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**FEATURED CARVER**  
**Back To The Future With Bosko**

**By Jeff Berry**

    Since graduating from Art Center College Of Design in 1988, Bosko Hrnjak has carved out quite a career for himself.  Literally:  His hand-chiseled palm and redwood Tikis have become sought-after collector’s items, enabling him to create his own Polynesian hideaway on the outskirts of Escondido, California.  Bosko’s studio compound, which he shares with his wife and business partner Truus “Trader Dutch” DeGroot, boasts two imposing A-frame outbuildings surrounded by lush tropical foliage.  Bosko built both buildings himself, the same way he built his reputation:  by following his obsessions wherever they might lead, whether or not anyone else went along for the ride.  With today’s Tiki revival in full swing, it’s easy to forget that there was a time, only a few short years ago, when no other artist did share Bosko’s obsession with Tiki.   He was the first to exhibit his Tikis in art galleries, and the first commissioned to design a new Tiki bar (the Taboo Cove at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas).

     Bosko was also the first to revive the lost art of Tiki mug manufacture.  As Book Of Tiki author Sven Kirsten remembers it, “When Bosko told me in ’94 that, after carving Tikis for a while, he was going to try to cast new Tiki mugs, I thought ‘Oh, what a novel idea!’  To our tight-knit group of hunters and collectors of vintage Tiki vessels, the thought of NEW mugs simply had never occurred as a possibility!”

     I first met Bosko around that time.  We got together again recently in his studio, where, surrounded by his latest commissions, we discussed all things Oceanic.

**You began carving Tikis when nobody else was doing it:  The old guard had stopped because there was no longer a commercial demand, and the current Tiki revival was many years down the road.  With no scene to “feed” you, how did your original inspiration strike?**

Back in college during the mid-eighties, I’d recently gone over to doing dimensional art and was scratching around rediscovering Tiki, picking up mugs, whatever came along. The first Tiki piece I ever did was an assignment in one of Jim Heimann’s classes.  We had to do an invite of some sort.  I was banned from making Elvis art, so I did a Tiki invite for a Luau.

**You say you were “rediscovering” Tiki.  When did you first discover it?**

I grew up in the San Gabriel Valley.  We moved several times, but always somewhere along Rosemead Boulevard, which was lined with Tiki restaurants and apartments.  When I looked at Polynesian architecture it was so removed from my dull existence:  The apartment buildings had waterfalls, giant idols, colored lights and flaming torches at night -- very different from the depressing off-white boxes that they pass off as architecture today.   It seemed like we were going down that street every night; luckily my parents liked to drive slow, because the area was packed not only with amazing tiki temples but all kinds of mid-century architecture.  Going down that road, past all the signage, the neon, the buildings juxtaposing primitive and modern –- all of it designed to be viewed from a car -- it’s indescribable.  Just seeing, off in the distance, that giant neon sign at the Downey McDonalds with Speedy running across the top:  as a child how could it not have an impact on you?  And it all seemed perfectly normal to me.  Tikis in Southern California, buildings like space ships, I never thought about the absurdity of it.

**Because you had no context for it.**

No, not until college, when I read about it in Alan Hess’s Googie book.  Now I knew there’d been an official “Polynesian” movement on the mainland -- but I still had no concept of the parameters of the thing.  Back then every time you walked into a thrift store or swap meet you found some Tiki artifact, but they all seemed like parts in some giant unsolvable puzzle.  On the mugs you’d see logos for all these exotic locales, like the Tikis in Monterey Park, the Trade Winds in Oxnard, the Pago Pago in Tuscon.  They all sounded so fabulous, yet so mysterious, so unknowable.  Before I knew it I had amassed a decent-sized mug collection, some paper stuff, exotica records, bits and pieces of the past.  So one of the first things I did when I moved here in 1990 was build my own Tiki bar, the Kapu Tiki Room, to store my collection.  Also I sculpted the large 12-foot Moai, and the pieces which hold up the roof over my bar.  A couple of years later I wanted more Tikis, bigger Tikis, and a mug for the Kapu Tiki Room.  This was my first motivation to carve and cast my work.  Once I started, it was addicting.  I would get up early and work outside until dark; my head was in an art zone.

**How many years were you alone in the wilderness, so to speak, until you found others who were into Tiki?**  
   
From the mid-1980s until 1992, the only other person I knew who had an interest was my old friend and then-roommate Mark.

**Ryden?**

Yeah, Mark Ryden.  We’d go on drives around the Los Angeles basin, just generally taking pictures and looking at things, and every now and again we’d run into a remnant of Tiki culture.  One morning we started out driving through my old Rosemead neighborhood and ended way out on what had once been route 66; the roadside architecture was very compelling, so we just followed Foothill Boulevard like lemmings.  At some point we ran into what had been the fabulous Kapu Kai.

**The tiki bowling alley in Cucamonga.**

Yeah and it was huge.  My first thought was that it must have been a giant supermarket.  The abandoned site had a really intense serial-killer vibe; we peered thru the boarded-up windows and saw what looked like monster Tikis and a roller-rink sign.  It would be years before we learned what that place had been.  I eventually ended up with one of the giant Milan Guanko carvings, but at that time we had no clue, it was a lost civilization we had no understanding of.  Then, much later, Mark ran into our old teacher Jim Heimann and told him we were into this Tiki thing.  Oddly, Jim had just met a guy named Sven Kirsten, who was shopping a book around about this very same subject.  So we went over to meet him and he started explaining his theories on how Tiki flourished and devolved, and who its prime movers were, like Don the Beachcomber, Steven Crane, Paul Marshall, Andres Bumatay -- all I could think was he’s talking so fast I’m never going to remember any of this.

**Did meeting others who were into Tiki affect your art?**  
   
It changed everything.  Suddenly this mysterious, shadowy thing was revealed to me.  Nowadays it’s hard to imagine how things were before the Internet, but then it was all word of mouth.  I would drive up to L.A. to meet Tiki people, or go to one of the “Tiki Symposiums” Sven used to hold, and I would drive back home on a cloud:  all the knowledge you could pick up in an evening, it was amazing!  Back then no one had reissued any records; everyone owned something you had never seen before, there was always some cool place you couldn’t possibly imagine -- it was all still being mapped out.  Every time I came to L.A. it was mind-blowing.  One thing that really bit before the Tiki revival was the drinks.  Having been to Hawaii I thought I was some kind of tropical drink aficionado, but I knew nothing:  we went to one of Sven’s talks at Dale Sizer’s studio, where Beachbum Berry made a Trader Vic’s Grog, and it is not an exaggeration to say it was akin to a religious experience.  It was the most amazing thing I had ever tasted:  sweet, sour, strong, fruity … the mint smell … you tasted every part, yet it all combined so perfectly.  I vividly remember that drink.

**I do too – because I broke a gallon jug of it all over Dale’s floor.**

That would explain why we didn’t get a second round.  Another thing that profoundly affected me was Sven’s observation that different mid-century carvers each had their own unique styles.  They were just like other artists.  He sent me a pre-Book Of Tiki booklet he put together of some of the carvers’ work; once I could identify their personal styles, mine took off.

**In the current crowded marketplace, with legions of carvers churning out countless Kus, Peles, and "vernacular" tikis, has your enthusiasm for Tiki waned?**

No no, not at all.  When you do anything for this length of time you have to come to terms with it or you’ll burn out.  I feel I’m doing the best work of my carving career now.  As far as the marketplace, some days I wonder what is it that people see in some of this mass-produced crap -- is it just the cheap price that attracts them?  So many things that have “Tiki” in the description are completely removed from Tiki.  Maybe the word is losing its meaning and becoming just a vague label like the word “vintage,” as if saying something is “Tiki” enough times will somehow make it Tiki.

This is also an area where the Internet has polluted us creatively.  If you look back in time at how many individual styles of carving were out there, it seemed like all the old-timers had a distinct style; they couldn’t count on typing a word in their computer and having ten million pictures of the thing come up.  They had to use their imagination more.  When you look at what passes for Tiki now, think about how many “authentic” pieces you’ve seen versus those giant buck-toothed monsters that are everyplace today.  Don’t get me wrong -- a lot of people are doing very good work.  But there’s a certain watered-down sameness to much of what you see out there.

I’m also amazed at how much hucksterism is still out there, and how people still love to go for it.  It’s a lot like Tiki’s heyday -- all these BS legends that sound so obvious, but the general public just eats it all up.  For instance, recently a customer asked if my Tikis had any traditional meaning.  We told her no.  She writes again a couple of weeks later, sending us a link to a website that had “Hawaiian” carvings “with meanings.”  Can we do those?   So we go on the site, which is selling those stiff Tongan knock-off versions of Hawaiian carvings, and the descriptions are amazing, they’re so over the top, adjective after adjective, all these words in pidgin English no less.  We couldn’t make it through a sentence without laughing.

**"Selling out" no longer seems to carry the stigma it used to among artists.  For many, it’s actually a career goal.   Are you troubled about the corruption of art by commerce?**   
   
You could make an argument that art’s always been corrupted by one thing or another.  Way back when the church was holding the purse-strings -- when they could dictate what kind of art got made -- did portrait painters really like dealing with their subjects?   Whenever you make a living doing something, you’re responding to the market whether you’re conscious of it or not.  That’s why the pieces we sell on the website are one thing, and my other artwork is separate.   I’ve been doing the Tiki stuff so long now, I know what I make will sell.  And this gives you a confidence, or boldness:  now I create things that will challenge the perception of what “Tiki” is.

**Challenge it in what sense?**

At the moment I’m taking my carving into a couple of new directions.  The first is, I’m reinterpreting the figures by using wood as if it weren’t actually wood, but a more malleable plastic substance, so that the carvings are no longer symmetrical but twisted to varying degrees.  Some of them look Cubist, or like something in a warped mirror.  The second direction I’m moving toward is really minimal idols.  After a while it’s easy to fall back on overly detailed Tikis:  although it doesn’t look it, there are a lot of places to hide problems.  People may think a simplistic carving is easy, but that’s not the case; being able to convey an idea or personality in a few lines takes a lot of forethought.  The challenge for me is to see how basic I can get and still put something unique across to a viewer.

**Only two directions?  Looking around your workshop, it seems like Tikis are only a small part of your output.**

As far as all my other work, the last two years have been the most productive period of my life.  I started doing huge abstract paintings last year; it’s been satisfying to achieve something so disparate from anything I’ve ever done.  I’ve been trying to get into larger sculptures for ages now, and I’m finally doing that.  I’m also collaborating with Stan Ridgeway.

**The singer from Wall Of Voodoo?**

That’s right, he picked out one of his solo songs and I put some of my photography to it.  This has been very exciting for me as he and his work have been a huge influence on me and my work.  We recently began a set of silk-screened prints that have a photo-collage type of effect.  There are a lot of other things I’m always working on; in the end, all the styles you develop affect one another to some degree, and that’s why things grow stylistically.

**As your style evolves, have your obsessions evolved along with it?**

Lately I’ve become obsessed by old books.  I keep dragging piles of them back home.  There are all kinds of obscure records I collect that fascinate me; another thing that I’m just amazed by are people’s scrapbooks and photo albums.  Artist’s scrapbooks can be very satisfying, and old Christmas card sample sales albums, swizzle sticks, Elvis -- you could do a book on all the things I collect, but physically possessing things is not the big thing it used to be.  One thing I’ve always been obsessed by is just driving aimlessly and shooting photographs, stopping at thrift stores, just drifting down a highway.  It’s much more invigorating now:  the older you get, the more you see.

**Speaking of Elvis, you’re also carving pieces in the style of his “Jungle Room” décor.**

That’s inspired by the works of Witco, the company started by a Northwest artist named William Westenhaver.  Witco actually did the furniture line Elvis picked for Graceland.  They did really wild, primitive-looking carvings, all done in cedar with this burnt-wood look.  Hundreds of themed restaurants were done in this style, like the Hala-Kahiki in Chicago, from around 1956 to ’76.  Witco rose with Tiki, and kind of dropped off the map when Tiki did too.

I’m doing framed wood pieces influenced by the old Witco framed art, but with a more “modern primitive” abstract quality.  I knew Witco did Tikis and stuff but I didn’t understand the extent of the company’s work, so back in 1998, when I mentioned to Sven I was going to Seattle, he asked if I would go interview William Westenhaver for the Book of Tiki carvers chapter.  So we get up to Mr. Westenhaver’s house and it turns out he and I both attended Art Center College, but about 50 years apart.  After that it was one amazing story after another.  He’d built that company out of nothing; whenever we’ve talked since, he’s had tons of advice on every aspect of what I’m doing.

The thing that fascinates me about Witco is that it was made to look like fine art, but was actually mass-produced.  Of course Mr. Westenhaver, the guy overseeing the operation, was a fine artist, and he designed the pieces to look like art, but the stuff Witco made was produced on an assembly line by non-artists, as cheaply as possible.   It was not fine art in the traditional sense, but it is something people bought because they thought it was.  When I make a Witco-style framed piece, it’s a hand-made piece of art, and I’m trying to imbue the piece with a deeper meaning, but what I also want to achieve is for the piece to have this disconnected “production” feel at first glance.

**Why?**

It’s an hommage to that era’s sensibility, though clearly my pieces are being created today.  If you look at all the designs they used to do at Witco, they ran the gamut of what was popular back in the day.  It would be easy to fall back on what worked for them and churn out copies or variations on it, but I’ve tried to take these designs to another level.

**Stanley Kubrick said that he had to create because that was the only way he could stop thinking about his own mortality.  Why do you have to create?**

Back when I was a kid, I used to stare at dioramas at the Pomona Fair, or the California mission models at Knott’s Berry farm.  I’d press my face against the glass and wonder, “How did they make that?”  We had a neighbor in Rosemead who built models, miniatures for Hollywood movies.  It was like visiting a church.  He had tiny western towns in his workshop, and out back he had huge battleships in a shed.  A scale-model train went around his yard.  It was unreal.  Somehow I wanted to possess this stuff, but I thought I could never make it myself –- it seemed so complex.  That was also what I thought the first time I looked at a full-on Ku Tiki in Hawaii:   “Where would you start?”  It looked impossible.  And now making things is all I know how to do.  It’s all I ever wanted to do; it’s when I’m the most content.  Creating something new -- it’s like a drug, only it’s satisfying afterwards.

Bosko’s oeuvre is on display at ***[www.tikibosko.com](http://www.tikibosko.com/)*** and at[***www.boskoart.com***](http://www.boskoart.com/)

Jeff Berry’s fourth book on tropical drinks is due out in the spring of 2007.  Visit his website at ***www.beachbumberry.com***.