

June 27 - July 27, 2013

Artist Talk
Thursday, June 27 | 6-7 pm

Opening Reception
Thursday, June 27 | 7-9 pm

Alexei Vella *Beings From Beyond*



Cover: TRYON - *The Toothed Tri-Sighted Terror God*, screenprint, 17" x 11", 2013. Interior:
YITHU - *The Glass-Eyed God of Yith*, screenprint, 17" x 11", 2013. Printed by Nicholas
Shick under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency, 2012-13.

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Gallery Hours: Tue - Sat, 12 - 5 pm



Reflections in a Multitude of Eyes

by Mark Laliberte

In considering the work of Alexei Vella, one must know a bit about the various conditions from which he frames both his practice and his very existence.

The primary condition to note — one that cannot be ignored — is that Vella suffers from Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), an inherited degenerative disease resulting in severe muscle atrophy. His body is in a state of advanced chronic transformation, compromised in a way that most other bodies are not; this deeply personal experience makes him acutely aware of the impermanence of the body. Vella has stated that living with this condition has influenced the construction of his identity, noting, "I perceive most everything and everyone as being more permanent than myself, and this comparative permanence threatens me by reminding me of my own physical decay and impermanence."¹

The secondary condition to note is that despite his bodily challenges, Vella has created and maintained a successful practice as a commercial illustrator. Working in the digital realm, Vella has developed a marketable style that capitalizes on what he refers to as the "colloquial iconography of popular retro forms,"² presenting a range of characters inspired by vintage comics and advertising art; utilizing exaggerated halftone patterns to fill space; playing with the illusion of messy registration and purposeful misregistration; tethering his imagery together with a layer of surface noise, the kind that occurs when a screen begins to fill in during the act of printing.

For Vella, the residue of error has provided a way to summon an idea of authenticity and offer false evidence of physical, manual labour — hands at work, outside of virtual space — when none actually exists. By faking noise in the digital realm, Vella applies a kind of skin over the many works he produces; it's a visual trick, a way of injecting a bit of chaos and life into the computer's linear, vectorized perfectionism. Noise has taken on a layer of importance in his craft, acting as a kind of visual signature by which he emphasizes surface.

The third condition to note is that Vella's distinctive commercial style has greatly informed his more recent fine art explorations, and that it is sometimes difficult to completely separate commercial technique from artistic intent. To do so requires a leap of faith, a peek behind the curtain. At the point of entering this residency, Vella brought forth fully-developed digital illustrations of his *Beings From Beyond*, a set of portrait images of colourful, abhuman creatures. Stylized eyes form a numeric rhythm from print to print: 1, 2, 3, 4 — a cold cartoon horror of clustered orbs staring out at their viewers. Like many of his commercial graphics, surface blots offer a dynamic unifying crust of visual noise as they hang over everything. The screens have been filled in, in advance of the work.

These images have their reference point in pop culture. Certainly, anyone who is familiar with the tropes of Lovecraftian horror will associate these graphical renditions to the "Great Old Ones," a loose pantheon of ancient, powerful deities from space who once ruled the Earth and who have since fallen into a deathlike sleep. Many artists before him have capitalized on the imaginary pantheon of Lovecraft's shared fictional universe. I propose, however, that what at first seems like an homage to H.P. Lovecraft is in the end a mere surface gesture, one that provides a casual starting point for Vella to consider the fragility of the human condition in general, and the genetic failings of his own body in specific. The hallmark of Lovecraft's work is the development of the concept of *cosmicism*, which provides a picture of an uncaring universe that human beings, with their limited faculties, can never fully

understand. His weird tales were always studies in the fear of the unknown, a way of expressing a deeply-felt existential malaise. Vella shares Lovecraft's dark preoccupation with the meaningful search for hints at what lies beyond the curtain of daily existence. His quirky surface mutants are therefore presented as a symbolic way to reveal a crack in the everyday, to act as a counter to ordinary life.

And here we have it: just past the surface of things, Vella wants us to know that life is playing out in a mysterious and sometimes chaotic manner — likened to the uncontrollable processes that a body experiences under its own material frailty. Vella asks us to look and to reflect, even if in doing so, we are faced with the kind of dread that Friedrich Nietzsche pointed to when he posited, "if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."³

The final condition to note is that Vella enters into this creation scenario with a goal of capturing the cleanest possible translation of his digital imagery into physical print form. At first, I found it ironic that Vella — someone known for embracing the stylistic imperfections and surface noise that screenprinting naturally reveals when it gets a little out of control — would set out to strive for clean, flat colours, well-registered lines and only the most carefully placed, predetermined smudges and scuffs. Finally outside of the virtual box, I expected him to want to play. But of course, this desire to faithfully duplicate his digital renditions in serigraphic form becomes understandable when it is viewed from the position of physical discipline. For Vella, this is a bid for control, an attempt to create something more permanent than himself. Here we see the artist striving towards perfection by utilizing someone else's hands and body in place of his own. Hands that work; aimed at precision, managing the gap.

This relationship is of course a variant of what already occurs within the context of an Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency. Artists often enter into a project prepared to utilize the technical expertise of a master printer, with a specialized understanding of both process and execution. This collaborative environment will see each artist guiding their idea along a path as the work takes place, making a choice about how involved they want to be in the technical side of the printing partnership. It is an expectation that the facilitator will act as a kind of tool for a visiting artist to work with, or *through*.

Yet in this instance, it is important to note that Vella can have it no other way. For him, the procedural act of pulling ink through a screen is a challenge beyond the limits of his body, an impossible thing that can only be accomplished through the use of a surrogate set of hands. Vella came to this project aware of his desire to scale a metaphoric mountain, and through a heroic mastery of technique, he wants to experience an ideal view, from the very top.

¹ Vella, Alexei. "It Lacks A Human Corpse." MFA Thesis. OCAD University, 2011.

² ---, "Information." <<http://www.alexievella.com/#information>>.

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Chapter IV: Maxims and Interludes, Aphorism 146." *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Reginald J. Hollingdale. London [u.a.]: Penguin, 2003. Accessed from <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Beyond_Good_and_Evil#Aphorism_146>.



Through the Visiting Artist Program, Open Studio is accessible to all professional artists, with or without printmaking experience, to explore and develop new bodies of work through print media. Each year, four artists produce their work in the Open Studio facilities followed by two-person exhibitions in the Open Studio Gallery.

Open Studio, Canada's leading printmaking centre, is dedicated to the production, preservation and promotion of contemporary fine art prints.

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Open Studio is an active member of ARCCO, the Association of Artist Run Centres and Collectives of Ontario, and OAAG, the Ontario Association of Art Galleries.



Artists' Biographies

As a child, **Micah Adams** enjoyed creating maps while exploring his surroundings. Originally from Nova Scotia, Adams began his formal art training at CÉGEP John Abbott College (Montréal) and received his BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Halifax). Upon graduation in 2008, he pursued a three year residency in Toronto at Harbourfront Centre's Metal/Jewellery studio. Currently living in Philadelphia, PA, he is looking forward to participating in the Visiting Artist Residency at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, WA, in December 2013. Since 2004 his drawings have been held in the Pierogi Flat Files (New York) and he is represented by MKG127 in Toronto. Micah would like to thank Yael Brotman, Laine Groeneweg and Wayne Kleppe for all their help and support during this project. This work was also made possible with the support of the Ontario Arts Council.

Alexei Vella (b. Tal-Pietà, Malta, 1983) is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist and illustrator, specializing in creating images that are striking and complex, sensual yet undeniably intellectually involving. In order to achieve this unique look, Vella employs a complex palette, an eclectic application of graphics and texture, and a sophisticated use of antiquated surfaces. Alexei's work has been exhibited in Canada and the US. He received a Bachelor of Applied Arts in Interpretive Illustration from Sheridan College, where he received multiple awards and scholarships. After graduation he pursued a freelance illustration and design career, and was noticed for his signature style, allowing him the opportunity to exhibit widely and garner many professional awards. In 2011 Alexei completed his MFA through OCAD University's Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media & Design program.

Writers' Biographies

Yael Brotman is a print-based artist also engaged in drawing and sculpture installation. She has recently exhibited in Berlin, New York, Melbourne and is slated to show in Edmonton, Edinburgh and Austin. She teaches at the University of Toronto, Scarborough.

Mark Laliberte (marklaliberte.com) is a visual artist, writer, curator, designer and soundmaker with an MFA from the University of Guelph. He has exhibited and performed extensively in galleries and festivals across Canada and the USA. He is the editor/designer of CAROUSEL magazine and the editor/curator of the 4panel.ca experimental comics site.

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EDITING & TYPESETTING Sara Kelly

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Micah Adams Coinage



Penny Leaves, etching, 22" x 18", 2013. Printed by Laine Groeneweg under the auspices of the Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency, 2012-13.

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Theatre of the World: The Work of Micah Adams by Yael Brotman

*Construction is a very intriguing mediation between a concept and the material.*¹
Erwin J.S. Viray

Like a magician pulling incongruous objects from a top hat, the visiting artist untied his backpack and removed small packages cushioned in tissue and bubble wrap. The art students watched with growing curiosity as he unwrapped each one and placed it gently on the model stand. It was an odd collection of objects, most small enough to sit in the palm of a hand: among them a hollowed-out, whole round orange peel with oval cut-outs, small metal spheres constructed of square copper tubes, laminated red and white plastic sheets carved into organic microscopic structures, a chunk of striated rock, a tiny "splash" made of silver.

Micah Adams, the visiting artist, was discussing his fascination with fictive geologies, with miniatures, with industrial materials and with systems of patterns. When he showed his diagrammatic sketches, "plaid" drawings and collection of photocopies that comprise his sketchbook, Adams provoked the students to examine more closely each object. They were mobilized to appreciate the rich and nuanced scope of Adams' artistic practice.

Adams' approach to art making renders one conscious of the fluidity of life. I was propelled into a meditation on his knapsack as the contemporary equivalent of the *Wunderkammer*, also called Cabinet of Curiosities, *Kunstkammer* (Room of Art) and Theatre of the World.² This metaphor supersedes the magician's hat, but the commonality between the two is the element of wonder.

Recently, I visited an exhibition at New York's Grolier Club of books from the 16th to the 19th centuries that documented collections.³ Incorporating engravings and descriptions of objects and their provenance, the books revealed Europe's obsession with order and with the classification of all things. It was not enough for them to know the world, they had to possess it physically, to aggregate objects and bring them home. Initially the noblemen's collections were by-products of the drive for trade, exploration and colonization ventures. Eventually the luxury trade for unusual artifacts became the impetus for expeditions. The developing collections formed microcosms of the world and conveyed two streams of information: one, the wonders of the natural world and the diversity of human culture, and two, the power of the one percent over that world.

When middle class merchants joined in the mania for collecting, their cabinets of curiosities became actual pieces of furniture rather than dedicated rooms. But what they had in common with the Royals' collections was creative categorizing. It was the dynamic perspective of variety and evidence of evolving nature in these collected artifacts that had a profound effect on the development of a scientific view of phenomenology.

Micah Adams' collection of objects confounds and reveals nature while compelling the viewer to re-evaluate what has become traditional in present day museum-sanctioned categorization. As with the tusk of the narwhal that was often thought to have belonged to a unicorn, Adams plays with the fictive and the real. His chunk of striated rock turns out to be layers of paint build-up from a hardware store paint booth, while the plaid patterns in his drawings describe three-dimensional shapes in fictional spaces.

Materiality is at the crux of his practice, tempered by concept. He often incorporates the materials and vocabulary of the jeweller. But playfulness and subversion render traditional precious metals into un-wearable objects. As intimate and minute as his three-dimensional pieces are, there is a monumental sensibility about them. Scale too is confounded. And even though his pieces are non-functional, there is an affinity to architecture in his mediation between materiality and concept. In his acceptance speech for the 2001 Pritzker Architecture Prize, Jacques Herzog says that "[it] is the materiality of architecture that paradoxically conveys thoughts and ideas. In other words, its immateriality."⁴ He is talking about matter that transcends matter.

Materiality, concept and construction as mediation inform Adams' print project for his Open Studio Visiting Artist Residency as well. The elements of his print explorations include found pennies where the leaves are cut out to reference fallen autumn leaves. There is a plan to produce brown craft paper bags to hold the copper leaves, which would mimic the large recycling paper bags that people fill with autumn leaves. The cut out maple leaves are embossed in random systems on sensuous thick printing paper, sometimes a dollar's worth of pennies, sometimes more. Some copper leaves have been heated and have changed hues to metallic blues, golds, burnt reds, again mimicking nature. There are larger etchings of hand drawn maple leaves borrowed from the penny's design. The round decorative border of the coin is expanded in scale, intended for use as a framing device in future prints. The beavers on the nickels are cut out and embossed in narrative clusters. One beaver is enlarged, isolated, manipulated.



Adams is a consummate researcher. He shows me an enlarged photocopy of a 1938 penny that provided the inspiration for some of his project's imagery. We speak about the history of numismatics, especially British control of the composition of visual elements on the coins of the far-flung empire. Yet what fascinates him most is the mystery of an individual coin's history: whose pocket has it been in? How long did it lay on the sidewalk?

From the phenomenological to the fictive, from industrial to natural material and from the controlled to the accidental, the spirit of questioning and becoming are implied in the found and manufactured objects of Micah Adams' broader practice. The prints and print experiments he has produced at Open Studio are likewise a work in progress. They are cumulative and speak to each other, as they speak to the materiality and sensual perception that play a salient role in concept and construction. They comprise a new constituency in Adams' theatre of the world.

¹ Viray, Erwin J. S. "Postscript." *a+u – Architecture & Urbanism: Herzog & De Meuron: 1978-2002*, February 2002 Special Issue (2002): 324.

² From a didactic panel at the exhibition Rooms of Wonder: From Wunderkammer to Museum, 1599-1899 at the Grolier Club, New York NY, December 5, 2012 - February 2, 2013.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Herzog, Jacques "Pritzker Architecture Prize Acceptance Speech." Charlottesville, Virginia. 7 May 2001. *Reprinted in a+u – Architecture & Urbanism: Herzog & De Meuron: 1978-2002*, February 2002 Special Issue (2002): 6.

⁵ Viray, op.cit.

Image: Adams' cut penny leaves on the press bed. Photo by Laine Groeneweg.