

Artistic Landscape

ART REVIEW: 'LOVE FROM VICKI ISLAND'

Daniel Giordano does not trade in nostalgia

'Love From Vicki Island' is a mix of artistic endeavor, ancestral knowledge, experience and information



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER HUBERDEAU —THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

"My Scorpio I" is made up, partially, of two conjoined motocross bike frames that have been dipped in batter and deep-fried.

By JENNIFER HUBERDEAU
The Berkshire Eagle

NORTH ADAMS — Nostalgia has become a commodity that is bought and sold in the blink of an eye.

Corporate America, with its astute eye, has realized there is value in our wistful affection for the past; our happy personal associations with items and media. Every day there seems to be a new reboot, relaunch, restart or rebrand of a television show, movie or toy associated with the collective public's childhood favorites. With each reboot, the story, characters, and plots are retooled, recycled and watered down. Nothing is sacred.

Daniel Giordano does not trade in nostalgia.

It could be easy to mistake his sculptures as such, as his assemblages are concocted of the very stuff that gives birth to nostalgia — memories. But here, in "Love From Vicki Island" on view at Mass MoCA through December 2023, he draws the line, his assemblages and monstrosities, he says, are reliquaries, vignettes, that hold a woven tapestry of his memories, homages to family members — his mother, older brother Anthony, grandfather and his beloved Aunt Vicki.

Family, his Italian American heritage, his family's coat factory all shape his artwork, as do the magical realism of childhood and embellished family mythology — his maternal grandfather was friends with Buffalo Bill and toured with him as a motorcycle daredevil. His paternal grandfather had a larger-than-life Rat Pack persona — completed by a Cadillac, fedora and a nightly standing card game.

Vicki Island is Giordano's playground, his creative home where he sculpts gentle monstrosities from the detritus he finds in around his family's long-closed factory — the former Vicky Clothing Company — in a post-industrial neighborhood of Newburgh, N.Y., a mix of crumbling buildings and pockets of revitalization and gentrification.

"I consider the factory kind of an island unto itself, it's a magical place for me," Giordano says during a recent phone interview. "It's my sanctuary. It was my playground grow-



On fiber drums, from left to right, "Study for Brother as Gandalf the White, 2018-22," "Study for Brother as a Warlock, 2016-22," "Study for Brother as Merlin's Beard, 2019-22."

ing up and it continues to be my playground. For me if I were to describe what I do as an occupation, it's 'If I'm not having fun with it what the hell's the point?'

"I want to live as much of an extraordinary ordinary life as I can. So I want whatever takes up my time to be enjoyable, so damn it I'm gonna make it fun. There's that and I like to refer to the whole building as Vicki Island for that reason because it's unlike anything around it."

On the third floor of the factory, his work is informed by a variety of influences, both geographical and personal.

"The immediate geographic layout and the scene around the factory is somewhat bleak and somewhat depressed. There's literally an ancient Revolutionary War graveyard catty-corner to it with a lot of the street names pairing with the grave-stones at the graveyard. So I think there's a rich history and lineage that's like no other.

"I'm being informed by my geographic location and the people, the loved ones, my family members, specifically the factory itself. It really feeds me, whether it's materially, from the old sewing machine parts that are left behind or the bolts of fabric and essentially the storage and time capsule that my dad has left there paired with, the flora and fauna and industrial detritus or just urban garbage that litter the streets and the shores of the Hudson River."

He combines these items — coat hangers, marzipan, motocross bikes, tennis court remnants, the dried legs of roadkill turkey vultures, railroad spikes, stockfish, and deep-fried batter — with the components he produces en masse, specifically Raku-fired ceramics.

And he channels his personal muses, his mother, whom he describes with endearing terms, his older brother Anthony and his Aunt Vicki.

On View

What: "Daniel Giordano: Love From Vicki Island"

On view: Through December 2023

Where: B4, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams

Information and tickets: 413-662-2111, massmoca.org

"Vicki is very dear to me, she's like a demigod to me. She's still alive, thankfully, and we sit down and share a pasta meal about once a month," he said. "She's a funny character. She's got a fiery personality. She's got a beehive hairdo. She won't let anyone photograph her without being all dolled up in makeup."

"So that being the entity and the namesake of the factory, I like to channel Vicki as an energy. I always questioned, 'Do I have it in me to be Vicki?' Vicki was this amazing entrepreneur that opened up Vicki's Video Villa which was a rental before Blockbuster existed. After that, she opened Vicki's Cool Delights, which was an ice cream shop. She also managed a Little League team that went to the world series championships and won."

All of this is woven together in a mix of artistic endeavor, spewing forth like an overflowing volcano of ancestral knowledge, experience and information.

"You just have to excavate and pull it from yourself. There's enough there to make something that is sincere, genuine and true to you," he said.

One of the most remarkable pieces of the show is "My Scorpio I, 2016 — 2019," two 1970s Husqvarna motocross bikes dipped in batter and deep fried. Steel and aluminum pipes curl from the back of the motorcycle, ending in crown made of stockfish.

It's an homage to his older brother, who he credits with introducing him to literature, opera, the arts and more. It's a rendering of an Etruscan chariot his brother favored at The Met, the motocross bike a nod to his motorcycle daredevil grandfather, the deep-fried batter a nod to the plates of calamari and cannoli shared at

dinner. Scorpio is his brother's astrological sign.

A gallery filled with pipes, both big and small, are part of an ongoing series, "Pleasure Pipes," which pay tribute to his grandfather Frank, who always had a pipe in his photographs.

The largest pipe, "Pleasure Pipe XIII (Jupiter Optimus Maximus)" is carved from a stump, its smoke made up of a variety of objects — artificial clementines, artificial navel orange, Aunt Vicki's cheesecake, buttons, cattails, ceramic, Christmas tree ornaments, construction adhesive, deep fried batter, deer jaw, duct tape, enamel, epoxy, foam ball, gravel, horseshoe, hosiery, mop head, oil-based clay, paper plates, phosphorescent acrylic, plastic bags, railroad spikes, steel coat hangers, tennis balls, tin, water chestnuts and wood.

And while there are plenty of sculptures dedicated to his brother — a giant pop-sicle-shaped monstrosity "Study for my Brother as Cyrano de Bergerac" and a series of small figures "Study for Brother as Gandalf the White, 2018-2022," "Study for Brother as a Warlock, 2016-2022," "Study for Brother as Merlin's Beard, 2019-2022" — a gallery is filled with more intimate self-portraits.

"Each one has a distinctive name," Giordano says. "It actually started off as a playful experiment where I have been using these moisturizing face masks in my skincare regimen and I just started saving them and then I started using them as the foundation to build off of and make faces from that mount to the wall or sometimes they are free-standing, tabletop works."

"I like to consider them as past and future lives or maybe I'm embodying different personas or different characters. They convey different moods and emotions. It's ongoing."

Somehow, we believe the mood is never too dark on Vicki Island, as the art here is too pretty, too wild, and too fantastical to be somber. It's a labor of love and that love shines through.

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