Trucks: Recent Work by John Himmelfarb

January 7 - April 6, 2014

Curated by Gregg Hertzlieb and Gloria Ruff
**Trucks: Recent Work by John Himmelfarb**

We at the Brauer Museum of Art are pleased to present *Trucks: Recent Work by John Himmelfarb*. A prolific and highly regarded artist who is able to work in virtually any medium, Himmelfarb (b. 1946) has for the past number of years been exploring the subject of trucks. His trucks are frequently whimsical, as well as technically complex and formally inventive in any format. Through Himmelfarb’s treatments, the truck becomes a carrier of meaning, a vehicle for representational approaches, that speaks to its humble utilitarian nature at the same time it showcases the artist’s considerable and diverse skills. This survey exhibition of his recent creations offers a realm for viewers of all ages to explore as they recall past and present associations of a dependable and versatile type of vehicle, filtered through Himmelfarb’s interpretations. At times seeming like toys and at other times relating to art historical precedents in the overall effect and use of materials, the artist taps into our human need for play and our enduring fascination with metamorphosis or transformation.

I wish to thank Gloria Ruff for her curatorial decisions and the lenders to the exhibition for their cooperation, as well as the artist for his promptness and willingness to help in every step of this exhibition. In addition, I am grateful for the financial support of the Valparaiso University Cultural Arts Committee, the Brauer Museum of Art’s Robert and Caroline Collings Endowment, the Brauer Museum of Art’s Brauer Endowment, and the Partners for the Brauer Museum of Art for making this exhibition possible.

Gregg Hertzlieb, Director/Curator
Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University

**“Why Apples?”**
**As asked Adam**

John Himmelfarb

To my constant amazement, people of all backgrounds and dispositions ask me, “Why trucks?” (Dogs never ask me this, as they share my excitement.) Does anyone ask the artist of still lifes, “Why apples?”

For centuries, still lifes were held as a lesser form of art because they seemed to lack reference to intellectual concepts concerning religion, history, and philosophy. Only recently has the still life been accepted as a possible approach to high art. Just in time for my trucks.

An excerpt from my sister Susan’s recent remarks (in a discussion about whether a mystery story can be literature) is germane here:

“As the child of two abstract painters, I learned from the air I breathed that content only becomes art when it is given meaning by the form an artist gives it, and that this is as true for literature and music as it is for the visual arts.”

My primary driver as a visual artist is to create form that is exciting visually and that suggests content ripe for interpretation through association, metaphor, and implication. I am not concerned with illustrating what we see.
As usual, I had no particular image in mind. I began on the right side with the usual industrial forms. The result looked like a crane, and I stopped far short of covering the entire plane with this pattern. It wasn't enough, so I recommenced drawing beneath the boom of the crane. The truck that emerged delighted as much as it surprised me. I felt an immediate visceral connection.

Having experienced a great deal of art (literature, visual art, music, and theater), I have a great deal of confidence in my ability to sense when a work has resonance on many levels, and this painting, which I titled *Inland Romance: Bypass*, did. I felt compelled to try creating something similar again and, shortly thereafter, painted *Avion*, a painting whose title may have been inspired by Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*. Not only does the word *avion* not mean “truck,” the painting is a representation of something more than a truck.

The truck works then exploded rapidly in numbers and materials, as I followed this still unexamined “hook.” To me, the resonance was so clear as to need no examination.

However, as these works gained increasing exposure I was asked repeatedly to answer the question: “Why trucks?” I explored this question from many points of view, and I found the exploration itself a satisfying endeavor, though the validity of an answer always fell short of any mathematical certainty. The exercise was similar to those I had gone through with other bodies of work that continued over a long period of time. It gave me the same kind of satisfaction I experience in thinking about why a particular novel strikes me as of great moment.

While I have talked to many individuals about these trucks and possible interpretations, I now realize that for me to tell other viewers how to interpret or understand these works is to deprive them of the personal discovery that comes from looking at art.

As usual, I had no particular image in mind. I began on the right side with the usual industrial forms. The result looked like a crane, and I stopped far short of covering the entire plane with this pattern. It wasn't enough, so I recommenced drawing beneath the boom of the crane. The truck that emerged delighted as much as it surprised me. I felt an immediate visceral connection.

Having experienced a great deal of art (literature, visual art, music, and theater), I have a great deal of confidence in my ability to sense when a work has resonance on many levels, and this painting, which I titled *Inland Romance: Bypass*, did. I felt compelled to try creating something similar again and, shortly thereafter, painted *Avion*, a painting whose title may have been inspired by Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*. Not only does the word *avion* not mean “truck;” the painting is a representation of something more than a truck.

The truck works then exploded rapidly in numbers and materials, as I followed this still unexamined “hook.” To me, the resonance was so clear as to need no examination.

However, as these works gained increasing exposure I was asked repeatedly to answer the question: “Why trucks?”

I explored this question from many points of view, and I found the exploration itself a satisfying endeavor, though the validity of an answer always fell short of any mathematical certainty. The exercise was similar to those I had gone through with other bodies of work that continued over a long period of time. It gave me the same kind of satisfaction I experience in thinking about why a particular novel strikes me as of great moment.

While I have talked to many individuals about these trucks and possible interpretations, I now realize that for me to tell other viewers how to interpret or understand these works is to deprive them of the personal discovery that comes from looking at art.

Now I turn the “Why trucks?” question around. I ask those who query me about my choice of subject matter, “What do you think about when you see these works?”
Invariably, I hear, often slowly at first, a series of references both personal and universal, to direct experiences, to literature, music, and to the work of other visual artists.

It is clear to me that I don't need to tell anyone anything about these pieces. The best thing I can do is to give them permission to answer their own questions. I encourage people to explore my use of visual language and the resulting form. This is where they will find answers. Ultimately, it's up to each of us to answer for ourselves the questions we have about the meaning of anything, even apples and trucks.

### Exhibition List

#### Sculptures

- **Penelope Awaiting Her Chamberlain**, 2013, mixed media, 137 x 300 x 102 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Truck to Market, 2009**, glazed ceramic, 8 x 12 x 6½ inches, Collection of Nell and Paul Schneider
- **Girder**, 2012, plywood, nuts and bolts, 5 x 48 x 12 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Blue Motive**, 2011, woodcut on paper on wood, 21½ x 44 x 15 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **The Road to Herron**, 2012, screen print on paper, mounted on wood construction, 22½ x 30½ x 21 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Mesa**, 2007, cast bronze, 15 x 42 x 22 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Bird in Hand**, 2007, cast iron, 16¼ x 27 x 13¾ inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Arkansas Traveler**, 2010, 20 x 34 x 10 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Wisdom**, 2007, unglazed ceramic, 9 x 14 x 16 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **High Beam**, 2009, unglazed ceramic, 9 x 11 x 7½ inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Speed of Dark**, 2008, ceramic with black glaze, 6½ x 15 x 8 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Honor**, 2011, unpainted steel plate, 32 x 60 x 34 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Knowledge**, 2002, bronze, 27 x 31 x 22 inches, Collection of the Artist

#### Prints

- **Sweet Surrender**, 2007, color lithograph on paper, 22½ x 28¼ inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Drift Ice**, 2009, plasma cut aluminum plate relief print, 19 x 26 inches (paper), 15 x 21 inches (image), Collection of the Artist
- **Outward**, 2008, archival inkjet print drawn in Photoshop, 17 x 21¼ inches, Collection of the Artist

#### Paintings

- **Setting Forth**, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 90 inches, Collection of Charles and Elizabeth Sklarsky
- **Loyalty**, 2007, 38 x 54 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Dug In**, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 38 x 60 inches, Collection of the Artist
- **Temperance**, 2006, graphite on canvas, 40 x 138 inches, Collection of the Artist

20 selected paintings from the **Puerto Vallarta Series**, acrylic on canvas board, various sizes, Collection of the Artist

---

### John Himmelfarb

**Biography**

Born in Chicago in 1946, John Himmelfarb grew up in a rural area west of Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s with his two artist parents, Sam and Eleanor Himmelfarb. While engaged in the arts as a youth, he did not turn to the visual arts as a way of life until late in his college experience at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. He has had a studio in Chicago since 1970 and has shown frequently in New York, nationally, and abroad since the 1970s. Himmelfarb's work is in numerous museum collections, including the British Museum, London England; Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; The Art Institute of Chicago; and many others. He continues to maintain studios in Chicago as well as in Spring Green, Wisc.