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EYES

SR 71

OUR  
Noses

the  
GRAND

*The Conqueror Worm, 1997 (installation view)*

## Director's Foreword

The AGW is pleased to introduce this exhibition selected from our impressive collection of 80 works by acclaimed artist John Scott. The exhibition joins numerous others produced by the Gallery over our long history that mine the rich archive of art objects held in this important public collection. An examination of Scott's work from these holdings is recognition of the significant growth of his representation at the AGW since 1990. It was in that year that the Gallery received 24 works from the artist by gift, including the animation drawings for the *Born Near the USA* series. Growth of the Gallery's collection of his works after 1990 was supported by six more gifts from private collectors, several of which are included in this exhibition.

Since 1990, the AGW curators have been supportive of Scott's work being more deeply reflected in the collection. It was primarily curator Helga Pakasaar, who also organized *John Scott / Hometown Exhibition* in 1998, that oversaw the next major wave of collections growth to expand the Gallery's John Scott holdings. As guest curator David Liss points out in the accompanying essay, for some of Scott's most visceral works, the artist's experiences living in Windsor and in an international industrial border community have formed a critical axis of inquiry throughout his art practice. Today, Scott is widely recognized for his strong graphic drawing style and his sculptural works exploring such subjects as violence, destruction and anxiety in a technological world.

Regarding Liss's curatorial perspective, Srimoyee Mitra, AGW Curator of Contemporary Art, observes that "Liss has selected works that are most closely related to the industrial manufacturing history of Windsor/Detroit. He highlights those works where the artist examines the destructive potential of machinery and technology and its impact on human behaviour, a subject that Windsorites reckon with every day. Liss addresses Scott's disparaging perspective on mass mechanization in playful and poetic ways that lure the viewer in and make them laugh and think."

On behalf of the AGW, I would like to thank David Liss for his enthusiasm in taking up this project. Thanks are also extended to the AGW staff working on this exhibition, including Srimoyee Mitra, Curator of Contemporary Art, Otto Buj for his work on the e-publication, and to Nicole McCabe and Steve Nilsson for their work on exhibition logistics and presentation. Thanks are also extended to our core granting agencies and supporters for providing us with crucial resources to explore these topics and continue the work of generating knowledge and interpretations on the Gallery's collection.

Catharine Mastin, PhD  
AGW Director

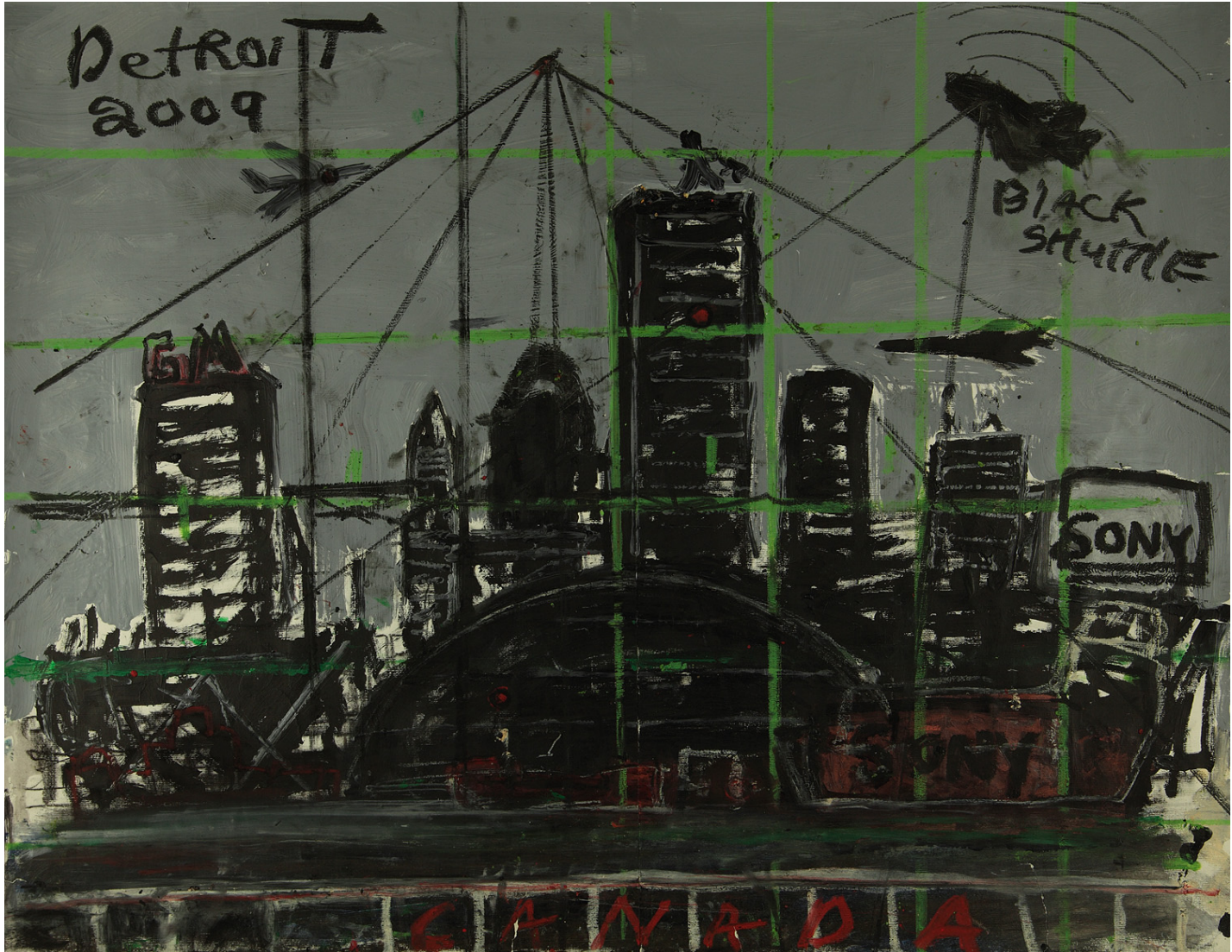
Detroit  
2009

BLACK  
SHUTTLE

GA

SONY

CANADA



## John Scott / **MEAN MACHINES**

Born in Windsor, Ontario, now living and working in Toronto, John Scott grew up familiar with the machinery — the processes, labour and technologies — of the industrial age and the rise and fall of that era. Scott also dwells within the shadow of nuclear doom, as all of us have since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. These significant factors have shaped and defined his lifelong interest in industrialism and his acute desire to come to terms with the often destructive relationships between mass-mechanization, militarism and human behaviour. Haunted by the memories of his father trudging off to factory jobs, he identifies strongly with working-class culture and the plight of the 'everyman.' Since the 1970s he has created drawings, installations and sculptures that address head-on the causes and effects of abject suffering and oppression. Raw, even primitive in execution and rarely including colours other than black and white, his work can easily be understood to be dark and pessimistic — and it may well be. Nevertheless, as an artist Scott believes in the potential of art to be a voice against forces of tyranny and evil.

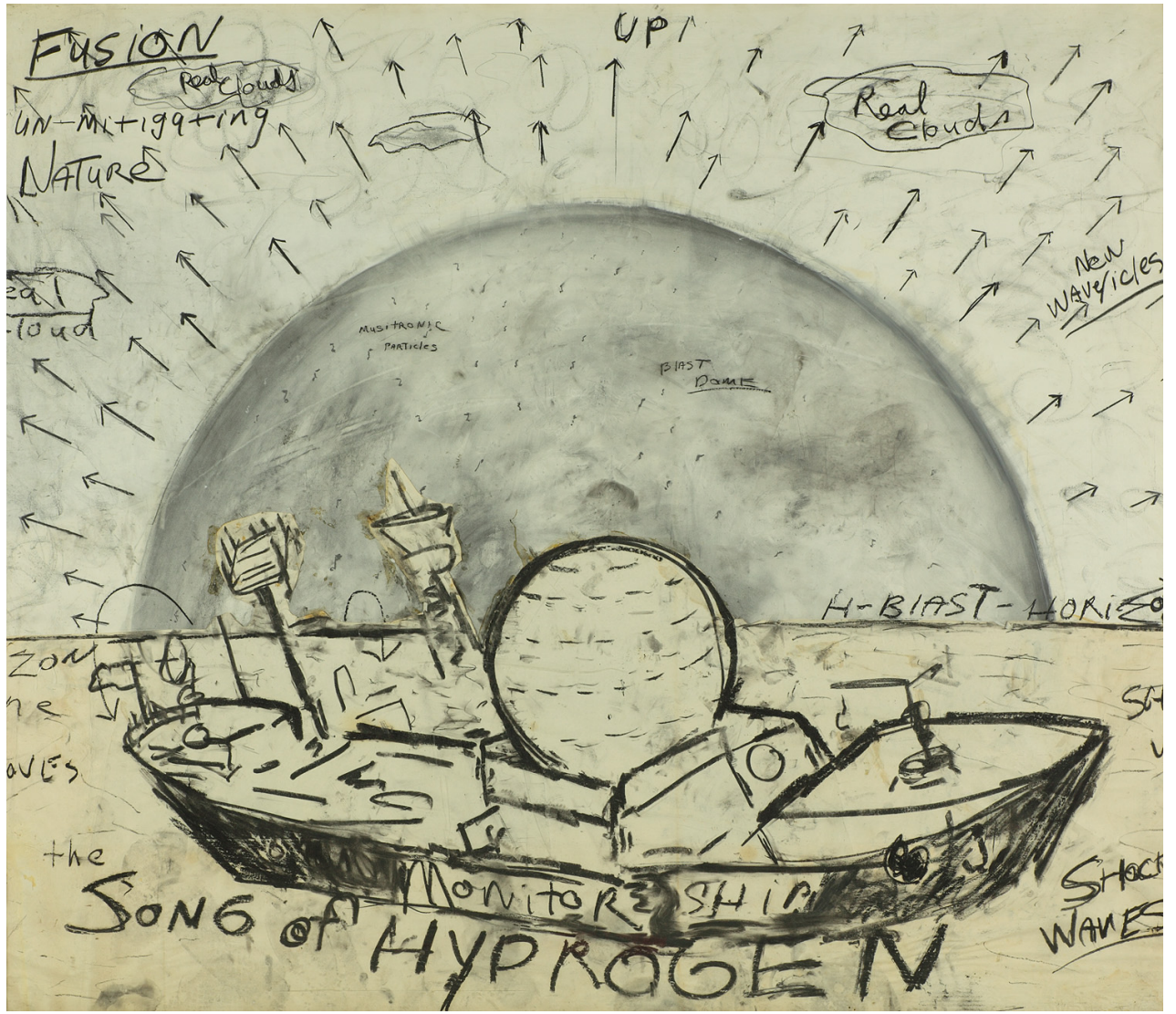
Growing up in the Windsor/Detroit area in the 1960s, Scott was also aware of forces of social unrest — street protests, racial tension, job loss and a rebellious youth culture. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the beginnings of corporate restructuring, the relocation of factories to cheaper labour markets, the rise of the political Right, the intransigence of religious fundamentalism, continued racial intolerance and growing economic disparity. Many people of Scott's generation were beginning to suspect that the utopia promised by political, business and religious leaders was a façade masking exploitation, corruption and greed. For them there was urgency in the air that called for direct and immediate action. If you were not going to be part of a solution, you were part of the problem. Not necessarily armed with solutions at the time or wishing to be part of the problem, Scott left Windsor in the early 1970s and moved to Toronto, where he enrolled in philosophy courses and was particularly drawn to socialist ideologies that espoused equality for all. Eventually he wound up at the Ontario College of Art. With no formal training yet still harbouring a sense of revulsion towards political and religious oppression and capitalist exploitation of labour, he began producing crudely rendered drawings and paintings

on any paper at hand in heavy black ink and paint, depicting images of primitive-looking figures marching towards their factory jobs or huddled together in fear before tanks, guns and planes.

Scott soon became known for his urgently expressive style and political messages that were in sync with the times as the vernacular and direct art forms of graffiti and punk rock began to emerge. While he continued to make drawings, as he does to this day, he eventually began producing large-scale sculptures that were even more powerful and confrontational. Given his upbringing in the seat of the automotive industry, these works often take the form of cars and motorcycles. Perhaps his most famous is *Trans Am Apocalypse* (1988), an actual Trans Am car with the entire Book of Revelation scratched into all of its surfaces.

In the mid-1990s, Scott produced *Avatar (the deathless boy)* (1996), a menacing-looking motorcycle painted matt black and outfitted with scrap computer parts and a windjammer containing the haunting holographic image of a young-looking, long-haired, bearded man resembling familiar depictions of Jesus. As evident in works such as *Trans Am Apocalypse* or *Black Sun* (1997), a half-scale replica of a B-2 stealth bomber mounted atop a prayer lectern, Scott equates religious doctrine and its structures of power and control with militarism and oppression — not surprising as he observes the legacy of violence and bloodshed perpetrated in the name of various religions. While venerated figures like Jesus may have walked the earth as divine avatars of peace, their human followers have waged wars, fabricated prejudices and fostered divisiveness. Though spiritual thought may be used to guide, inspire and enlighten, and weaponry may be used to feed and protect, history has repeatedly demonstrated that religious doctrine and military technologies are more often used to control or destroy. The same technologies invented during the Industrial Revolution that allowed for mass production of goods also allowed larger numbers of workers to be exploited and controlled. And the same sophisticated technology, the hydrogen bomb, invented ostensibly as a deterrent against horrors such as the Second World War, has unleashed upon us a technology capable of obliterating all of us from the face of the earth. Scott's large drawing, *The Song of Hydrogen* (1981), is one of several works that he has created over the years depicting imagined scenes of nuclear destruction.

Scott's sculpture, *The Conqueror Worm* (1997), a repulsive-looking creature, draws reference from Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 poem of the same title. In the poem Poe refers to a "monstrous crawling shape" that functions as a metaphor implying the relationship between worms and decay and suggesting that the universe is controlled by dark forces beyond our



FUSION

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UP!

Real Clouds

Real Clouds

New Waveicles

MUSTROMIC  
PARTICLES

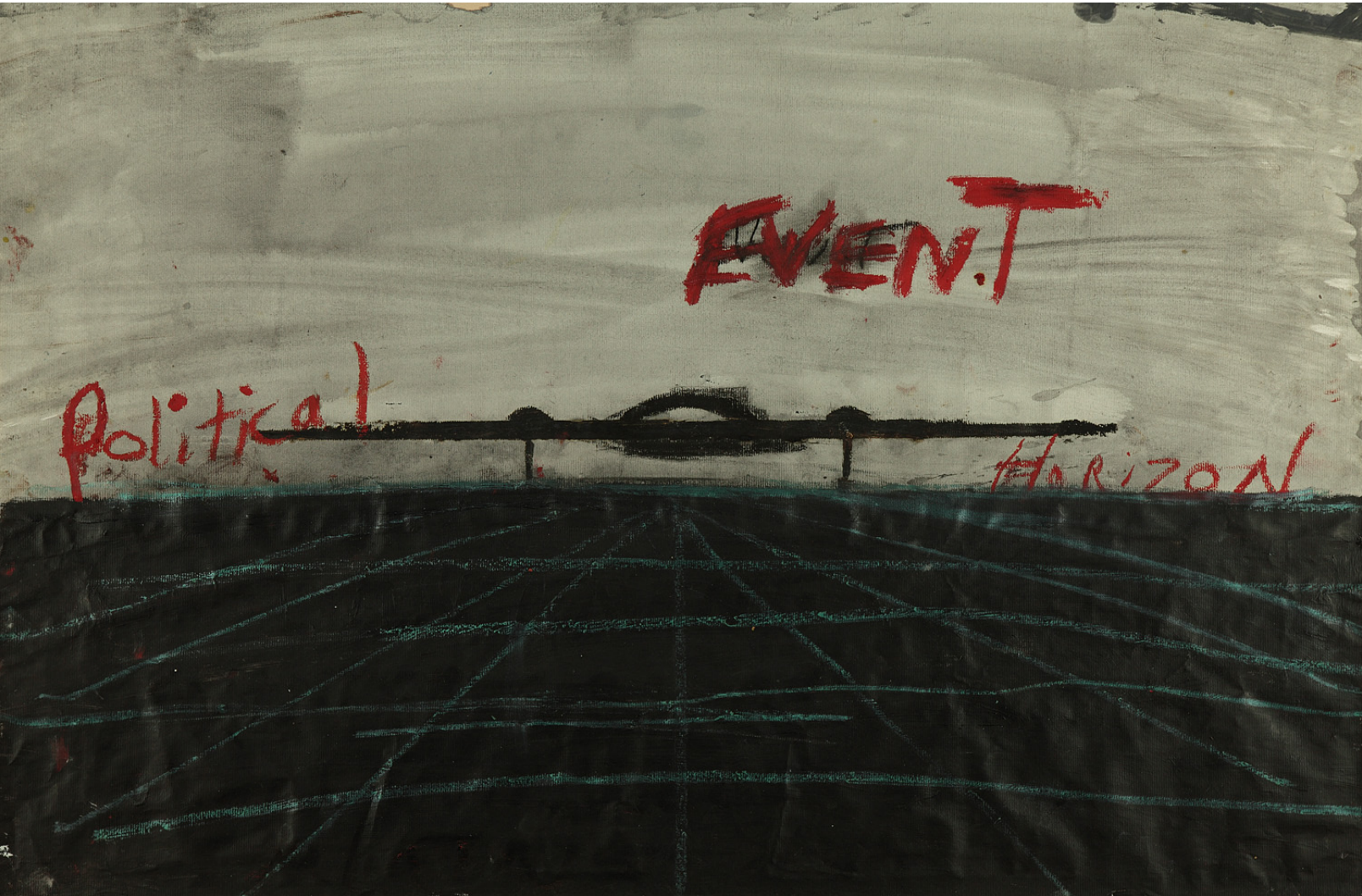
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understanding or control. *The Conqueror Worm* is also the title of a four-issue mini-series within the ongoing horror/sci-fi adult comic series, *Hellboy*, that Scott is likely familiar with given his wide-ranging interests and influences. In that story the conqueror worm is a mysterious space-born demon sent by evil forces to devour the earth. Again, as with *Avatar*, although the source of evil and destruction descends upon us from outside of our physical realm, these forces are nevertheless aspects of our being that are only capable of exerting their power when they take physical form. Similarly Scott has fabricated *The Conqueror Worm* here as a hybrid machine/vehicular life-form, spewing animated apocalyptic scenes from within its armoured casing; from within its soul. With these works Scott suggests that machines and technology are manifest expressions of our consciousness; of our desires and fears that embody forces both good and evil.

*Between the Eyes* (1989) is a large three-panel work depicting a drawing of a dark, military plane emerging from between two enlarged photographs of the artist's eyes. Never one to dilute the urgency of his message with subtleties, clearly the implication is that the plane is hurtling forth from the depths of the mind on a direct collision course with the viewer. Here both artist and audience are interconnected (Scott is, after all, one of us), and together we are affected by the manifestations and projections of our deepest fears, our most sophisticated technologies and our darkest actions.

As human inventions, all technologies and machines are a part of us. Today we enter a fascinating yet unfamiliar digital age. We rely heavily upon technology even as we are fully aware of its destructive potential. Ours is an age of anxiety and John Scott seeks to expose the machinery of its workings, the forces visible and unseen that threaten to destroy us. Ultimately his art is a positive act of expression and hope that aspires to liberate us, perhaps against all odds, from the cycles of our object behaviours and a seemingly inevitable armageddon.

**David Liss** is the Artistic Director and Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. From 1995 to 2000, he was Director/Curator of the Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts in Montreal. He holds a BFA (1987), from Concordia University in Montreal, and between 1994 and 1996 he regularly contributed art reviews to the *Montreal Gazette*. Since the mid-1980s he has organized, produced and curated numerous solo and group exhibitions of contemporary art, in addition to overseeing related publications, educational programs, performances, events and travelling exhibitions in Canada and internationally. Among numerous activities he has participated in the curatorial programs of the ARCO art fair in Madrid, Spain, and he has served on the advisory committee of the Toronto Sculpture Garden since 2003. Most recently he was co-curator of the *2011 Biennale Montreal*. He is a member of the Canadian Association of Museum Directors Organization (CAMDO), a contributing editor to *Canadian Art* magazine and Adjunct Professor at York University in Toronto. He is also a practicing artist in drawing, watercolor and photography.

## List of Works

*The Song of Hydrogen*, 1981; mixed media on paper; Gift of Chris Poulson, 2001

*Animation drawing for Born Near the USA*, 1988; gouache on paper; Gift of the artist, 1990

*Animation drawing for Born Near the USA*, 1988; gouache on paper; Gift of the artist, 1990

*Between The Eyes*, 1989; mixed media on paper with two photographs; Gift of Chris Poulson, 2001

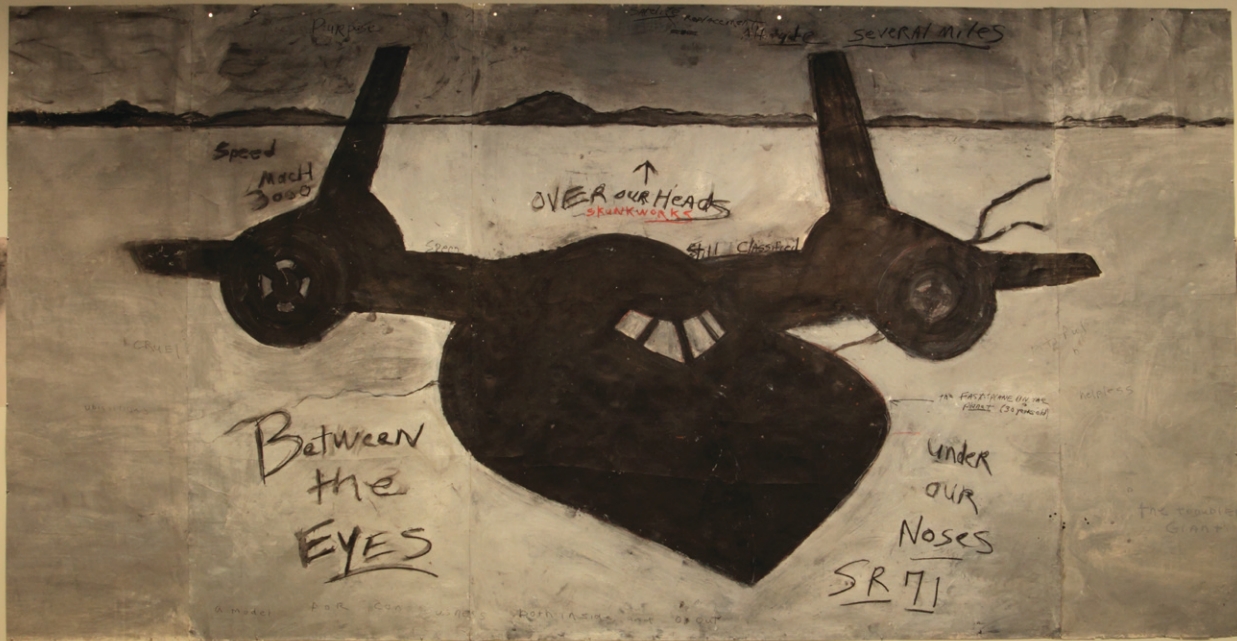
*Untitled (War Machine)*, 1995; mixed media on paper; Gift of Frank Marchegiano, 1998

*Detroit 2009 – Black Shuttle*, 1995; mixed media on paper; Gift of Tom Gottlieb, 1998

*Political Event on the Horizon*, 1995; mixed media on paper; Gift of Frank Marchegiano, 1998

*Avatar (the deathless boy)*, 1996; altered motorcycle, with audio/video component, found objects; Gift of Chris Poulson, 2001

*The Conqueror Worm*, 1997; paint, sheet metal, metal frame, rubber tires, electrical components; Gift of Chris Poulson, 2001



X



(both images) *Animation drawing for Born Near the USA, 1988*



*Untitled (War Machine)*, 1995

**John Scott / MEAN MACHINES**

September 15, 2012 – January 6, 2013

Guest Curator David Liss

Editors Alison Kenzie, Srimoyee Mitra

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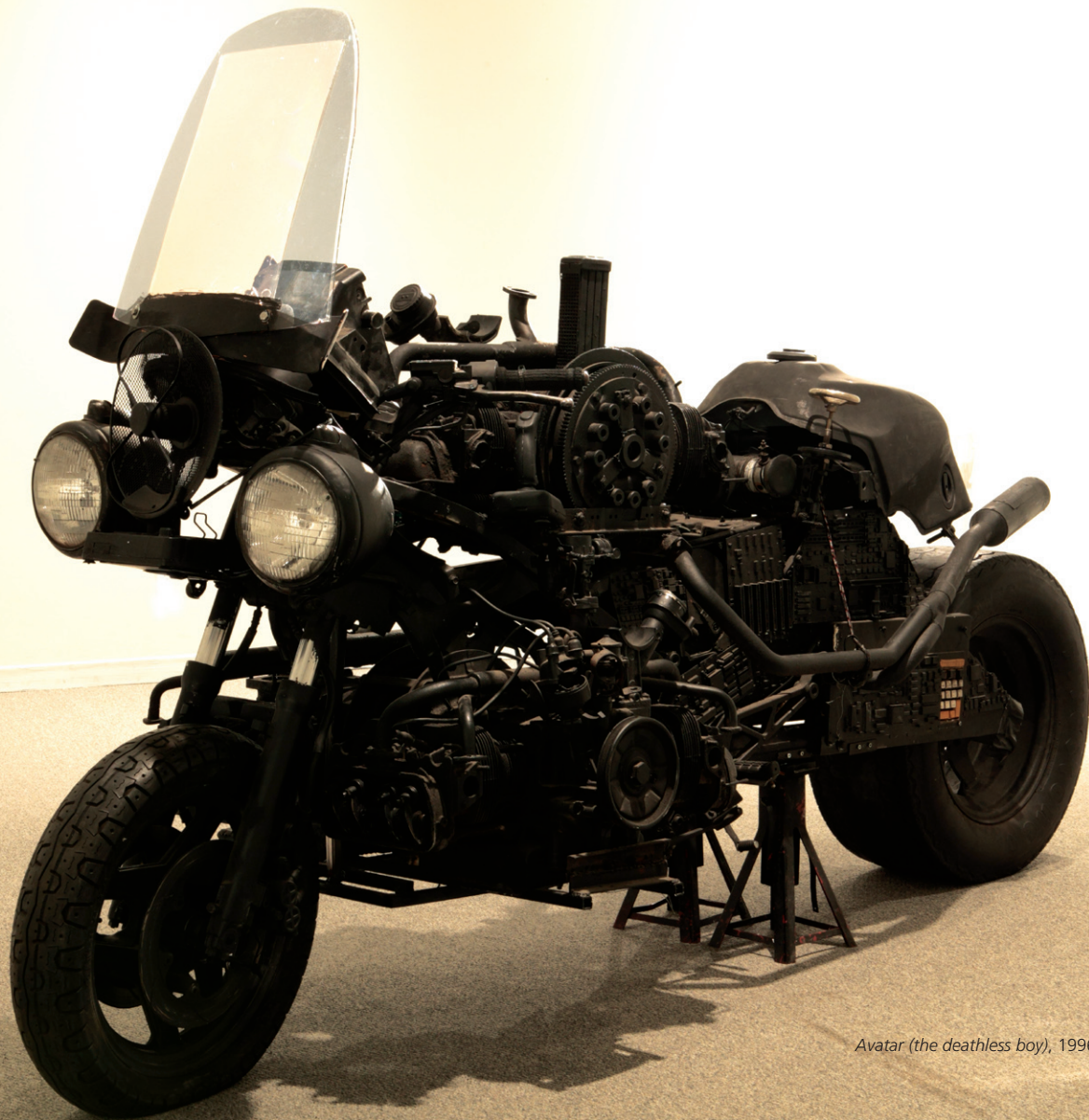
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*Avatar (the deathless boy), 1996 (installation view)*

