 Pinetree Way, Coquitlam

When: Mon. to Sat., noon to 5 p.m., to Jan. 8

BRIAN JUNGEN

Where: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 274 East First Ave., rear entrance

When: Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., to Jan. 15. The gallery will be closed Nov. 30 to Dec. 5 and Dec. 20 to Jan. 3 for two installation periods.