

## BRUCE CONKLE







*Hypothermic Reaction*, 2010  
Bronze, thermoelectric cooler, wood, ice, heatsink  
22 x 8 x 8 in  
Photo: Marne Lucas



*Middle Kingdom Earth is Fucked*, 2007–2011  
Metal, wood, foam, oil lamp, resin, motor, fountain pump, pepto bismol, coconut, quartz crystals, meteorites, pyrite, mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Photo: Marne Lucas

*Previous page*  
*Maybe In An Alternate Universe*  
*We Live Through This Shit*, 2019  
Crystal ball, wood, lead, sugar, carbon, ceramic, pepto bismol, paint  
26 x 13 x 13 in



*The Wooden Carrot*, 2014–15  
Freezer, ice and snow, wood, paint, glass  
77 x 36 x 30 in  
Photo: Marne Lucas



*Critical Laputa*, 2012  
Gouache, acrylic, pencil on paper, polyester  
9 x 12 in



# THE TWO WORLDS OF BRUCE CONKLE

by Michael Szpakowski

Bruce Conkle is a **Thaumaturge**. He takes the everyday and the banal and magics it into something specific, unique, auratic. This is because Bruce Conkle is a **Visionary** who sees connections and possibilities between the physical manifestations, the stubborn stuff-ness and present-ness of objects, their technical function in the world and their potential as wobbly metaphors for critique and change. Also, not unconnected, Bruce Conkle is an **Innocent**. (The child who wanted to be **Garbageman** or **Cartoonist** or both. Now he is both, and much else.)—how strange and wonderful and elastic things and ideas are, how cool it is to play! But then he is also a **Partisan** for the planet. (His standard features many greens, many blues, darkness, earth tones, crystal, snow and fire.) And a **Mythographer**—of tasks, dilemmas, characters somewhat like us, characters almost nothing like us but still a nagging little bit so, of journeys. And a kind of **Grammarian**, of things and ideas—he welds, nails and tapes and glues material things and concepts together and establishes procedures and rules for so doing. Sometimes he sticks material thing to concept, sometimes concept to thing. Sometimes it's a mish-mash. Often these processes make him smile and often we follow him in that because Bruce Conkle is a **Wit**. And we smile and look at him askance and he smiles back and we await his explanation and none is forthcoming, because Bruce Conkle can be **Deadpan**. And also he is a **Scholar**. He knows his field, way back. He knows what others like him have thought and written and most importantly made and done. He has opinions about this. He looks carefully and he thinks hard. Bruce Conkle is a **Craftsperson**. He carries pens and coloured pencils carefully arrayed in a case, in case of sudden need. But he makes his marks studiedly, painstakingly.

Conkle resembles nothing so much as a minor deity, steadily constructing a world for nigh on thirty years.

What this world making activity adds up to is a map or, better, a working model or simulation, of a realm which, in many respects, resembles ours but which in parts shimmers and flickers and threatens to fade and in others is intensified almost beyond belief or tolerance and it is as if, too,

it has big post-it notes attached—*'Try this, don't forget this, don't try this at home, examine this more closely, look this up, this reminds me of, it's OK to laugh'*. And the moving parts move by rickety clockwork and some things are just banged together with sticky tape or an odd nail.

A flea market stall world by turns cute and abject, with jokes and moments when you turn a corner to find yourself surprised by a sudden lump in your throat and moisture in the eye but with danger areas, too, and hidden voids under often unsteady ground.

And there is a constant shock of recognition and constant puzzlement and uncertainty too. Because Conkle is not going to figure it out for us, he's not even going to give us reliable clues, but we do know, he is gifting us a generous gift.

And this gift might be some practical use to us. Like the mathematical models of our scientists, or the charts of the old navigators, it could help us to understand the way things are and to find a way around in these difficult times. HERE BE SNOWMEN. HERE BE BURLS. HERE BE BURLS WHICH RESEMBLE SNOWMEN. But it is better than that, than mere utility, for it stops us short with moments of intense beauty, moments given rise to by combinations of things we'd never anticipated, by re-castings of the banal into the lovely and injections of loveliness into the everyday, the trashy and the awkward. And that beauty is not a sugar pill to make us want to use it (though it helps) but itself, in turn, becomes a new and wonderful part of this actual world where we are for a while embodied, part of the glory of it, a reason for staying alive in it, because it makes us feel better in it, with a fuller understanding not in scientific or technical terms, but of what it *feels like* to be in it for ourselves and for others and of our pleasure in it and our duty to it and to those who share it with us...

Conkle's art will not change that actual, lived-in, world (I'll tell you a secret—no art will, of and by itself). What it might do, might just do, is encourage us to push on ourselves towards change, to feel our way thoughtfully but determinedly forward, and travelling that risky and sometimes obscure path it will fitfully, but often magnificently, illuminate our way.

Michael Szpakowski is an artist and writer based near London, United Kingdom.



*The Wall*, 2018–19  
Oil, metal leaf, rough diamonds on panel  
16 x 16 in





*Hungry Rats*, 2020  
Pen, watercolor, gouache,  
color pencil, acrylic on paper  
11 x 8½ in



*Balance Rock: Miner Threat*, 2012  
Metal leaf on natural stones  
Site specific work from Land Art Mongolia 360°  
with Marne Lucas/Eco-Baroque  
Gobi Desert, Mongolia  
Photo: Marne Lucas



*Philosopher's Burl (Manatee)*, 2010  
Wood burl, silver leaf, varnish  
25 x 13 x 11 in  
Photo: Marne Lucas

## BRUCE CONKLE

*b. 1964. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon*

*2010 Hallie Ford Fellow*

Bruce Conkle declares an affinity for mysterious natural phenomena such as snow, fire, rainbows, crystals, volcanos, tree burls, and meteorites. He examines contemporary attitudes toward the environment, including deforestation, climate change, and extinction. Conkle's work often deals with man's place within nature, and frequently examines what he calls the "misfit quotient" at the crossroads. His work has been shown around the world, including Reykjavik, Ulaanbaatar, Rio De Janeiro, New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, Seattle, and Portland. He has completed public commissions for the Oregon Department of Transportation, TriMet/MAX Light Rail, and Portland State University's Smith Memorial Student Union Public Art + Residency. In 2010, Conkle received an Oregon Arts Commission Artist Fellowship. Conkle received a Master of Fine Arts from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.

**Hallie Brown** was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

*Anne C. Kubisch*  
*President, The Ford Family Foundation*

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit [www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org).



## VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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*The Wooden Carrot:* Courtesy Frosch &  
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*The Wall:* Courtesy Private Collection

*Critical Laputa:* Courtesy Private Collection

All remaining works: Courtesy the artist