

HOME & GARDEN

Chef Amy Thielen and artist Aaron Spangler make a home in the Minnesota woods

The dynamic couple completed an addition to their cabin home on the edge of a state forest some 200 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

By **Laurie Junker** Special to the Star Tribune | **AUGUST 10, 2019 — 4:25PM**

The home of Amy Thielen and her husband, Aaron Spangler, is literally in the sticks, and that's just how they like it. Located on the edge of a state forest some 200 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, it's a cozy world unto itself.

Thielen is a chef, a James Beard award-winning author and host of "Heartland Table," a cooking show that ran on the Food Network for two seasons. (She's no relation to the Vikings wide receiver but she is part of the bacon-famous Thielen Meats of Pierz, Minn., family.) Spangler is an accomplished artist who has pieces at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Institute of Art and in many private collections. Both grew up in nearby Park Rapids, Minn.

The couple have lived on 150 acres of woodland and meandering creek for the past 20 years — at first, only during the warmer months, then full time after son Hank joined them 12 years ago.

The land belonged to Spangler's family. He grew up hunting and camping there, and returned after graduating from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in the late 1990s to build the house he'd been planning since childhood.

He did it by himself, using scrap lumber from nearby Two Inlets Mill, windows salvaged from an old lake cabin, a metal roof from an abandoned trailer and "his own young back," as Thielen described in her memoir "Give a Girl a Knife." The finished product had high ceilings, a wood-burning stove and a sleeping loft with a skeleton kitchen tucked beneath; but no electricity, running water, gas, plumbing or neighbors. It was off the grid, and then some.

It was not the obvious landing spot for a budding professional chef who would soon be cooking in the starred Manhattan kitchens of David Bouley and Jean-Georges Vongerichten, but Thielen was fresh off a college thesis on early American literature and had a romantic, if not entirely realistic, view of homestead life. Plus, she was smitten with Spangler.

"In my teen years, I knew Aaron peripherally, because he was my friend's brother. But he was older and into punk music, and I was in my cheerleader phase," Thielen said. When she ran into him again years later in Minneapolis, she found herself drawn to his unconventional ways.

She moved Up North to be with him and threw herself into learning how to live like her ancestors — gardening from seed, preserving the harvest and cooking without refrigeration or running water.

For years the couple spent summers at the cabin, taming the land and adding modest conveniences (they dug their own sand point well one year, and installed a used solar panel that provided a trickle of power another). They christened their cabin Hazelbrush, after the nut-bearing bushes that cover the property.

Winters were spent in New York City pursuing their respective passions — Thielen working 80-hour weeks in high-pressure kitchens, and Spangler making his art while working odd jobs, including a stint with a contractor in Brooklyn that did historical renovations, which deepened Spangler's knowledge of construction and carpentry.



ALEX KORMANN, STAR TRIBUNE

Chef Amy Thielen and artist Aaron Spangler recently expanded their Park Rapids, Minn., cabin to add a better kitchen for Thielen.

Once Hank arrived, the couple realized they needed to be at home, and home was the land of elongated vowels and potluck salads that arrive in plastic-handled ice cream buckets. Their one-room cabin grew as they tacked on bedrooms and added indoor plumbing — giving Thielen a big bathroom with a claw foot tub to soak away the winter chill and a bidet because, why not? (She confessed that it's mostly used to wash off sandy feet before bed in the summer.)

They also built a warren of small outbuildings — an art studio for Spangler, Thielen's dacha where she writes her books and articles, and a chicken coop with an upstairs playhouse for Hank.

Doubling their space

The biggest change, though, was this past year when they decided to build a bigger kitchen for Thielen. Her original space under the loft (nicknamed "the bunker") was efficient, and she filmed two seasons of her show in it, but for someone who cooks every day, sometimes all day, it was a challenge. Plus, her bevy of gear — canning supplies, cookware, serving dishes and her pantry of pickles and preserves — was spilling over into other areas of the house and Spangler's art studio.

While they were at it, they also added a powder room, mudroom and office, plus a basement with space for a root cellar and Hank's model train collection, effectively doubling their total square footage. Spangler's art school friend, designer Chris Hand, helped them draw up the plans.

The clear pine walls and ribbed ceiling in the addition are a lighter and more refined version of the rough logs and knotty pine in the rest of the house. They'll darken with time, a process the couple appreciate. All of the wood came from Two Inlets Mill. "We're so fortunate to have a sawmill nearby, and it's really the heart of the Two Inlets community," Thielen said.

For the floors, the family chose durable red brick tiles, inspired by those they saw in old train stations, set in a timeless herringbone pattern. The countertops are a soft gray marble, a luxury Thielen allowed herself, along with professional appliances and a sunflower yellow wood-burning oven from Italy that turns out crusty loaves of bread and tender pastries.

An 11-foot island anchors the space and gives her a proper expanse for testing recipes, shooting images of food for her cookbooks and tackling projects like making yards of paper-thin strudel dough, canning the summer's harvest or hosting big dinners. A half-dozen Danish modern stools that Thielen found online and had reupholstered, provide seating for meals and parties.

Big windows overlooking the garden flank the Wolf range, and open shelving gives her easy access to ingredients and dishes.

"I thought a lot about my choreography, and decided I wanted to take just two steps to reach stuff, and so we decreased the standard spacing between countertops by 3 inches — because I'm a little short," Thielen said. Drawers beneath the counters reveal their contents with one pull, vs. the open, squat and squint that lower cabinets can require.

Throughout the house are lots and lots of books and a gallery's worth of artwork from friends. One of Spangler's latest sculptures, a tripod with an appealing biomorphic shape, stands sentry in the kitchen on a platform that separates the office from the kitchen. The platform is surrounded by bench seating that Spangler built, which Thielen describes as a cross between midcentury modern and Lutheran church. It's a popular hangout spot during gatherings. The office includes Thielen's cookbook collection, a table for meetings and informal dining, and refinished chairs from St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn.

The couple have been planning the project for years, and now that it's finished, they couldn't be happier.

Laurie Junker, *Star Tribune*, August 2019

“When we built this addition, I actually said to a friend, ‘We’ve built our coffin. It’s so perfect now, we’ll never leave it. We’ll die in this house,’” Thielen recalled. “But I felt that way about this place even before that. We’ve built so much here, on what was once a patch of brush, we could never sell it.”

Laurie Junker is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer.



ALEX KORMANN • ALEX.KORMANN@STARTRIBUNE.COM

Amy Thielen and her husband, artist Aaron Spangler both grew up in Park Rapids, where their home is located.

Highlights From NADA New York 2016

Kari Adelaide, Contributor

Writer, curator and doctoral student living in New York City

05/11/2016 11:36 am ET | **Updated** Dec 06, 2017



Aaron Spangler, *Stump Mountain*, 2013, Carved and burned basswood, 62x53x5.5" / 157.5x134.6x14cm.

Aaron Spangler's wood carvings were mountainous and fine all at once at Zieher Smith and Horton Gallery (New York), monolithic in stature but invested with a palpable love of land. Spangler's kinship with his environment echoes strongly from his mythic North Woods Minnesota studio, and seeing his works alongside the sun dappled abstract surfaces of Clare Grill's paintings and the folksy landscape preponderances of David Byrd's works was a revelation.

Art in America

INTERVIEWS Jun 6, 2017

Out of the Woods: In Conversation with Aaron Spangler

by [Brian Droitcour](#)

On June 10, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden reopens to the public after two years of renovation and structural reinforcement. A partnership between the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board and the Walker Art Center, the Sculpture Garden is both a recreational area for visitors and a space for artists to take on new challenges; several artists made their first public projects on commissions from the Walker. Aaron Spangler joins their ranks as one of the six artists to make new work for the expanded Sculpture Garden. The [Minnesota-based](#) sculptor works primarily in wood, and his *Bog Walker* (2017)—a rippling, ruggedly lumpy abstraction slightly larger than human size, inscribed with runic lines and patterns—is his first bronze. It stands in a nook beside the museum, where the scattered geometry of the 2005 Herzog & de Meuron addition meets the brick monolith of the 1971 building designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes.

Spangler's title sounds like a pun on the institution and its site. Refurbishment efforts were primarily aimed at strengthening the ground beneath the Sculpture Garden, which sits on a former marsh. (The Guthrie Theater once occupied the area where *Bog Walker* now stands, but the company moved to a new structure on a bank of the Mississippi River in the early 2000s because its old building was sinking.) The primordial area surrounding the park is consonant with Spangler's work as a whole, which is inspired by encounters with



wilderness. I met with the artist at the Walker ahead of the Sculpture Garden's reopening to talk about the new commission and his life in rural Minnesota.

BRIAN DROITCOUR The site of Bog Walker is interesting because the Walker has done a lot of new landscaping to complement the Herzog & de Meuron addition, including the creation of a new hill. Did you work with the Walker to choose the site? Did its shape influence the forms you generated?

AARON SPANGLER They had a general idea. We worked on the exact placement, where three paths come together, and centered it on the wall of the museum, which really frames it. The site shaped my choice only in the sense that I wanted something organic to play off the angles of the building. It's about ruralness and wilderness being pitted against modern urbanism.

DROITCOUR How is the idea of ruralness realized in the work?

SPANGLER When I lived in New York, I worked in bas-relief. Those pieces were more narrative and pictorial, dealing with breakdown of rural society and politics. It was something like commercial country music, which didn't get created until people moved to the city, from a position of exile. In New York it made sense to make work on political, moral themes. When I started spending more time back here, I didn't have that need anymore. The ruralness in my work now is more about the actual wilderness and my place in it. This sculpture is something new for me. It's a beginning rather than an end.

DROITCOUR Your older work has figuration in the carvings, whereas the forms in Bog Walker are more abstract. Is this part of the new direction you're moving in?

SPANGLER It is. Though I'm still using silhouettes of woodworking tools. I used to trace old tools to make a border, which became more abstract when I carved. Now I want to figure out how to make art that's really out of the forest. My sense of how I am in the world is formed by my relationship to the woods. The forest has its own architecture. It has open spots and crowded spots. The height of the trees makes me think about older cities, like Brooklyn, where the buildings—the four-or five-story brownstones—are about the height of trees. There's something about those proportions that always felt very natural to me. I've realized that the woods really informed my sense of being.

DROITCOUR Bog Walker is situated near some groves of trees. Did that figure into your conception of it?

SPANGLER A park is a containment of nature that's pleasant for people. I've never really gotten that much out of parks. If I designed a park, I would plant poplar trees. The only way to kill a poplar tree is to let it die of old age. If you cut it, it stays alive. Little ones sprout from the stump—they call that "dog hair popple" up north. I'd let poplars grow in a half-acre section of the park, then have them cut down every forty years, so as soon as everyone gets used to the nice big trees, they are harvested in order for the park to stay alive

People believe that they're getting a true sense of nature at state parks, but those places are orchestrated. People get attached to old oak trees and think that is the height of what nature has to offer. But it isn't. The

height is the birth of the forest. They're most alive when they're new. When a forest reaches maturity, there's very little underbrush. Fewer animals can exist there, fewer bugs. But as humans we think that's really pleasant. We're conditioned to that aesthetic, which probably goes back to English manors and John Muir and all that. But I think that the true forest is constantly dying and rebirthing and has this ferocity to it. It's a beautiful thing.

DROITCOUR You've been living in northern Minnesota for almost ten years now. Has that changed the way you think about the wilderness?

SPANGLER I started out there. I first built the place that I live in now when I was twenty-three, twenty-four. It was very crude and very rough. I didn't have electricity. The land was a jungle. I had to beat back the brush, get rid of bugs, and build a garden. Since then, the spot has definitely become more domesticated to myself and my needs. I had a neighbor who came over with a Bobcat to help me do some work, and he said an amazing thing to me. I kept saying, "Let's open this up." He said, "Aaron, the woods have to start somewhere." I really thought about that: where in my realm do the domesticated things I've created, like the orchards and the garden, begin and end? I maintain trails for skiing and getting firewood because it's too hard to get through the thick brush. Sometimes I abandon a trail and the woods take it right back. If I let my place go for a couple of years it would revert to hazel brush and chokecherry bushes.

DROITCOUR Are you in touch with artisans and craftsmen in your area?

SPANGLER I have good friends who are weavers. They grow their own flax, scrape it out, and make linen. But that's a pretty recent phenomenon. I don't really have an experience of rural craftsman around me who I identify with. There have always been chainsaw carvers making bears, eagles, and wizards. My main education was when I moved back north after college and worked at the sawmill, mostly with Native American guys and old Germans. That gave me an education about American history, the history of the area, and also about the woods, how forests grow, how to build things. It was my graduate school.

DROITCOUR Are the forms you use in your sculpture related to that history?

SPANGLER A lot of the shapes in my work come from old tools, from the early pioneer days. I don't even know what they're for. I find them in junk stores, make stencils, and use them to make designs.

DROITCOUR So you spend more time in junk stores than museums of pioneer culture?

SPANGLER They're one and the same. You can go to the local historical society and find the same stuff they have in the back room of the junk store, though it's in better shape. What do you need to work in the woods? Cant hooks, axes, saws, and things for farming and working with animals. It's basic stuff that people use all over the world, for breaking raw material down into things that people need to function.

DROITCOUR Your work faces a bench sculpture by another Minnesota artist, Kinji Akagawa, who you took classes from at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. What did you learn from him?

SPANGLER Kinji has a great pedagogical style. He wants to learn from you. There's a give and take. He's a beautiful soul in that way. When I was in art school, I was not a craftsman at all. I just made stuff out of junk. It was kind of about war, as if I was playing army and making weapons out of stuff. I started carving almost by accident. I wanted to make murals on the side of a building that I'd made out of junk. I started using a carpenter's chisel and it just sucked me in. I just got obsessed with it. Then I got a job at the sawmill, where I learned how to get good lumber out of a log. There's an art to it. The old guy that I worked for said there are sawyers and there are wood butchers. A sawyer knows how to get the optimum board out of the log based on the nature of the log.

DROITCOUR Bog Walker is your first work in bronze. How did you approach that? What did you learn from it?

SPANGLER When we were doing the patina on the bronze, I kept thinking about how it would look outdoors. I know what my wood sculptures look like outside. But I hadn't realized how the play of light on bronze is much more nuanced than the way light hits a piece of wood. I'm still absorbing what I learned from that process. I'd like to learn more.

Sculpture Garden piece gives Park Rapids artist a boost

Euan Kerr August 18, 2016



Aaron Spangler documented the development of his sculpture over the months using his smartphone. The first picture of the block was taken on March 17, 2016. The final image, taken on July 10, shows the piece as Spangler was approaching completion. Courtesy Aaron Spangler

In a studio north of Park Rapids, a couple of hundred miles from the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Aaron Spangler is taking his art to a new level.

The sculptor has been at work creating a large abstract piece that, once it has been lifted into place by a crane, will become a prominent feature on the new sculpture walk beside the Walker Art Center.

We are now a little less than a year away from the grand reopening of the [new and expanded Sculpture Garden](#). The landscaping is well underway. Spangler's work appears in collections around the country, but the piece on the sculpture walk will be his first bronze.



Spangler's piece, which is carved in basswood, will be cast in bronze and displayed

Spangler says he lives "way uptown" in Park Rapids. His studio sits outside his home on the edge of a lake in the woods, a 25 minutes' drive north from town.

"I think actually my biggest waste of time is spent here looking for chisels," he said as he rummaged through a tangle of tools on a trolley in his studio. "Finding the right chisel. I can never find them. I can never *see* them."

There must have been a couple of dozen chisels in the pile, each with a different shape or breadth.

"There we go," he said, finally finding the right one.



The nest of chisels sits on a trolley. Euan Kerr | *MPR News*

He crossed the room to the huge basswood form he's created over the past few months. It's close to 8 feet tall, and from some

"I am really trying to get it to a point where it looks like multiple things," he said. "You can reference many things, but it doesn't look like any one thing too much."

"Let's try these here," he said, pulling out his mallet and starting to carve.



A view from the Walker Art Center roof of where Spangler's piece will eventually be displayed, photographed June 27. Euan Kerr | *MPR News*

Spangler's sculpture started as a 1,400-pound block of wood, carefully glued together from pristine planks of basswood. When it's finished it will be cast in bronze and given a patina. While this massive object is taking shape in his studio, Spangler has to be constantly imagining how the finished piece will look.

The way he describes it, his carving is almost instinctual. He

"It's really about being in the studio, most of the time," he said. "Sitting and looking. And sitting and looking and looking and looking, and carving and carving. I would say almost half of it's looking."

Spangler, 45, grew up in Minnesota, but he has traveled far to get to this point. He headed east, like many young artists, and lived in Brooklyn for some years, scrounging around for materials.

"When I first started carving, I was carving in hard maple bowling-alley floors," he said. "It was what I had and I did it, and by God I made it, but when I look back, what a ridiculous thing to do."

He and his wife, chef and broadcaster Amy Thielen, thought their future lay out east. But they came back to Minnesota for summers, to be close to family and enjoy a little quiet.

"Then the whole economic world collapsed and we were glad to be here, not paying that high rent," said Spangler.

Standing in this studio, it's hard to imagine his wanting to be anywhere else. His brow often knots as he thinks about what he's



The form Spangler has carved was originally glued together from basswood planks by retired cabinet builder Jack Watenhofer using wood from Twin Inlets Saw Mill in Park Rapids, where Spangler once worked. Courtesy Aaron Spangler

"Sometimes I wonder, like, what is my pace? Why is it that tempo?" he asked as he pounded away with his hammer. He began hammering faster. "Sometimes it can be like that," he reflected, and then returned to his normal rhythm.

He paused and felt his pulse. "It's almost my heartbeat," he said, and then resumed carving.

For months he has shaped the form, sanding down the finished bulges and edges until the surface is smooth. The smell of sawdust hangs in the air.

He's carved patterns and forms into the surface. At first glance they could be taken for ancient tribal markings, or hieroglyphs. But they actually started as tracings of tools, toys



Spangler in his studio in Park Rapids during the carving of his piece.

Euan Kerr | *MPR News*

For this work he hand-chisels, using his carefully sharpened gouges to carve patterns into the smooth basswood.

He's not concerned about slipping and making a wrong mark.

"Doesn't matter. You just change what you are doing, then," he said.

Spangler's low-key approach belies the seriousness of what he is doing: creating something that could be around for centuries. "I try not to think about that," he said with a laugh.

In a few weeks the piece will be cast at a foundry in Brooklyn. The process finishes with the application of a patina.

All being well, the sculpture will be installed at the Walker by late

The Minneapolis Park Board is spending \$10 million on landscaping and drainage work as it expands the Sculpture Garden by five acres. The Walker will add \$15 million worth of art to the garden, including Spangler's piece.

Walker Visual Arts Curator Siri Engberg stood recently on the roof of the building, looking down on the construction site that is becoming the garden. There was an actual X on the ground, marking the spot where the Spangler will go.



Spangler sometimes uses gesso to highlight the markings he is carving onto the surface of his piece. Courtesy Aaron Spangler

"Aaron was very interested in having the piece, which is quite human-scaled, be at an intersection of two pathways," Engberg explained, so it can be viewed from different directions.

Engberg said the Walker is proud that its past commissions for

"And we felt Aaron was at that point with his work where outdoor sculpture was something he had not yet done," she said, "and it would be the perfect moment to invite him to take his work somewhere new."

During a visit by the artist, Walker staff set up a shape roughly the size of Spangler's piece and set it in place so he could get an idea of how it would look. There's a lot to think about when placing a heavy bronze designed to appear different from every angle. Spangler said the experience made him realize he wanted to build a platform for the finished work.

"But I also have to think about which side is going to be viewed from where," he said. "Ideally, I could just be there and turn it around, but I think I am going to have to have a plan before that happens."

And then, like the rest of us, he'll have to wait until the garden's opening to see how it looks in place.

Art in Print

The Dread North of Aaron Spangler

by Mason Riddle, *from Volume 5, Number 2*



The Wall (2014), woodcut, image 53 3/4 x 30 inches, sheet 58 1/4 x 34 inches. Edition of 6.

With his recent suite of ten woodblock prints, *Luddite*, Aaron Spangler has conjured a tangled and immersive world that unwittingly channels the densely symbolic tales of Hieronymus Bosch within a 21st-century stylistic idiom. Spangler's bold, one-color woodcuts, with their complex skeins of pattern and form, lack Bosch's jewel-like hues and detailed naturalism. But just as Bosch was an acute observer of Dutch society at the turn of the 16th century, Spangler is an intrepid interpreter of rural life—in his case, the vicinity of the small town of Park Rapids in northern Minnesota, a landscape of deep woods, granite outcroppings and cold blue lakes. Spangler and his wife, Amy Theilen, a chef and cookbook author, are both native to the area and, after years away, now live on the town's outskirts in a forest near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. He describes the prints' subject matter as “rural chaos, high anxiety, political outrage, nature's beauty and bounty, stoicism, severe religion, wellness and spiritual bliss,”¹ suggesting the narrative fury of Bosch, who showed little mercy for the besotted clerics, misbehaving nuns and compromised peasants who peopled his paintings. Both artists treat the world with smart, dark cynicism.

SAVEUR

THE ENLIGHTENED ENTERTAINER

Midwestern cookbook author Amy Thielen learns the value of laid-back entertaining and garage parties

BY AMY THIELEN, JULY 21, 2015



Entertaining. As much as I love to do it, I dislike the word itself. It sounds so matronly—saying it out loud makes me break out in polka dots of cold deviled quail eggs. *Hospitality* is just as buttoned up, but a step better because it contains the suggestion of generosity, which is really what throwing a party is about. My social contract is pretty simple: I make way too much food and invite too many people, and in turn they bring too much wine and we stay up too late. I provide the dinner, and they, en masse, provide the din that soothes my excess-loving soul.

When my husband, Aaron Spangler, and I moved back home to rural Minnesota after nearly ten years of living in Brooklyn—swapping a small apartment on a hopping urban street corner for a rustic house on 150 acres of lonely Northern wilderness—we started having more parties. It happened naturally: Inviting a throng to drive down our snaking dirt road was a consequence of our sudden rural isolation and our newfound space.

Not that we didn't throw lots of parties in the city. I'd regularly set out buffets for 20 on our tiny kitchen counter. Having cooked on the line at restaurants for years, I expected to keep up my game at home, which meant my party food was either derivative of the restaurants I cooked in (shallots confited in red wine sauce—delicious but fussy) or channeled someone else's more storied rural roots (smoky Southern-style pork butt). I rarely served Midwestern food, which I thought of at the time as stodgy and stuck in the past. (I have since become one of its fiercest advocates.) Back then I dreamed about throwing classy parties—proper ones with champagne in flutes, individual appetizers, two to three

courses, and well-behaved children. That dream died fast and, truth be told, painlessly, when I moved back to Minnesota. Any guests who come with expectations of haute cuisine stand corrected when they arrive to find me still peeling carrots, kicking the oven door shut with my house mocs, and taking breaks to sip a cocktail as I pound out a sauce in my mortar.

Though I used to try to control the scene, now I let things *happen*. Blame it on middle age or becoming a mom, but I've given up on trying to herd people. When I have a party, I let them wander where they may, and I've found that guests at our house tend to follow the fire. The congregation that begins in the kitchen around my working burners often moves after dinner to Aaron's studio, where folks idle happily around the wood stove like bugs around a late-night lightbulb. Naturally, it makes sense sometimes to just throw the party *in* the garage, as we're doing today.

Aaron's studio is actually more hive than garage. Here he makes sculptures—some freestanding 3-D pieces, some bas-reliefs that hang on the wall—from local basswood. The studio is filled with chunks of wood in various states of creation and demise, not least of which is an enormous basswood log that he'll peel and cut into long curling cylinders. Freshly glued-up basswood panels line the walls, and the wood chips litter the ground, making a shuffly foot mulch as reassuring as peanut shells on the floor of a dive bar.

The garage party confirms the weird theory I lit on when I moved back home: The deeper you move into the country, the farther the party travels from the formal heart of the house. Fancy dining rooms give way to bright kitchens, and when you get to really rural areas such as ours, you find people accustomed to throwing parties in cement-floored shops and garages. Now that I've logged time here, I get it: When the meter dips to super-casual, the social-barometric pressure falls. It might seem like this kind of informality is one lazy lady's excuse, but I don't think so. When it comes to dinner parties, a lack of rules in an unconventional space feels rather electric.

And just when all this extreme informality begins to sound dangerously close to a set of commandments, remember that party rules work best when they are noted but then subversively trespassed—which also applies to the rules of English grammar. So iron your linen napkins if you must, but remember: Parties are fun, but parties in the garage are always *funner*.

Aaron Spangler:
Idol, 2013, paint
and graphite on
basswood, 64 by
48 by 17 inches;
at Horton.



AARON SPANGLER

Horton

Aaron Spangler's basswood carvings are rife with imagery that reflects his interest in Native American mysticism, natural phenomena and contemporary rural American life. Despite his use of traditional materials and methods,

Spangler's work is more about a collective and personal connection to the Northern Minnesota landscape than a fetishization of tradition itself.

The first of two galleries presented *Homeschool* (all works 2013), which was also the title of the show. A few feet high, it is a small chair roughly hewn from a log. This plainly constructed, functional sculpture was meant to offer a place to sit and reflect upon the other works in the room; these included low-relief carvings on the wall, freestanding totemic sculptures and a two-dimensional frottage (a crayon rubbing on linen taken from one of Spangler's own carvings).

In a recent interview, Spangler discussed the proliferation of "homesteaders" near his hometown of Park Rapids, Minn. The title of *Praying Hands*, a nearly 6-foot-wide and 46-inch-high black wall relief, alludes to the predominance of Christianity among these homesteaders. Wings (bird or angel), cosmic radials, stylized human arms and geometric shapes are carved across the surface of the sculpture. Its irregular shape suggests both the form of two hands clasped in prayer and Elizabeth Murray's shaped canvases from the 1980s. The current homesteading movement, like the back-to-the-land trend of the '60s, embraces a willful detachment from technology-driven commerce and a spirit of resourcefulness—all values which are embodied in Spangler's work.

Idol, a freestanding, zoomorphic sculpture measuring 64 by 48 by 17 inches, resembles an ancient reliquary as well as a wood-burning stove. Carved leaflike forms cover its surface. This dense network of concentric radial shapes is woven together by a series of fluid, vinelike grooves that create a thicket of botanical imagery. The sculpture is painted with a black gesso and graphite mixture that the artist has used regularly in his earlier sculptures.

Spangler has introduced color in some of these recent works. For *Water*, he left a water-logged tree trunk in his

studio for nearly two years to dry. He then chiseled away the areas of rotten bark and sanded the log down to a bulbous column which he stained turquoise and mounted vertically on a rough wooden pedestal. Delicate fissures running the length of the sculpture poetically trace its decay.

The lyrical pattern of markings chiseled into the unpainted surface of the wall sculpture *Stump Mountain*, which is 62 by 53 by 5½ inches, underscores the work's associations to rural American folk songs such as Ola Belle Reed's "High on a Mountain" or Harry McClintock's "Big Rock Candy Mountain." The mountain shape is likewise evocative of an arch, perhaps an ode to the Carpenter Gothic-style homes that dot the Midwestern landscape, including the famous Dibble House portrayed in Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* (1930).

Spangler's output is infused with a pragmatist ethos, evinced through the evolution of his working process. He came upon carving as his favored medium when he decided to incorporate some carved elements into a found object sculpture he was making. He grabbed a sharpened screwdriver for that piece. Though he uses chisels now, his carving technique is self-taught. Spangler's curiosity about materials and techniques has yielded increasingly complex arrangements that are also conceptually rich.

—Eric Sutphin

STAGE & ARTS

American idyll: Sculptor Aaron Spangler comes out of the North Woods

Back from New York, Minnesota sculptor Aaron Spangler fuses city smarts with rustic imagery in a print show at Highpoint.

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Mary Abbe

After a decade making a name for himself in Brooklyn, sculptor Aaron Spangler returned to Minnesota with his wife and infant son. Settling a few miles from the headwaters of the Mississippi in a spit of a burg called Two Inlets (pop. 237), they aimed to keep things simple. That meant just adding electricity, running water and another room to the log studio he'd hand-built there years earlier.

That was five years ago, and, as it turned out, even Up North, Spangler and his family have never been very far off the grid. Since the move, his big carved-wood sculptures have been shown in New York, Houston, Berlin and Rotterdam and at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, among other places. Simultaneously, the career of his wife, Amy Thielen, took off with the publication of her award-winning cookbook, "The New Midwestern Table," and the success of her "Heartland Table" television show, now in its second season on the Food Network.

Now Spangler, 43, has a new series of woodcut prints at Highpoint Center for Printmaking in Minneapolis through Nov. 15. With their sophisticated mix of rustic and personal imagery, the prints have been selling briskly to private collectors and museums, including the Walker and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The prints are not as dark, intense or political as his early lead-black sculptures, which bristled with bas-relief images of claustrophobic forests, primitive industrial sites, menacing tools and weapons of war. Chiseled from slabs of basswood procured at a sawmill where Spangler once worked, the brooding sculptures succeeded in "transforming a marginalized craft ... into a conduit for the mythology of the Midwest," said Artforum magazine.

Spangler said recently by phone, "In a way, when I was in New York, I was more tied to a rural perspective and rural politics because I was always longing for something that I didn't have there. It's like country western music, which was really created by people who had moved to cities and missed their roots and old life. Coming home definitely freed me from that."

Three years in the making

He spent three years, off and on, working on the 10 Highpoint prints. The smallest is about 3 feet square; the three largest are roughly 9 feet tall by 4 feet wide.

At a glance, they look like big abstract jigsaw puzzles — jumbles of black-and-white stripes, zipper-ribbons, dots, gouges, squiggles, feathery marks — on gray backgrounds that resemble stained floorboards. Upon scrutiny, images appear — of body parts (hands, footprints, heads, outlined torsos); tools (levels, gouges, rakes, chisels, saw blades), and other stuff (chair arms, crosses, kitchen utensils, guns). The images overlap, fragment, fold and break apart. One print is a rusty brown; all the rest are black, white and gray.

Outlines of guns recur, but they are not intended as a statement about weapons, he said.

"It definitely comes from my own experience, but it's kind of American life," he said. "Guns are tools as well. They are very threatening, but there's a pragmatic thing there, so I try not to cast too much judgment and to let them be like all the other tools. Likewise,



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HIGHPOINT CENTER FOR PRINTMAKING

From left, Highpoint master printer Cole Rogers, intern Mary Schaubsluger, artist Aaron Spangler and intern Michael Ferut used



FEED LOADER

Rogers, left, and Spangler measured one of Spangler's prints. Below is Spangler's "Waiting in Line."

a cross can be used or abused; it can be a metaphor for Christianity or mean different things. There are lines drawn, but they're not always black and white."

Some of the images are highly personal. The upside-down figure in "Waiting in Line," camouflaged with leaves, vines and flowers, is an outline of Spangler's own body. The pale, barely perceptible child outlined in "How Do I Say Goodbye" is Spangler and Thielen's son, Hank. The title alludes in part to Spangler's brother, who died in a 2000 plane crash at age 31.

"When something like that happens, you lose your shared memories," Spangler said of his brother's death.

No Luddites here

To produce the prints, Spangler carved the imagery into slabs of wood that he then hauled 200 miles to Highpoint, where master printer Cole Rogers and crew figured out how to transfer the images onto paper.

Because the wood was so rough, and some of Spangler's lines and marks so delicate, the slabs couldn't be inked and run through a regular Highpoint press. Doing so would have obliterated the fine lines and reduced many of the subtleties to muck. So the wood was slathered with ink in the usual way, and a sheet of paper laid over it. But then Spangler and the Highpoint staff carefully transferred the ink onto the paper by rubbing the back of the sheets with wooden spoons and little palm-sized pads.

Rogers also recommended that Spangler use a sturdy but tissue-thin Japanese paper handmade from fibers of the kozo shi shrub. As the paper absorbed the ink, the printers adjusted their pressure to create darker and lighter areas. The process was so labor-intensive that they produced just eight prints of most images, and only three each of the biggest ones.

The series' title, "Luddite," is a droll reference to the old-fashioned handiwork involved. Historically, the term refers to anti-technology protests by English weavers displaced by new machinery in the 19th century, but it has expanded to mean general opposition to modernity and technology. It is not, Spangler insists, a disparaging allusion to printmaking nor to his North Woods neighbors.

"Ours was a sort of Luddite life here at first, not by choice but because we couldn't afford anything else," Spangler said. "But it's an open-ended title that refers to all that stuff.

"I probably know more Luddites living in Brooklyn than I do here," he added with a chuckle.



Kari Adelaide, Contributor

Writer, curator and doctoral student living in New York City

Artist Interview: Aaron Spangler

02/14/2013 06:55 pm ET | Updated Dec 06, 2017

[Aaron Spangler](#) lives and works in Park Rapids, Minnesota, near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. An intimacy with this vast northern landscape helps define his practice, as detailed in our recent conversation. Spangler's work has appeared in recent exhibitions at the [Walker Art Center](#) and a new selection of his carved Basswood sculptures will grace the floors of [Horton Gallery](#) in an upcoming solo presentation, slated for Fall 2013.



I know that you spent much of your career in New York City. How does now living in rural Northern Minnesota, outside of Park Rapids, affect and shape your practice, vision, or the intentions of your work?

Many of the things — the themes and visuals — that I'm interested in are here. Having the luxury of taking them for granted liberates me from my compulsions towards them. In New York I felt bound to a memory of what is rural, and here it just is.

Can you tell us about your transition from working with found object sculptures to wood-carving?

I began my interest in sculpture through found materials. The constructions were scrappy and crude. For example, in a sculpture of a building I was working on, I wanted to have carved murals inside of it, so I started carving them with a screwdriver I had sharpened; that's when I became hooked. The line between illusion and real sculptural space fueled my interest in bas-relief and still does.

What images or themes inspire your work, and do you intend for the sculptures to crystallize or convey specific or even dominant narratives?

Currently I'm witnessing the huge wave of Christian homesteaders sweeping into the rural landscape. I don't think people are aware of the extent of this movement; they're mostly young families with many children, they're into natural foods and healing, gardening and livestock, home birthing and home schooling, all requisite hippie activities — but with a somewhat "othered" and seclusionary twist. They are everywhere.

The other day I was down at the sporting goods store where folks are buying up weaponry as if it were a run on the bank. A young woman with her husband and baby were looking at a pink-handled mini pistol for protection, and I'm thinking, wow, should I be more worried about where I live? Am I naively walking around the woods, or going to the fleet store, the Dairy Queen, etc... unarmed?

What has the process been like of independently learning the craftsmanship of carving, and have these techniques evolved in surprising ways?

I began carving on a whim and over time it slowly evolved. I've never been concerned with working towards mastery of craft, the evolution of my abilities is motivated by content.

What does it mean for you to use age-old mediums like wood-carving in an art landscape that may sometimes be less attuned to ideas of traditional skill and traditional mediums? Is there an overarching desire in your practice to reflect something that carries a different ethos from, say, the idea of more ephemeral conceptual practices, found objects, or digital art, etc.?

Well, I think painting and drawing, as well as assemblage are ancient mediums that still thrive. But for the most part I don't associate natural materials with time, they are always around (hopefully) and here for us to use. I think the reason why wood carving remains on the margins of contemporary art is because of its rural associations. Of course this is why I like it and find it useful to the meaning of my work.



American Gothic:
Aaron Spangler & Alison Elizabeth Taylor
April 21- August 21, 2011

SECCA



Aaron Spangler, *Prairie Destroyer*, 2007

Somewhere between the autobiographical fiction of Wolfe and the persevering art of Gaman, artists Aaron Spangler and Alison Elizabeth Taylor translate memories, experience and cumulative chagrin into restless portraits of place. Across the Midwest and the Southwest; Minnesota to Nevada, and beyond; they expand personal observation into an earnest, but ambivalent mapping of rural America. Like Wood did in *American Gothic*, Spangler and Taylor populate the places of their present (and past) with the people they imagine living there – animating architectures and environs with surrogate/sacrificial protagonists. Turning figure into foil in the style of such films as *Children of Men* and *Y Tu Mama Tambien*, these artists trace the contours of traumatized landscapes as both document and metaphor. From uncanny Minnesota forests to stark Las Vegas deserts, they reconstruct narratives as they deconstruct their collapse – articulating the affects of industry, economy and the pursuit of utopia in an antiquated, but highly appropriate manner. Where Wood employed structures of the Northern Renaissance to paint small-town scenarios, Spangler and Taylor resurrect Romanesque and Renaissance-era woodworking techniques to forge purposefully timeworn tableaux. Working with the medium of wood and the respective practices of bas-relief and intarsia, they transform what was once the domain of royal and ecclesiastical courts into representations of a rusty, ragged countryside. In so doing, Spangler and Taylor resurrect what critic David Frankel calls, “a minority art historical specialty and territory for hobbyists” into a timely platform to envision the future of places that drift outside history.



Aaron Spangler, *A Simple Heart*, 2011



Burl Mask, 2008

Spangler's *A Simple Heart* (2011) locates one of the artist's signature wood carvings – featuring an elongated cabin reminiscent of Wood's Carpenter Gothic muse – atop a broken side table, its door falling off the hinges. Incorporating fable, critique and the decay of a traditional manual industry, this piece speaks tellingly of the prairie native's diaristic, decades-long vision of his home state's travails. Where Bruegel meets barnyard, Spangler's use of historical relief carving fuses medieval gravitas with a folk vernacular, "as though," in the words of critic Ken Johnson, "its author were a backwoods prophet carving his own Book of Revelations." In the process, Spangler turns what Johnson describes as "an antiquated craft with little relevance to modern technologies of communication," into what fellow critic Eugenia Bell rightfully designates, "a conduit for the mythology of the Midwest." As pioneering settlement, provincial bunker and endangered community, the prairie continually asserts itself in his work as material, influence, technique and subject matter. As a case in point, Spangler's preferred medium of basswood is a product of the waning timber industry near his North Minnesota home. Even the burls in this wood (akin to cancerous tumors in the body) that result from environmental and/or manmade trauma become fodder for aesthetic and socio-political employ. Using only chisels, mallets and a Dremel-type rotary tool, Spangler forges Frankenstein-like clusters, totems and panels from this soft wood. With the subsequent application of black gesso and graphite, these objects take on simultaneous qualities of talisman and tombstone.

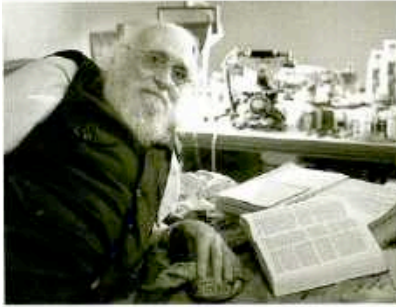


Aaron Spangler, *The Sniper's Home*, 2005



Decorated Soldier, 2008

The dark patina casts an ominous pall but there is an ever-present, Brancusi-like respect for materials as the basic forms (and grain) of logs, blocks and gouges can be observed in his freestanding sculpture and roughly hewn skies. In place of human protagonists, trees (and their branches) often take on leading roles as they fight, embrace, engorge and break with anthropomorphic/surrogate-like character. In concert with oversized leaves, giant shafts of wheat and endless fields of corn, trees also constitute a critical part of Spangler's iconographic language – “speaking” the symbols of rural America alongside cabins, churches and barns. These more benign elements are paired with guns, flags, belching automobiles, overhead bombers and ruinous buildings in an evolving lexicon of conflict, mutation and cross-pollination. Like the visionary Mexican Muralists of the 1920s and 30s (ex. Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros), Spangler mobilizes archetypal forms and populist rhetoric to consider fundamental socio-political issues. In this context, with the zealous roar of a Futurist manifesto, war becomes a multi-faceted metaphor to consider imperialist industries, diverging social attitudes and the destruction of provincial practices – both good and bad. With the schizophrenic fervor of a loyalist-anarchist spawn, Spangler depicts books that alternately open and burn at the same time that decimated ghost towns yield to nature's primordial reclamation. In this spectacularly frantic arena of what critic Merrily Kerr labels, “back-to-the-land survival of the fittest,” a centripetal nexus exerts its force. Most evident in freestanding work such as *Songbird* and *Decorated Soldier*, the laws of linear perspective and objective integrity implode into incestuous amalgams of military regalia, farming equipment and rural life. The ensuing maelstrom of incongruous actions, objects and architectures churn tensely like the psycho-geography of Midwestern consciousness.



Renaldo Kuhler

Photo by Roger Manley

Sharing Renaldo Kuhler's Secret World

Gregg Museum of Art & Design at NC State in Raleigh, NC

The drawings of scientific illustrator Renaldo Kuhler, on display this summer at the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at NC State, are simply amazing. Richly detailed and intricately elaborate, his dense layering and obsessive technique, visually intrigues and rivets the eyes. But for all their startling technical detail, the drawings are but a portion of what's going on in this exhibition.

Renaldo grew up a shy, introspective child in a difficult, authoritarian household; his father a talented though temperamental painter and industrial designer, his mother stricken with bouts of manic depression. Like many young people, he dealt with his circumstances by creating an escape via an imaginary friend. But it is how he did so and the extent of his accomplishment in the ensuing six decades of work that is most striking.

The fictional friend is the violinist Augustin Vallovin, who along with callist Hallock Jenkins, was envisioned accompanying young Kuhler (playing second violin) in an orchestra (a craftsman as well as draftsman, Renaldo even built his own violin -also included in the Gregg show- from scrap wood to enhance the narrative). The fantastical world evolved from these two companions and grew, eventually encompassing hundreds of characters and several cities in a tiny nation Renaldo named Rocaterrania, for the "rocky terrain" of Rockland County along the U.S.-Canadian border near his boyhood home in New York State. Rocaterranians have their own language and alphabet, dress in their own distinctive national costumes (upon which Kuhler has also designed and created his own wardrobe), their own religion, and a hybridized Victorian-style architecture. Rocaterrania's history is Renaldo's history; a nation where various tyrannical governments, political upheavals and a strong sense of individualism mirror his own yearnings and quest for personal independence in life.

Renaldo retired after a 30-year career at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh, producing technical biological drawings for reference materials. He kept the Rocaterrania drawings a secret all those years fearing that people "would think there was something wrong" with him and not understand his efforts. Luckily, filmmaker Brett Ingram happened upon Renaldo's work while producing a separate video project at the museum. The two forged a friendship and bond that culminated in the 2009 documentary film *Rocaterrania* revealing Renaldo's personal work publicly for the first time.

While the Gregg show is a small sampling of the work Renaldo has produced thus far on Rocaterrania, it is a fruitful glimpse enlivened by maquettes and models of street kiosks, a lighthouse, steam boiler and smoking pipes crafted from brown grocery-bag paper and glue. The models and drawings both illuminate what Gregg director Roger Manley described as Renaldo's ability to "link up his personal unconscious and his hand in a way that is a lot closer than it is for most people. There was less in the way. He drew what he was thinking about and that reflected what he was dealing with."

"Renaldo in the Land of Rocaterrania" is on display at the Gregg Museum of Art and Design in NCSU's Talley Student Center through September 3rd with a screening of the documentary film on Saturday August, 20th from 6-8 p.m.

by Dave Delcambre

Surreal Places and Scenes: American Gothic

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston Salem, NC

The withering inheritance of manifest destiny is writ large in Alison Elizabeth Taylor's marquetry panels and Aaron Spangler's dark sculptures and bas-reliefs in the show "American Gothic," at Winston-Salem's Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art through Aug. 21. In their spectacular images of ruined homesteads and subdivisions, Taylor and Spangler dwell on themes of isolation, war, and the bankrupting of the natural landscape. Another good title for this show might be "Now What?"

These Renaissance-era woodworking techniques lend the work of both artists a biting, temporally displaced nostalgia. Their arcane techniques combine with the fact that the wood itself used to be alive to imbue Taylor's and Spangler's depictions of social and emotional detritus with conceptual power. But it's not a simply ironic gesture. By inescapable extension, their artifacts provisionally join the cultural debris.

Taylor's nine inlaid panels each merit putting one's nose an inch away to gape at her handiwork. But once one steps back, the eyes must be at the service of the mind. Ranging from inscrutable to Cindy Sherman-film-still impenetrable, Taylor's works bear witness to both the depletion of the Las Vegas landscape she grew up in and the isolation people feel within it. In "Russell Road," two women stand in the road in front of a geodesic dome house. The women could be laughing or arguing. The house could be abandoned or inhabited. The women's tentative postures and the lame architecture behind them sum to a tone of failed futures, made garish by the warm tones of the finished, fitted wood.

Spangler carves sculptures and virtuosic bas-relief panels, all finished with a matte black gesso and burnished with graphite. Like Taylor, Spangler's panel pieces depict surreal places and scenes, although they lack people and are more allegorical. In "Mercenary Battalions," Spangler sicks American myths upon themselves, showing how the idealized Thoresevian harmony with nature eventually eats itself. Fractured trees hurtle around a rural neighborhood as a house is airlifted from the chaos by helicopter, dumping its contents out its foundation. Spangler's freestanding sculptures are less pictorial, montaging abstracted natural, military, and industrial forms into post-petroleum monoliths. If his bas-reliefs give the impression of a tornado tearing up the landscape, the sculptures might be the resultant debris mashed together.

Both artists' hard-edged content foils the preciousness of their craft. Despite Spangler's breathtaking carving and compositional skills, his sculptures look as if they survived a toxic fire. The perfect finish of Taylor's ornate inlay is mesmerizing but somehow also brings crappy rec room wood paneling to mind. Ultimately, both artists have taken their craft to such a high level that it becomes almost transparent. The works provoke one to think first and drop one's jaw second.

by Chris Vitiello



American Gothic: Aaron Spangler & Alison Elizabeth Taylor, Installation View.

Photo courtesy of SECCA

Show reflects artists' bleak view of America

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Credit: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art



Alison Elizabeth Taylor's works conjure a world of deterioration and desperation, as in her piece called "Paradise Gates."

By: [TOM PATTERSON](#)

Published: July 24, 2011

What does the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's exhibition "American Gothic" have to do with Grant Wood's iconic painting of the same title?

Wood's Depression-era painting, not included in the show, depicts a pitchfork-wielding farmer and his stern-faced, buttoned-up female companion stiffly posed in front of a Gothic Revival-style farm cottage.

Predating the exhibition's works by 80 years, the painting is referenced in the title because Steven Matijcio, the SECCA curator, wants to make a point. In the brochure essay he writes about the relationships he sees between "American Gothic" and the works of this show's artists, [Alison Elizabeth Taylor](#) and [Aaron Spangler](#).

It's a worthy point, highlighting a comparison intended to provoke thought about the themes and issues that Taylor and Spangler deal with in their work.

Wood's painting is an enigmatic image that has been read by viewers as either a celebration or an ironic parody of rural America. The works of Taylor and Spangler works also make ambivalent references to rural [America](#).

Taylor and Spangler work primarily with wood, a primal, timeless material that tends to evoke a rustic sensibility, and they employ techniques that recall bygone eras.

Taylor creates two-dimensional scenes using a wood-inlay technique called marquetry, developed about 500 years ago for decorating furniture and other objects. Her nine pieces depict real or realistically imagined people and places in the contemporary American Southwest, where she has spent much of her life.

Taylor's works conjure a world of gracelessly aging desert suburbs and deteriorating towns. The characters in some scenes appear restless, desperately insecure or paranoid, and are typically engaged in self-destructive or selfishly unproductive activities.

The two furtive-looking young men in the foreground of Taylor's "Paradise Gates" are seated in a neglected

***THE ABRADED AND INDEFINITE:
AARON SPANGLER'S RUBBINGS***



Aaron Spangler's woodcarvings are more instantly impressive than his recent crayon rubbings. But I'd like to write about the rubbings, because their raw images are burned in my mind. While Spangler's delicately carved, wood, graphite-encased sculptural allegories recombine narratives and symbolic imagery with a canny sophistication and soul, I am more concerned with the strange, mute rubbings.

They are unyielding. Beautiful, psychedelic, blunt, dumb. Expressive, iconic, pop, and fumbling. They feel inevitable and full of latent energy...

"That which rakes the soul."

"When you are only a line."

These two statements, printed in italics, face each other from the margins of opposite pages in Henri Michaux's *Miserable Miracle*, his account—in words and drawings—of experiments with mescaline. Next to "When you are only a line," Michaux writes in the body of the text:

Now only a line. A line that breaks up into a thousand aberrations. The whiplash of an infuriated carter would have been a relief to me. And no pity either. I, the accelerated line I had become, did not retreat, withstood each new slashing, was ready to form again, was on the point of forming again when the force, swifter than a meteor, falling upon me . . . It was agonizing because I resisted. . . .

To have become a line was a catastrophe, but, even more, it was a surprise, a prodigy. All of me had to pass along this line. And with the most appalling jolts.

The metaphysical taken over by the mechanical.

Forced to pass over the same path, myself, my thought, and the vibration.1

The massed images in Spangler's rubbings are a tangle of lines. They must be in order for the raised surfaces to register against the pushed crayon. Some passages recall lobes of the brain. But this visual analogy is glancing compared to the other ways the works seem to describe an inner mindscape. Sometimes the field is clotted and stuck, recalling inchoate communication, thoughts and feelings stuck in feedback loops, bumping into other thoughts and feelings. Sometimes the rubbings recall more natural landscape imagery with figure and ground. But throughout, the lines and masses of color register through the rough abrasion and pressing of their creation. They are a strange conflation of Leon Golub's pained and streaked limbs, the airy, lyric abstraction of Paul Klee, and runic psychedelic profusion. All of this is based in the

physicality of their creation, the mechanical over metaphysical, through the force and material resistance of crayon over surface over obdurate object.

I like to dwell in how they were made. Spangler hand-carved fragments of images and ornamental motifs. He stretched linen on sections of these objects and rubbed with crayons. While doing so, he had to make decisions about when and where to stop the rubbing, how to leave a fragment, and when/where to return to it. Where would he repeat it? Then he rubbed a different color on a different object. Then another. And then went back to the first to obliterate previous patterns/ images or to repeat them. No erasure, just accumulation, or moving away to form an outcropping, or to fill a void (that may not remain an outcropping or a void but could become a dark, deep pit of optical color mixing).

The result is something otherworldly and what would have been called “primitive” at one point. Most immediately, the rubbings recall tribal tattoos, all-over carved ornament, and non-Western visual hierarchies that eschew perspective. These references seem incidental but still present, and may account for a sense of intensity and some kind of alien function. But turn-of-the-century analysis of the “primitiveness”— or Modernity—of the ornamental offers another kind of useful analogy for Spangler’s work. Halfway into the infamous “Ornament and Crime” (1910), Adolf Loos writes:

The relationship between the earnings of a woodcarver and a turner, the criminally low wages paid to the embroideress and the lacemaker are well known. . . . Omission of ornament results in a reduction in the manufacturing tie and an increase in wages. . . . Ornament is wasted labour power and hence wasted health. It has always been so.²

Of course this was written in a different time and in response to ornament’s relationship to design and the consumer object. But the notion of wasted/expended time and labor and notions of efficiency may be transposed to our understanding and experience of fine art, and in turn a relationship to the artist’s process in constructing that experience. There is a sense of effort on the artist’s part that is transmitted to the viewer. And it is indeed in excess of what we might expect from a two-dimensional work, because of the sculpture that formed the lines and the rubbing that pressed into the almost dermal separating layer. The sense of care and craftsmanship comes up against a sense of reckless imagery and an overtly nonfunctionality-oriented psychic state. In “omitting the ornament,” as Loos suggests, for maximum efficiency and immediate legibility, one can imagine the clean, blank linen surface. That space of immediate, all-over understanding is exactly the antithesis of the effects Spangler achieves.

Poet Ann Lauterbach’s writing best captures a notion of contingent experience and the fragment, which is useful in looking at Spangler’s rubbings:

For a while I have been interested in the notion of a whole fragment. This fragment is not one in which one laments a lost whole, as in Stein, Eliot, and Pound, but which acknowledges the fact of our *unhandsome condition*, where we suffer from having been being, and in that acknowledgment foreground what is: the abraded and indefinite accumulation of an infinite dispersal of sums. In this construction, meaning abides or arises exactly as the place where “use” appears, “use” here meant both as pragmatic and as wear. It is my desire or intention to construct a poetics in which meaning is found within the terms of such contingency.³

Objects in their essential fragmentary, contingent nature haunt the two-dimensional works on linen by Aaron Spangler. Parts of bodies—limbs, musculature, networked sinews—weave in and out, creating more fragments and connective tissues. Totemic, ornamental, and involved, Spangler’s rubbings suggest the lives of objects literally and figuratively behind his work, and the physicality that conjures them. While the rubbings do indeed suggest labor and use (“abraded” and “indefinite,” to use Lauterbach’s words), even an excess of labor, they also suggest the efficient logic of scraps. Through reuse and accumulation of marks, Spangler has devised an aesthetic of excess built from thrift. DB

arts | wednesday



The cool and bold letters of Dana Frankfort's "HI," in her show at LaMontagne Gallery.

Playful and unfettered, words transcend meaning

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Words in art have gravity; they can jabber or command attention in a painting, competing with the visual aspects of a piece. Not Dana Frankfort's. In her show at LaMontagne Gallery, the words she paints come close to signifying nothing. It's thrilling. These forms have thrown off the shackles of meaning and are running free.

Just look at "HI." The vertical

and horizontal bars of the two capital letters form a sloppy grid in pale bottle green. Frankfort paints most of the bars in thick strokes, but two verticals are spindly. The form is translucent, streaked, drippy, and it hovers over a steamy background of hot orange and pink. The letters, cool and bold in tone, are slippery, like a yummy spearmint candy melting in your mouth.

Frankfort handles paint so exuberantly, it's easy to lose sight of her technical smarts. In "TOE

NAIL," she writes the words more than once: in broad, loopy brushstrokes that rush and swerve in rose and orange over the canvas, but then again in awkward, gray-brown stalks, and again quietly whispering in pink across the pale yellow ground. The words echo and echo, but in paint, that echo is especially evanescent and sweet: not a word at all, but a sound, or not a sound, but the memory of one. Nothing at all like toenails.

Frankfort includes a couple of

landscape paintings, also garishly hued and skittering away from their declared form. "LANDSCAPE" looks like an overexposed photo of a snowfield at sunset, except that it's deliciously painterly. The artist barely defines her horizon line with a streak of orange pink; we sense the slope of a hill, the gathering weather, all in that same color. But most of the piece is white; Frankfort's spare gestures, like her assured and playful ones in the word paintings, alter what

we think we know into something else, delicious and ungraspable.

Aaron Spangler's elaborate woodcarvings and graphite rubbings, also at LaMontagne, are dense with detail, providing a weighty counterpoint to Frankfort's paintings. Spangler is a Minnesotan and a hunter; Justin Lieberman, in an essay that accompanies both shows, calls him a "backwoods hillbilly," but he has an impressive resume of

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exhibitions in New York and beyond.

His work tangles with the violence and the sweetness in American culture. The sculpture "A Simple Heart" leans toward the latter, a vivid relief of a cabin with an open door, surrounded by trees. There's a flower box on an upper windowsill, and a front door lamp, but the piece is nearly black; it brings to mind the deep-woods dwellings in "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Hansel and Gretel." It sits on a broken old side table, with a door falling off its hinges. The rubbings, made from Spangler's own carvings, are dense, symmetrical totems. "Anonymous No. 2" has at its top crossed rifles, and at its center a rocket, the exhaust of which is a fanning pattern of guns. You have to scrutinize the piece to recognize its components. It's absorbing, then unnerving.

Painting truth to power

In New York in the late 1950s, the painter Boris Lurie cofounded the No! art movement, a group that spurned the art world's commercialism. As you might guess, the art world in turn spurned the No! artists, who often made dark and taunting work.

A survivor of Buchenwald, Lurie seemed to paint with a lifelong indictment of power structures. (He died in 2008.) His show at Pierre Menard Gallery is both riveting and disturbing. Much of it focuses on the dynamic between men and women, but that dynamic extrapolates outward. His most audacious works are collages that swim with images from girlie magazines.

Some of these function as subversive political declarations. For instance, "Slave (5 ave)" has text running across a shot of a woman in lingerie; the "L" has been dropped out, to turn the word slave into a reference to Manhattan's shopping mecca, 5th Avenue. And "Railroad Collage" shockingly places a clip of a woman playing peek-a-boo with her panties over an image of corpses piled in the back of a truck. The correlation between sexual enslavement and genocide is



A detail from Aaron Spangler's "A Simple Heart," which brings to mind the deep-woods dwellings of fairy tales.

DANA FRANKFORT: HI
AARON SPANGLER: A Simple Heart: Der Kleiner Mann
At: LaMontagne Gallery, 555 East 2d St., South Boston, through Feb. 24. 617-464-4640, www.lamontagne-gallery.com

BORIS LURIE: No!
Prologue to a Retrospective
through Feb. 25

BRUCE STUART:
Oneiric Cartographies
through Feb. 10
At: Pierre Menard Gallery, 10 Arrow St., Cambridge. 617-868-2033, www.pierre-menardgallery.com

the sheer density of images from girlie magazines seems as much an opportunity for the artist to get his jollies as a chance to make a statement.

geous, fluid, fleshy, and odd depictions of women with no torsos (save their breasts). These, too, are full of desire and repulsion, but they hold that tension evenly, leaving the viewer to grapple with it, rather than leaving the viewer feeling as if the artist hasn't grappled enough with it.

Until recently, artist Bruce Stuart was homeless. Now he's in Section 8 Housing, and his abstract drawings in ink, marker, and pencil are on view in Pierre Menard's downstairs gallery. They're otherworldly pieces, but in this medium they could be the elaborate doodles of a smart, bored, design-savvy high school kid. More about process than product, they seem to lack intention, as if they were made for the sake of making, not to be seen or sold. Boris Lurie would probably have been proud.

Digging In: Aaron Spangler on “Government Whore” and other sculptures

BY JULIE CANIGLIA
02/23/2011



"Government Whore," 2009-2010

Artist Aaron Spangler recounts his inspiration for the carved and painted basswood sculptures currently featured in the exhibition The Spectacular of Vernacular. Spangler, whose work is shown at the Galerie Michael Janssen in Berlin and at Horton Gallery in New York City, lives 20 miles outside of Park Rapids, Minnesota, on 150 acres of land.

“These three sculptures came into focus while I was digging a hole for my friend Bruce. We were hand-digging an addition to his underground house, which is a classic piece of hippie back-to-the-lander architecture. As happens when people are toiling with shovels, stories broke to the surface throughout the day, many of which we’ve told to each other before in the course of our 25-year friendship. But this time, Bruce’s narratives about the time following the Vietnam War, during which he moved to the woods and built his homestead, found a different hook in my imagination.

I had been working on an epic twenty-foot-long piece, carving out burrows and protective islands of rural isolation, and I was thinking about how and why young Americans turned to the woods in search of a more meaningful, self-directed life—and how that was mirrored in the western migration of the early

pioneers. Bruce started talking about a group of young hippies in Oregon during the 1970s who were living an extremely primitive hunter-gatherer life in the federal forest. When two “shaman” came to join the tribe, they proved disruptive to the sexist arrangement of the commune—women doing women’s work only, the men hunting, and so on—so they were beheaded. The National Guard then decided to take the tribe out of the forest, and a gun battle ensued. All this is just to say that I had a plan for the piece, but it was at that moment too sensational and not yet detailed, and then I find myself digging a hole for Bruce, a Vietnam vet still trying to find his way forward. Adding onto his bunker by digging out one wheelbarrow-load of dirt after another, we were just working to make things a little more comfortable, putting in a kitchen sink drain so that he could get rid of the buckets. A song that he had written during the first Gulf War kept going through my head: “Government Whore.” Around the campfire it was the song that always seemed to shut the party down, like the sudden bright lights of a bar at closing time.”

Doug McClement's New York Highlights

By Doug McClement · May 5, 2010 · Art News ·



Aaron Spangler: *Government Whore*
at Horton Gallery

Spangler, one of several stable artists released from representation by Zach Feuer Gallery last year, is presenting three large sculptures carved from basswood. The magnificently detailed bas-reliefs are proudly crafty, even down to their welded steel bases. Each amalgam of swirly or pointed forms contains coded but hyper-realistic clues: an owl, a waterwheel, barn-like shelters, a man or a horsetail. The sculptures are painted the black of a burned matchstick, and each includes "a touch of graphite." It's as if all of the elements of the complicated tale being told are piled on top of one another, the effect akin to listening to someone who is talking too fast. We try to follow the story without dwelling too much on each individual word. As if things weren't visually intriguing enough, all three politically cryptic piles of objects are flattened and sliced for our scrutiny. The sculptures in "Government Whore" demand to be viewed from all angles to be sufficiently savored. Spangler's skills are singular and rich.

Aaron Spangler, “Government Whore”

★★★★★

Horton Gallery, through May 22
(see Chelsea)

Aaron Spangler's three blocky black wood carvings on metal stands pile up images and motifs, just like the ancient Romans heaped up captured armor and weapons as trophies. And Spangler's subjects similarly suggest the spoils of war.

The largest, the eponymous *Government Whore*, features a long-haired person in bed clutching a semiautomatic rifle. A tiled floor crumbles underneath while a G.I. holding a flag floats above. This entire vignette is dwarfed, however, by a welter of lush foliage, a spear, an animal skull, flowers, an Art Deco frieze and a hirsute head in a crushed bowler hat. The ensemble evokes a PTSD-induced

fever dream, perhaps hallucinated by the aforementioned recumbent figure.

Flanking sculptures share this miasmic effect. In *I Owe My Soul to the Company Store*, posts supporting a pitched roof (a picnic area? a covered bridge?) pierce a uniformed body whose head is covered by a cardboard box, while an owl alights on a fluttering banner. Another owl, in *To the Valley Below*, perches upon one of two structures bearing images that suggest religious paintings—one of an angel, the other of pilgrims in what appears to be Yosemite National Park.

Spangler whittles with folksy charm, and like outsider art, his sculptures teem with hermetic meaning. But far from triumphal monuments, his works hint at some dark remembrance of imperial adventures.

—Joseph R. Wolin



To The Valley Below

...GALLERY PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF STELLAR BONS COURTESY I

THE

ARTFORUM

Bell, Eugenia. "Aaron Spangler." *Artforum* Jan. 2008: 281-282.

Aaron Spangler

ZACH FEUER GALLERY

In the contemporary art world, work featuring (or even originating from) the prairie states is about as popular as wood carving, but both figured prominently in Aaron Spangler's recent exhibition. While there have been fitful creative explorations of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's Montana cabin by Seth Weiner (in faithful reproduction; *Hermitage*, 2007), Constantin and Laurene Leon Boym (in souvenir mode; *Souvenirs for the End of the Century*, 1998), and Richard Barnes (in crisp color photographs; 1998); and while Catherine Opie has captured the languor of Minneapolis's ice-fishing huts and Habitat of skyways ("Icehouses" and "Skyways," both 2001), ultimately these are all objective—sometimes trivial—architectural studies that tend to obscure, if not ignore, the lore of the places they crave to capture.

Spangler, by contrast, searches beyond—or, more accurately, *before*—the built environment, but as a native son of the prairie, he not only appears to have a more sympathetic eye for what remains in the wake of the region's industrial decline, but has resisted the



Aaron Spangler, *Earthly Delights*, 2007, carved and painted basswood, 6' x 12' x 3 1/2".

conventions of wood carving by transforming a marginalized craft typically associated with bearded, plaid-shirted gentlemen of a certain age into a conduit for the mythology of the Midwest without diminishing its tactility or symbolic richness. The prairie, despite pioneering, settlement, and its eventual degeneration, asserts itself as a distinct element of the work.

Spangler's large-scale bas-relief carvings are rendered in basswood—a product of the waning timber industry near his rural northern Minnesota home. He uses only chisels, mallets, and a Dremel-type rotary tool. The basswood is more malleable than the soft maple he used in his apocalyptic, militia-themed, post-9/11 work and is possessed of a more even grain. The carvings are coated in black gesso and then graphite, lending them a slightly ghoulish appearance, suggestive of relics or talismans. The narratives here blur myth and reality: Spangler's ability to reveal something (literally and figuratively) just below the surface of the fable-like scenes he depicts is unerring—the homesteader's relationship to the land; American pioneering gone bust.

In *Prairie Destroyer* (all works 2007), Spangler rewrites the history of Ponsford, Minnesota—once a logging center bordering the thriving White Earth Indian reservation, today not much more than a ghost town bypassed by a highway when logging left in the 1940s. An abandoned train engine and an oversize ring pull take up residence in a decimated field of grain and trees. *Earthly Delights* is marginally more optimistic—a depiction of rural self-sufficiency and better times in a timber-logging forest. These are landscapes of a uniquely Midwestern innocence; vignettes of the flat "flyover" states. *A Martyr's Parade* is, compositionally at least, the most striking of the group, capturing the spirit of a WPA-era mural with its gothic rooftops, three-bar cross, and abstracted figures carrying a coffin. *Nature Is for Real*, meanwhile, is a dramatic freestanding carving of two trees, the tendril-like roots of one encasing the stump of another. Signaling an almost primordial reclamation by the earth, it makes fully three-dimensional that which all of Spangler's landscapes seem to anticipate.

—Eugenia Bell



THE NEW YORKER

NOVEMBER 19, 2007

AARON SPANGLER

Spangler's black-painted pieces, four reliefs and one freestanding sculpture carved from basswood, have roughened surfaces that give them the visual heft of bronze. His compositions are intricate and deft—in his hands a discarded pop-top looks as timeless as a twist of tree roots. The show's centerpiece is a twelve-foot-long relief that mingles rural and martial elements: farm buildings and tools, a sword, a tank as riddled with holes as a piece of Swiss cheese. The talismanic profusion of forms could be a proposal for a new American currency. Through Nov. 24. (Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700.)

Aaron Spangler

Published on October 31, 2007

Aaron is one of the artists that we worked with for our book *By Hand*. He has an exhibition that's ongoing at [Zach Feuer Gallery](#) in New York. His carvings on basswood are impressive both for the Expressionist-like compositions and sense of physical weight with which they confront you. Plus their all black presentation lends them a fitting note of Goth for the Halloween season.

Earthly Delights, 2007, Carved and painted basswood, 243.8 x 365.8 x 8.9 cm



Brad Kahlhamer/Aaron Spangler

Brad Kahlhamer, Aaron Spangler
(Kantor/Feuer Gallery, through Sept. 23)



The apocalypse has finally received some good PR. New York-based artists Brad Kahlhamer and Aaron Spangler bring the mythical event to life in a series of watercolor and ink paintings (Kahlhamer) and maple and graphite carvings and reliefs (Spangler). Kahlhamer dazzles, blending sketches of aging whores with images of skulls, snakes, and Indian chiefs in *Old Joe*. *Beautiful Sunset* is a glorious rendition of a fire gone amok. Spangler's reliefs are much tamer, color- and theme-wise, but much more intricate in terms of craftsmanship. *Race Among Ruins* shows tree branches extending into a fallen city; *Mercenary Battalion* is made up of trees holding up two houses. While the effect of his reliefs stretches the imagination, his stand-alone carvings are a bit less creative. *My Easy Chair*, for example, resembles a living room in a diorama—shoved into dirt and then covered with tar. In the end, however, both Kahlhamer and Spangler effectively deliver their bleak prophecies with a humorous and intelligent twist. *More info:* www.kantorfeuer.com. —GENEVIEVE WONG





THE NEW YORKER

FEBRUARY 28, 2005

RYAN JOHNSON / AARON SPANGLER

Paper isn't usually thought of as a sculptor's medium, but Johnson makes it one with his elaborate, life-size constructions. A pair of embracing skeletons is airily rendered in yellow scraps like Post-Its; a striped paper umbrella, inverted as if by a storm, is splayed on the floor. Most impressive is a 3-D paper doll of a sad guy in socks and boxers, wrapped in an afghan and holding a remote control. In the front room are Spangler's black wooden reliefs of Gothic forests with junked cars, water towers, and other non-medieval detritus lurking in the shadows. Through Feb. 26. (Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700.)

Reviews

Aaron Spangler

Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL), through Sat 26 (see Chelsea).

The American Civil War took place so long ago that images of its battles now appear almost as nostalgic as they do horrific. What such a domestic war might look like today is the subject of Aaron Spangler's wood carvings. Colored a somber black, they portray scenes of combat unfolding under a magnificent forest canopy. Aside from a few mutilated bodies, Spangler avoids Goya-like grotesqueries by visiting most of his atrocities on the physical symbols of rural American values: home, church and town hall.

Perhaps because they're monochrome, the carvings don't convey movement very convincingly; when a truck hauls away piles of banned books or a biplane heads straight for us, the scenes remain static. In contrast, over-size trees and enormous shafts of wheat are vibrantly alive, to the point that they dominate the work. Although the battles Spangler carves out have clearly damaged the landscape, the surviving inhabitants—presumably the

victors—nonetheless maintain a symbiotic relationship with nature, as suggested in *Sniper's Lair* (2004), where the sinister, snaky branches of a massive tree are echoed in the absent sniper's whip. Similarly, a huge, dramatic sword poised in the sky and a giant tree branch form a cross in *Race Among Ruins* (2004).

As Spangler invokes the recent red state-blue state conflict in America's heartland, he is strikingly un sentimental in imagining the region's savage destruction. The real intrigue in his carvings is not bipartisan factionalism—it's his vision of life after the onset of war as back-to-the-land survival of the fittest.—*Merrily Kerr*



Aaron Spangler, *Sniper's Lair*, 2004–5.

The New York Times



Zach Feuer Gallery

AARON SPANGLER You don't see much wood carving in elite Chelsea galleries. An antiquated craft with little relevance to modern technologies of communication or to a competitive, fast-paced contemporary art market, it is too hard to learn and takes too much time to do well. So it is exciting to come upon the large, intricate reliefs carved from broad, three-inch slabs of maple and painted black by Aaron Spangler. Mr. Spangler, who is from Minneapolis, lives in Brooklyn and is here having his second solo exhibition in New York, uses his extraordinary technique to elaborate profusely detailed, darkly comic visions of rural, post-apocalyptic ruin. The scenes appear to be set in a remote, Appalachian region where wrecked buildings, crashed cars and trucks and abandoned appliances litter the densely forested landscape. There are other

more fantastic elements, too, like the giant ears of corn and the many tire swings hanging from high branches in "Imperial Trees" (above). There is something Medieval and a little fanatical about Mr. Spangler's work, as though its author were a backwoods prophet carving his own *Book of Revelations*. Drawing closer, you search for narrative clues about what has caused these disastrous scenarios, but few if any are forthcoming. What you do discover are many more details and a more immediate sense of the sculptor's hand. Mr. Spangler is not a fussy finisher; he leaves things a bit rough and this creates a magical tension between the raw material and the epic fantasy. (Zach Feuer Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 989-7700, through Feb. 26; free.)

KEN JOHNSON



Aaron Spangler *The Sniper's Home* 2004-2005 carved maple, black gesso, graphite 32" x 36" x 4" detail



Ryan Johnson *Ghosting* 2004 paper, acrylic paint, epoxy, color-aid, matte medium, aluminum rod, wire 74" x 22" x 22" detail of installation

The **Zach Feuer Gallery** opened two shows on Saturday. Zach mentioned to us that it was his "war show." At first I didn't understand what he meant. Sure, there was violence in the imagery shown by both of these artists, but it seemed to be pretty much a homemade violence. Then I managed to remember that in democracies wars are always homemade by definition. So there we are.

Aaron Spangler shows elaborate faux-naive carved-wood dioramas which have been totally blackened, suggesting, at least to me, monumental bronze castings. They reward a thorough inspection, both for their details and their larger significance.

In the gallery's other space Ryan Johnson has assembled three amazing sculptures composed largely of colored paper. At least two of these painfully frail and incredibly exacting forms describe the fragmentation of physical time.

RECUPERATING REVOLT

AARON SPANGLER, PAUL CHAN, AND CATHERINE SULLIVAN



ANARCHY IN THE U.S.A.

On Aaron Spangler's studio wall hangs a photograph of a long-haired young man grasping a megaphone and shouting for all he's worth. The picture depicts a younger Spangler and the occasion is his war, that is, one that he planned and staged with a friend at college. Since he was a child, the Brooklyn-based Minnesota native has been fascinated by war's devastation and its potential as a metaphor for psychological conflict. However, while the U.S. is obsessed with terrorism in its cities and abroad, Spangler focuses on anarchy in rural America in large wood carvings of battle ravaged landscapes.

Blowing apart the stereotype of the quiet farming community, Spangler carves hellish scenes set in the Midwest. In *Mercurial Battalions*, a 210 x 90 cm panel, a helicopter hauls an old wooden farmhouse into the air, centuries-old trees topple to the ground, and an electrical tower lies on its side to act as a makeshift bridge over a river filled with debris. Similarly, *The Revelers* is an apocalyptic account of a town's destruction seen from the main street. The buildings that have not been

ing places, their awnings painted with anarchy symbols, pentagrams, and upside-down crosses. Directly overhead, a bomber drops its payload, intent on wiping out whoever has occupied the once tranquil burg.

With rebellious zeal worthy of an adolescent, Spangler reverses the social order of small town America, damaging it physically and disrupting the prevailing morality. *Revelers* and *Battalions* are so given over to chaos, you'd think the artist delighted in the idea of wiping out his roots. The opposite is true. In fact, Spangler feels an allegiance to country life and culture that is virtually unknown in the cities, an idea elaborated in the monumental drawing *The Poachers*, which depicts rural citizens reclaiming land from the government and big business. They are "poaching" from the powers that be by planting crops and trees and pulling down the huge electrical towers that cut through their farmland and increase cancer rates. This resurgence of self-reliant pioneer spirit, likely as it is to be crushed, belies notions of the peaceful heartland evoked by politicians. Spangler's scenarios are a mix of utopian, anarchic freedom and hellish destruction, American 'can do' mentality and radical anti-social insurrection. They're dark and pessimistic, despite their irony, but ultimately envision a fascinating and frightening revolution against passive consumerism "of the people, by the people."



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BEST SINGLE-ARTIST SHOW

Aaron Spangler, 'Dissident Aggressor'

Soap Factory
www.soapfactory.org

Aaron Spangler's collection of militia-themed sculptural woodcarvings, which opened in September 2002, was the highlight of No Name Exhibition's last season at the Soap Factory. These breadbox-sized arsenals and bunkers in army green were perched on pedestals, walking the line between resembling a toy-soldier regiment and a basement-woodshop man-cave. Embedded in these pieces was a timely and deft exploration of the conflict between the romanticized and juvenile understanding of militarism and the reality of the system. A pile of rocks near a bunker brought to mind a child at play in the yard—a somewhat ironic clash with the obviously adult skill used in the making of the model. Spangler's highly detailed carvings were set amid abstract representations of topography—clusters of figures that could have been evergreen trees nodding to environmental concerns or giant pencils representing bureaucracy. In addition to personal and political messages—and almost overshadowing the master woodcraft—Spangler's dramatic manipulation of perspective and sophisticated aerial views suggested an artist attuned to standards of classical

composition. With *Dissident Aggressor*, this MCAD-grad-turned-New Yorker offered a skillfully crafted reminder that it's a long way to Tipperary. Carry on, soldier! Carry on!

art alley

The Change Remains the Same

By Hank Hoffman

Proper Villains

untitled (space), 50 Orange St., New Haven 772-2709. Through Sept. 28

The show *Proper Villains* teases in its press release. Guest curator David Hunt writes, "9/11, 11/9, 9/11 ... An artist—never one to live in a cave—must embrace the reality conjured by the first term, flip the script as in the second or dial in their 'emergency' response with a newly acquired sense of urgency."

Are the works then a response to the events of Sept. 11, 2001? Not a response? Does the show have any relation at all to those events?

A recent spate of articles occasioned by the release of Bruce Springsteen's over-hyped *The Rising* mused on such weighty questions as, "Where is the definitive pop culture response to 9/11 that will help us all make sense of it?" Well, it sure ain't on *The Rising* and it isn't here, either. If this show is just art made post-9/11 then it is a rebuttal to the always dubious contention that "everything has changed." With a few possible exceptions, these works seem to have little relation to 9/11 except a temporal one: Purportedly, almost all were made after the attacks.

"Liquify," a video projection by Monika Bravo, conveys a sensation of grieving. A vibrato soundtrack accompanies video images of drops and rivulets of water pooling on and coursing over a shiny surface. The images are montaged in rectangles that open and close, eclipsing each other. In combination with the repetitive, mournful soundtrack, the images evoke an aura of sadness and loss.

Aaron Spangler's "Dissident Aggressor" is perhaps the most direct commentary on 9/11. A large wood carving on painted maple, it shows wooden crates being parachuted into a war zone situated in a mountainous region. Destroyed cars, trucks and a tank litter the foreground. Bombed-out buildings occupy the middle distance. A sign looming over the cars and trucks bears the image of an open book while to the right of the sign, a pile of books appear to be burning. In the lower left, a cross litters the ground. A similar cross, upside down, emblazons one of the mountains in the background. It's a deeply

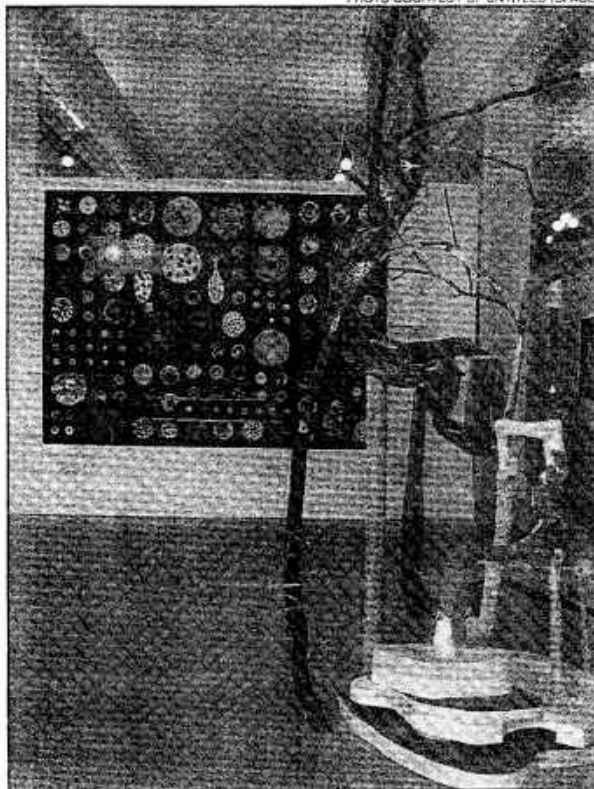
disturbing panorama of war, devastation and religious conflict. That it's unclear whether the locale is Afghanistan or an imagined future U.S.—perhaps reaping what it has sown—compounds the troubling uncertainty.

Two videos by Nicole Engelmann and Diana Shpungin, "Gunfight" and "Bloodpoor," portray the insanity of mutual violence. In the former, two women dressed in gray chase each other around a room furnished with white cardboard boxes. They shoot each other with water pistols, seeming to get hit but never expiring. In "Bloodpoor," which runs simultaneously, they pour what looks like blood over each other and end up lying still next to each other in pools of red. While "Gunfight" is almost goofy in a kids-playing-cops-and-robbers way, "Bloodpoor" lends weight with its macabre absurdity.

Once one gets over the question of the thematic thread, *Proper Villains'* appeal is palpable. Coming in for a second visit, I was barely 10 feet into the gallery when I realized I was setting foot on the edge of one of the exhibited works. Mark Dean Veca's "Oedipus Wrecked" is a large acrylic painting on canvas spread out on the gallery floor rather than hung on the wall, the artist accepting the inevitability of visitors' footprints. (In my previous visit, the work was rolled up like a carpet while someone mopped the floor.) It's a more apt introduction to the show than Hunt's press release. Much of the work is far from serious—serious eye candy is more like it. The old bait and switch, in this case, has a surprising payoff.

Veca's work is like a giant underground comix panel or a psychedelic concert poster from the late '60s embellished with Jackson Pollock-esque paint splatters. It's necessary to walk around the piece to take in all the imagery, which faces in four different directions. Among the more recognizable are Elsie the Cow, Popeye and a face that looks like it was drawn by Don Martin of *Mad*.

Gordon Terry's "Black Holes, Bohemians, Colonials & Boudois" brings to mind what bowling balls might look like if designed by fine artists. On a shiny black acrylic panel, the mostly circular shapes are rich with gorgeous colors that ooze and blend and wax smoky like a



Andrea Cohen's "MaiTai Vista."

space nebula.

A perhaps dystopian futuristic landscape is the subject of Dan Kopp's "Your Children's Children." In the large acrylic painting, shattered and splintered wood explodes across a bright setting that has the strange beauty of the "airborne toxic event" in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. On the other side of the same wall is a bizarre untitled work by Suzanne Walters. Smooth featureless creatures resembling android Bam-bis mingle in poses of sexual suggestiveness.

Amy Gartrell's untitled work with dayglo colors positions a heroic figure with bright pink boots and gloves in the center plunging a long staff into the mouth of a squirming orange dragon. All the block shadowing in the human and dragon figures is made of the repeated and minutely lettered sentence, "You can never slay enough dragons."

As is the fashion with wide-ranging contemporary art shows, there are a number of multimedia sculptural works and installations. Ken Linchan's untitled work is suspended from the ceiling. His sculpture incorporates two dozen audio speakers in unvarnished wood: a dozen large ones that together form a dodecahedron and a dozen small ones that surround that form like satellites. Different ambient sounds and music issue from the separate speakers. The viewer moves around the sculpture trying (in vain) to mesh the subtle cacophony into a gestalt.

Somehow, the subtle cacophony of *Proper Villains* does mesh into a gestalt. With its odd paintings, photography, collage, video and installations, it demonstrates the continuing drive of creative need. Despite the rather misleading teaser of 9/11, the show delights in its heterogeneity.