

Marcus Bowcott: Trans Am Totem puts cars on a pedestal

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One of the first sculptural pieces by [Marcus Bowcott](#) that I saw made me laugh. It was a small ceramic sculpture – about the size of maquette – of several squashed cars and a Humvee all in a pale shade of green in an exhibition at the [Evergreen Cultural Centre](#). As I described it in a [review](#) five years ago, I associated the colour more with “Martha Stewart than with a tough-looking civilian vehicle modeled after a military vehicle.”

On their own, the squashed vehicles looked unusual and quirky. I liked the sculpture’s intimate size and unusual colour. What made the work even more interesting was the title: it was called Bush Dynasty Vase/Celadon Humvee. That’s when I laughed: I realized that Bowcott was taking on the George Bush’s military-oil legacy in a domestic-size sculpture. It was a small work that had a big impact.

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I mention that because Bowcott is the artist who created [Trans Am Totem](#), the stack of cars on a cedar tree that was installed earlier this year as part of the [Vancouver Biennale](#). It generated lots of media coverage when crews erected the complex and weighty work.

A dynamic work such as Trans Am Totem didn't just emerge fully formed from Bowcott's head. He's been working with the idea of cars and their effect on the environment for years. He's also been doing it in a way that both celebrates cars and pokes fun at the way we literally put them on a pedestal.

Some of those paintings and sculptures are in an exhibition at the [Pendulum Gallery](#) – the gallery in the atrium of the HSBC Building at West Georgia and Hornby. The gallery is named after [Broken Column](#), Alan Storey's massive stainless steel pendulum which is located in the atrium.

Bowcott said he's had more public reaction to [Trans Am Totem](#) than to anything he's done before.

"One guy said it was a waste of a good Trans Am," Bowcott said. "I just thought that was great because he was so wrong. It would have been scrapped if I hadn't used it."

Bowcott thinks it generated such interest because it engages people. People who would never go into an art gallery realize that Trans Am Totem is a work of art they can understand.



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“Everybody can relate to it due to the subject matter,” he said.

“We’re surrounded by cars. They’re put on pedestals on billboards and TV. I’m putting it on this strange pedestal. I’m in a sense holding up a mirror to our culture.”

Members of the public can see what the sculpture is made out of and ‘get’ it without feeling like they need added text or someone with a degree to explain it to them. As a former instructor at Capilano College, Bowcott said he was always very aware how his students experienced the elitism around art.

“A lot of people are very disaffected with art,” he said. “I’ve been disaffected by the elitism. They feel they can’t go into a gallery because they don’t know the context. They feel stupid. Yet these are people who are engaged in media at a very complex level.”

Trans Am Totem engaged me from the start because of my own personal history with cars. As a child, I made plastic models of cars that I displayed in my bedroom. Later as a young adult, I drove gas guzzling American cars such as a two-door 1963 Pontiac, a sporty 1966 Mustang, and a four-door 1963 Chevrolet. They were cheap to run and fun to drive. Times change and now I don’t even own a car: I get around by bike, bus and car-sharing. But I still remain fascinated with the speed and design of

cars.



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Bowcott said his work has always been multidisciplinary but he's primarily thinks of himself as a painter.

“My first instinct is to paint water surfaces and go for the reflective, metaphysical energy,” he said.

“Over the years, I’ve been distracted by other issues. I want to engage more at a topical level.”

For about 30 years, he has been interested in cars in one way or another. Previous works have included *On the Beach* (see below), a painting of a pile of cars on the beach and cruise ships, and *The Three Graces* (Jaggy in the Middle), a sculpture of squashed cars. In that bronze, a VW Beetle was atop a Jaguar which rested on a Trans Am/Firebird.

The exhibition at the [Pendulum Gallery](#) is called *Endlessly Rocking*. It’s named after the Walt Whitman poem called [Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking](#) about the life energy of the world.

It also includes several car-themed works. They include paintings of images on the back of vans and earlier sculptural iterations of *Trans Am Totem*. The star of the show is a Firebird – the dowdier cousin of the Trans Am – that rocks gently back and forth. It’s equipped with Goodyear Eagle GT II wheels and rests on a four-metre slab of cedar.

“Like *Trans Am Totem*,” Bowcott said, “it’s culture on nature.”

Bowcott said *Trans Am Totem* remains a temporary installation for the [Vancouver Biennale](#). It may be one of the sturdiest. The sculpture weighs more than 11,000 kgs and stands about 10 metres in height above ground. As a safety measure, the city required that the sculpture include a 10-metre long steel rod that extends underground to anchor it to the earth.

Trans Am Totem is composed of five cars stacked in a slightly spiralling inverted pyramid on top of old growth cedar. At the top is a Trans Am followed by a BMW, Honda, Cabriolet and Mercedes.

Trans Am Totem is located where Pacific Boulevard turns into Quebec Street at Melross Avenue. People often step onto the grassy median to take photos of the work that cost about \$20,000 to make and install and two years of planning.

Members of the public both love and hate it, Bowcott said. Some of the haters live in nearby condos overlooking False Creek. But they changed their opinion thanks to addition suggested by Bowcott’s wife Helene: a green light that comes on for three hours every night at 8 pm.

Why a green light? If you're in the neighborhood at night, you'll see numerous balconies illuminated with green lights. They're part of a community protest against Concord Pacific and the city for not building a promised park on the north side of False Creek. By adding green light to the Trans Am at the top of Trans Am Totem, it was a sign that the sculpture was in solidarity with the residents.

"A lot of the residents who didn't like it ended up loving Trans Am Totem," he said.



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[Endlessly Rocking](#) continues at the Pendulum Gallery to Friday, Sept. 18.

Images: Out of the Cradle by Marcus Bowcott at Pendulum Gallery, Photo: Kevin Griffin; Blue Eden by Marcus Bowcott, Photo by Kevin Griffin; Trans Am Totem seen from Skytrain, Photo by Kevin Griffin; On the Beach by Marcus Bowcott, file photo The Vancouver Sun.