

EVENT HORIZON

Sculpturally-constructed objects by Nikola Nikola

text by Larry Gaudet

*tomorrow will come from somewhere
and hunt you for yesterday*

The feeling of bone radiates from *Event Horizon*, a new show of sculpturally-constructed objects by Nikola Nikola. In one work, the bones are real and retain the identity of the dead creature – the hind leg of a cow. More often, bone is evoked in the colour and texture of forms with recognizable contours: a bottle, a truncheon, a small human figure that conveys the totemic intensity of a kouros or dashboard saint. As motif, bone is employed in a way that instigates the urge to clutch these works each in turn, much as you would a holy relic. It's only human, after all, to hope that an object made from body parts – from skeleton dust – should have the power to heal, to speak to the dead, to reveal an avenue into the abyss. This show at Alison Smith Gallery is presented with shrine-like intimacy, the works mostly scaled to fit the hands.

A paradox asserts itself as you proceed through the show. The mind knows that these works by Nikola that evoke bone, engraved with poems written by the artist and sketched in human figures, were made in the 21st century. The mind also knows, or suspects, that a fair number of these works were constructed of steel mesh, fused to spines and ribs of wood and metal, providing the structure beneath a wax skin redolent of stone, that creamy bone colour, restful on the eyes, inviting to the touch. Your gut, however, concludes something else: these are votive objects, inscribed in prayer, and not from the present at all, arriving instead as emissaries from the past, removed from a grotto in a lost country steeped in suffering. You are in the presence, your gut says, of icons that for centuries breathed incense and, within the subterranean dampness, absorbed the murmuring of acolytes, the echoing drip of aquifer. And yet you also sense – to complicate the paradox – that these works do not all come from the past. Some have arrived from an imagined future, a message for the present, history in reverse, a history we still need to endure to arrive at a better place.

You keep reading – or reciting, in a whisper:

*I asked the dead
when they die and how
and I asked the living ones
why are they dead*

Over the past thirty years or so, Nikola Nikola has produced an extensive body of work across the painting-sculpture-drawing-printmaking continuum. Collected mainly in North America, Nikola's work has been showcased in many exhibitions, establishing him as one of Canada's most accomplished living artists. A study of his work from the 1980s onward illustrates an allegiance to expressive figuration. As the critic Donald Brackett wrote of Nikola's work of the early 1990s:

Nikola is, I believe, certainly an expressionist. Not a “new” expressionist but a real one, using authentic emotional content within a classic gestural mode: human figures burned by the colour of their own arrival in the framed area of the canvas. The combat commences, the audience winces, but stares on nonetheless. The space of each picture is again a mirror of the space we live in, are trapped in, struggling to depart from.

Nikola’s expressionism initially manifested in a neo-surrealist idiom, providing a background philosophical field for mapping forces that are often less than benign in shaping our relations to one another. His figures are often shadowed, or assaulted, by spectral proxies from the world of institutional power but also legion in the domestic sphere: our greed for gain and pleasure, our need for power over others (especially those we purport to love), our fervor to violate and kill.

*People who exhibit submissive behaviors
Have a genetic history of fearing humans
And people who don’t
They turn submissives into their pets*

A Nikola work from any period holds up a mirror to the myriad ways we undermine ourselves, usually for paltry or transient advantage. The mirrors provided, though, aren’t merely glassy surfaces that present illusions from arm’s length. They’re much more atavistically engaging, made of tactile substance. His sculptural works often incorporate materials – in addition to bone – such as wax, felt, ashes and reclaimed wood and fur pelts, all transfigured by shamanistic force, but also mournful responsibility. He has long associated human depravity with our degrading treatment of animals and the natural environment – not unlike Joseph Beuys in that isolated respect. Often, the most sensitive spirit in his narratives is the look of fear – of pure sentience – on the face of a cow, a rabbit or bird, a gaze turned with vulnerable reluctance to the observer, as if to say: do you have any idea how much pain you’ve caused with your stupidity? His respect for nature isn’t a bolt-on ideology, a convenient eco-correctness, but rather a value deeply rooted in his childhood, growing up in a village nestled among mountains and forests. This is an artist who earned his viewpoints, not at a televisual distance, but in the pastures and treetops of agrarian life, in the contemplation of stars from a barn loft and, let it be said, in the mundane terrors of a farm community where some animals are raised to be slaughtered, where what you eat depends on how skillful you are with the plough and the knife.

While never abandoning the human story, Nikola’s work in the later 1990s incorporates a bolder weighting of abstract properties, signalling a decisive shift in focus to the mystical plane. We now see more visibly the rendering of mysterious but very material forces that include alien-looking apparitions swirling around the figure. We are often transported to otherworldly landscapes that feel eons distant from human habitation. In these worlds, there is a veiling – or poetic codification – of ideological content. We’re given a small measure of sensory distance – and emotional breathing room, too – from sources of human pain, a buffer provided as an aid to contemplation, as if Nikola accepts that we won’t acknowledge our culpability in the violence of human affairs if the message is too direct, too raw.

If there’s one definitive conflict or experience consistently offered in Nikola’s work, it usually occurs in the thinnest air of human perception, the boundary or edge world between the temporal and the celestial, the existential tightrope on which maintaining one’s balance depends on addressing the larger questions: Who or what

are we? How did we come to be? Did we evolve into human forms or were we designed – if so, by what, by whom? Where are we going? What exists in the dark matter and black holes that surround us? These questions are answered in Nikola’s work as representations of cosmic forces that simmer in our blood, as fears beneath our skin, often without a conscious voice, but directing us all the same, despite our hardwired somnolence to live in the here and now – not the “there” and “forever.”

*If only my life could rise above night
 If only my life could rise above pillows
 If only my life could drink my shadow
 If only my life could remember all my desires
 If only my life could live near a bowl of rice
 If only my life could return
 Those who keep me a slave*

What generates the turbulent power in Nikola’s work is arguably related to a dialectic – to resort to that old-fashioned word – that fuses his aesthetic. One of the factions in his battle for poetic synthesis is a desire for mastery of the past, the known symbolic universe, the image-graveyard that is the legacy of art through the centuries. It’s monumentally evident Nikola has respectfully apprenticed to the fine-art tradition, given his facility with medium and diversity of metaphor that could keep an army of art historians in perpetual motion, tracing influences that cross civilizations as well as centuries. At the same time, Nikola is very much an artist of the future, living in the wilderness of all that hasn’t happened yet but will or could happen, an original voice speaking to all that we’ve never been seen before, the images we are moving towards, the symbols of where we might be going.

More daunting, still, his art doesn’t respect time zones, the distinctions of past-present-future. The present in Nikola’s work is a fulcrum state that mediates between memory and prophecy on opposite ends of the metaphysical teeter-totter. The present is principally a home to the corporeal fact of his work: a vehicle for journeying to the less-traveled aspects of ourselves, the dimensions beyond our physical if not our spiritual fingertips. Imagine an artist with the mystical intensity of Blake, as fearless as Goya in chronicling indecency, arguing with Einsteinian conceptions of time and space, even while reworking the brush strokes of intimate psychological violence offered by Bacon. Nikola’s art, however, even when it depicts the victims of cruelty, the colours of spiritual isolation, also celebrates the fortitude of the individual against fate, the heroism of survival itself in context of the riddles of existence. There’s always a suggestion that through the contemplation of terrible truths – regarding the darker side of ourselves, and our profound ignorance in the bigger scheme – a better path can be forged, even if that path amounts mainly to solitary moments stolen from the noise of failure, the blather of ego. He appears to thrive on the task of calculating if not actually closing the distance that we all travel – in every sense – toward wisdom, a condition that, like any horizon of interest, keeps receding as we sail toward it

To truly experience a Nikola work, you must enjoy that pit-of-the-stomach sensation from inching forward on a high ledge, tempted but anxious about diving into waters that appear calm but, in their depths, swirl in light and forms that evoke longings and fears that defeat the words used to describe them. The more intimate you become with Nikola’s work, the vertiginous experience doesn’t fade but intensifies. Always on offer is intimate conversation, a dialogue, with the loneliest realities that become lonelier still as the conversation deepens.

*remain still
be like the cliff
stand firm
clear your head
make yourself beginning
after the end
death will be the first light of dawn*

In this show of sculpturally-constructed objects, Nikola is addressing the questions that construct us, that turn us into *us*. His metaphor of bone anchors an ambition to chart the visceral marrow of consciousness, the structure of what makes us – at least in moments of contemplation – real. As Nikola's work has become invested in what might be called an interstellar perspective, it remains disciplined by a guiding modesty, a first principle: that we are all subject to laws of the universe we can't remotely conceive never mind control. In that sense, Nikola fuses grand ambition with the humility that comes from knowing that we while can be victims or victors in our earthly struggles, in the joy and pain that we bring to one another, we are also pawns to the monstrous unknowability of our cosmic fate.