

# **Empires of Rust**

August Kochanowski

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Empires of Rust

By  
August Kochanowski  
Master of Fine Arts

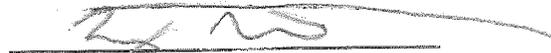
Herron School of Art and Design  
IUPUI  
Indiana University



Professor, Greg Hull  
Advisor



Professor, Eric Nordgulen  
Committee Member



Gallery Director & Chief Curator, Max Weintraub, PhD  
Committee Member

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Professor Nan Goggin  
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

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## **Abstract**

My work is a reaction to the current movement away from traditional sculpture. In response, I have created a series of figurative sculptures that I placed on non-traditional pedestals. When I look at the art world, I see how contemporary sculpture has veered away from art on a pedestal in favor of performance, installation, and time-based sculpture.

In my research, I examine systems of wealth and power. There are the haves and the have nots. It is obvious a small percentage of people control the world and we are all affected and the economic gap keeps widening every day. I see how power has been represented in art: Portraits are idealized, sculptures are made of refined and precious materials, and there is opulence in the presentation.

“Sculpture, more than any other art form, is about time and history and the use of materials which can last for centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Huma Bhabha

## **Complicity**

When I look at this system of power, I question the design of these unbalanced structures. I do this in a way by taking part in these systems: I’m a portrait artist, albeit unconventional – I do not capture the likeness of a person, but I do try to have an essence revealed; and, I’m a blacksmith – I do fine wrought iron work. These two forms of creativity have always been considered privileged forms of art. Going back in history, if you had a portrait bust made of yourself or your ancestors, or had a fine wrought iron gate leading to

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<sup>1</sup> Huma Bhabha: Lecture Extract, 2010

your estate, you were considered someone of means. In a way these forms of art become symbols of systems in themselves. It is a system of privilege, wealth, and power.

In my art, I critique this power. Using a torch, I cut apart and reassemble industrial scrap metal into human likenesses which are disjointed and disfigured. The scrap metal used is a reference to the people who were crushed and taken advantage of by those in power. Instead of sculptures that are majestic, mine are in a state of disrepair. Instead of being mighty, my sculptures are toppled. Through my unconventional handling of portraiture, the broken, ruined figure is a warning. It is a requiem to the artwork destroyed by oppressive conquering forces, in the past and to the present.<sup>2</sup> It is also a symbol of time and how all systems of power eventually crumble.

I have been studying the work of Robert Smithson and his writings. He is known for his sculpture and land art all over the country.<sup>3</sup> Smithson went back to his home state, New Jersey. While there, “He photographed various industrial relics he found in the region and re-imagined them as ‘monuments’ from a different time, musing on their artistic significance.”<sup>4</sup>

While photographing, Smithson brings up this idea of ruins in reverse. “All the new construction that would eventually be built, is the opposite of the romantic ruin because the new buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built. Rather, they rise into ruin before they

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<sup>2</sup> Buffenstein, Alyssa. 2017. A Monumental Loss: Here Are the Most Significant Cultural Heritage Sites That ISIS Has Destroyed to Date. Cultural heritage sites continue to be casualties of the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

<sup>3</sup> Artsy. n.d. "Robert Smithson." *Artsy*. Accessed March 1, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/artist/robert-smithson> Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, created in 1970 on the Northern shore of Utah’s Great Salt Lake, is his most famous land art.

<sup>4</sup> Culture Trip. 2016. *New Jersey: Robert Smithson's Homage to Passaic New Jersey*. December 23. Accessed February 26, 2018. <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-jersey/articles/robert-smithson-s-homage-to-passaic-new-jersey/>.

are built.”<sup>5</sup> Smithsonian continues, “Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.”<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1 - Striding Figure  
Photo credit: Matt Panfil

For my thesis work, I created *Striding Figure*. Observe that it is created broken – a ruin before its time. *Striding Figure* acts much more like ruins we are familiar with than just classical ruin. Across this nation, we see so many old skeletons of industry warehouses and manufacturing plants. Hulking, weathered shells of fallen prosperity that are now replaced with fast construction and cheap drive-it finishes – palatial looks that won’t even last fifty years. These ruins are in areas that once had prospering communities. We have overcome this

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<sup>5</sup> Culture Trip. 2016. I think Smithsonian is observing how present-day construction is not built to last. It is only built for the present time, and will not last into the future.

<sup>6</sup> Culture Trip. 2016.

loss, but it's nothing like the traditional infrastructures of manufacturing that we previously had, which produced tangible goods. Everything now is a giant façade. On the surface, things are not as they seem. We have this false sense of security. Our reality is built on consumerism and mass production -- on things easily thrown away. There is no future in this type of behavior. The average person is being left behind while the rich continue to thrive.

Consider Smithson's words and reflect on what you see when driving down the freeways. There are housing developments that have literally popped up, from start to finish, in a year. These monuments to society, to living, are built for the present. The materials used will barely last into the future. Similar monuments to the present are the multitude of bill boards found along the freeways. They are tributes to consumerism and a throwaway society. Many times, these same billboards feature the figure – something we should all be able to relate to; however, these figures have been idealized to an unreasonable and unreachable degree.

My work of portraits, created out of scrap iron, coming from weathered components of industry, they are a monument to monuments. Industry is infrastructure. Without it we would not have the society we have today. Industry was the monument to the blue-collar middle-class worker. Those monuments have been taken down. In scrap yards across America, you can find cubed-up piles of what was industry – industrial fittings, shelving, framework – at a massive scale. And, I am reimagining their greatness. Instead of being melted down, the scrap of industry is being preserved in my art as evidence of what once existed, and hopefully will reoccur. I am turning scrap into something venerable. Industrial scrap is now becoming portraiture, but not that of the rich and famous, but of the middle-class.

## History

As a fourth-generation blacksmith, my everyday life in the workshop has always influenced my drive for craftsmanship in my own works of art. My education in that field has followed the time-honored apprenticeship of practicing first the detailed techniques of filing and finishing, then graduating to the process of iron transformed from its state of raw, cold rigidity into a fluid and malleable substance. I learned the rules and limitations that come with creating with fire and hammer. This training imbued in me my fascination with unique one-of-a-kind work that has a hand-made sensibility – always focusing on manipulating materials and using them in an unconventional manner.

Historically a blacksmith's work was essential and functional. He made the tools and hardware that supported all the other crafts. However, his work could cross into the realms of superfluous – ornamental rails, gates, and sculptures created for the rich and powerful. Mass production eliminated what the blacksmith created for the general public.<sup>7</sup> What remains is the exclusivity of working for the wealthy. Early on I realized that most of the ironwork I worked on was going to that small slice in the demographics.

## Time

The human body is fascinating. Everyone on the planet can identify with the human form and relate to it in some way or fashion. Everyone has something in common because regardless of whether we are powerful, wealthy, spiritual or impoverished, we are all human. When you think of art history, figure representation is something that has been done

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew, Jack. *Edge of the Anvil*. 1991

continually, and humans have been visually documenting their presence for at least 30,000 years (Kuiper 2016). The figure is my way of exploring what it is to be human. What is means to live in this day and age, to be aware of history, and not only to look to the past to understand, but to speculate on our future.

I first looked toward classical sculpture. These works of art were made for the wealthy and powerful. They were used to memorialize, idealize, and commemorate. The figure is portrayed both realistically and ideally, and there was a significance associated with the material used; in the subject matter; and in the poses and gestures.



Figure 2 - *Portcullis*  
Photo credit Peter Vance  
The Studio. Weston, Wisconsin

I have been fixated with this idea of how to reinvent the figure in a way that was my own for many years. I wondered how can I make something new, different, and exciting. I do this by walking a line between figuration and abstraction. My sculpture, *Portcullis*, gives an example of this is in my earlier work. *Portcullis* plays on the classical *contrapposto*

stance and adlocutio gesture of *Augustus of Prima Porta*.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Augustus, *Portcullis* is not based on a god<sup>9</sup> but on a common man.<sup>10</sup> While the contrapposto stance is classical in usage, the adlocutio gesture is not. It has been applied to the left, not the right side. Moving away from the classical, *Portcullis* is incomplete in its structural skin and is lacking features.

## Influences

In my quest to reinvent and reinterpret the figure, I created *Striding Figure*, fourteen-foot-tall and in mid-stride.<sup>11</sup> When I was making *Striding Figure*, I was referencing several artists and their techniques. An early influence of mine was seeing the figure work of contemporary sculptor, Mathew Monahan. Monahan's figures are recognizable as figures, yet they take on an abstract quality. One approach he uses is to draw a portrait on paper that he then continually reworks until the paper starts to bulge and wrinkle. The paper starts to have dimension. From this paper he constructs by folding, crumpling, and manipulating, a figure.<sup>12</sup> He is creating this in-between zone of figuration and abstraction. I wanted somewhat to emulate that in my work. Not so abstract that a person cannot identify with it, yet not so figurative that it is dated.

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<sup>8</sup>Augustus from Prima Porta can be found at the Vatican Museum in Rome. (Patron of the Arts of the Vatican Museums 2014)

<sup>9</sup>“Art historians debate the significance of this, however, appearing barefoot was an attribute of divinity in art of the ancient world. Though likely based on a bronze statue created during Augustus' reign, according to many scholars, the Prima Porta must be posthumous, since the Roman Senate deified Augustus a month after his death two thousand years ago in AD 14. In other words, the [Prima Porta Augustus](#) ... is not simply a portrait of Rome's first emperor – it is also a vision of a god.” (Patron of the Arts of the Vatican Museums 2014)

<sup>10</sup> One-and-a-half-times-life-size, *Portcullis* was based on the proportions of the artist, August Kochanowski.

<sup>11</sup> Once again, the proportions came from the artist, August Kochanowski.

<sup>12</sup> (Contemporary Art Gallery 2012) "Matthew Monahan." *YouTube*. Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, June 3. Accessed February 24, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyyMYqXgOdM>.

Then there was Auguste Rodin and his larger-than-life figures like *St. John the Baptist Preaching*. I appreciate how Rodin created intentionally incomplete and fragmented figures.<sup>13</sup> Another influence was the work of Thomas Houseago.<sup>14</sup> Like Rodin, Houseago creates larger-than-life work and figure fragmentation. His influential concepts use asymmetry in a way that exaggerated proportions of the extremities and left facial features seemingly incomplete. I especially like that he creates masks that read as portraiture. My work makes use of all these concepts and techniques. *Striding Figure* is a fragmented larger-than-life figure. It has asymmetrical eyes, larger than normal feet, and ears and mouth are missing on the head.

I was also thinking of John Chamberlain and Debra Butterfield in the way they use found scrap iron. Both Chamberlain and Butterfield created with scrap iron in a way that was unique to their own time. Throughout his career, many of Chamberlain's abstract sculptures relied on the colors and shapes from discarded car parts (Artnet 2018). Butterfield's scrap metal pieces have some of the same sensibility, but she takes it further by making something identifiable – horses (Artnet 2018). I fit somewhere in the middle. I am leaving much of my scrap metal in the found state. Other aspects I am helping along by adding details to make the work recognizably figurative.

*Striding Figure* is not unique in its locomotion. We all have seen statuary in mid-stride. It is a common technique still used in contemporary, as well as classical, sculpture. A

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<sup>13</sup> Rowdney, Elizabeth. ND. "Rodin, *The Walking Man*."

<sup>14</sup>Morgan, 2018. "Inside the Healing L.A. Studio of Artist Thomas Houseago, Where Ghosts (and Brad Pitt) Roam"

contemporary example would be Thomas Houseago's *Untitled Striding Figure (I)*,<sup>15</sup> while a classic example is *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.<sup>16</sup>

Similar to *Winged Victory*, my *Striding Figure* intrigues my audience by celebrating the beauty of negative spaces. The presents of vacancies in my sculpture allows the viewer to imagine what would be there. We have been trained to fill-in-the-blanks, to understand its importance, and to accept art that looks incomplete.<sup>17</sup> In the case of classical sculpture, we don't always know if the incompleteness is the result of time or conflict. What we do know, is that it is not usually the result of the artist's decision. In my case, it is.

When approaching *Striding Figure*, viewers can have a varying phenomenological experience. This is to be expected because, "Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view" (Smith 2003).<sup>18</sup> While it is human nature to personally connect to the figure, the audience would normally have this experience when viewing a sculpture at life size but when the natural size is amplified, the viewer's perception is distorted.<sup>19</sup> At fifteen feet tall, the *Striding Figure* isn't a small piece and a person's initial reaction could be intimidation.

Although it is large, *Striding Figure* is proportionate to the human body in such a way that it is relatable to the viewer. Not that it directly mimics our actual portions, but it is at a size and a scale where the viewer can directly interact with the piece. For instance, a person

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<sup>15</sup> *Untitled Striding Figure (I)* is permanently installed in the rooftop sculpture garden for Rennie Collection at Wing Sang in the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

<sup>16</sup> Musée du Louvre. 2008. "A Closer Look at the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*." Musée du Louvre. Opixido. October. Accessed February 28, 2018. [http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace\\_acc\\_en.html](http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace_acc_en.html).

<sup>17</sup> Hull, Greg. 2017. Lecture at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, David Woodruff. 2003. *Phenomenology*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. November 16. Accessed February 24, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

<sup>19</sup> Moran, Dermot. 2000. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Routledge, New York.

could view the figure from a distance, or they could also pass right under the splayed legs. The ability to engage with the sculpture from multiple vantage points creates an intimacy with the object. But, because of its size, I think the viewer would tend to take it in more from a distance, and with that they might neglect some of the finer details.

## Materials

Although *Striding Figure* can be appreciated from afar, there are some aspects worthy of an even closer inspection. It is created from thin rods of metal, unwrapped flattened aerosol spray cans, and weathered corrugated barn siding.<sup>20</sup> I used barn siding to soften the form and bring interest back to the tradition of mimicking classical drapery. Unlike the drapery in *Winged Victory*, my drapery starts to reference something which is more unexpected. I am activating the core of the figure. If you peer inside of my figure, the corrugated metal mimics drapery, but instead of being on the surface shrouding the figure, mine is within. That is something that classical sculpture never did. The barn siding becomes comparable to the drapery from classical sculpture in the way that I folded and hung it. These recognizable materials have wavy impressions and visible weathering from their original structure, which conceptual add to my ideas about contemporary sculpture.

Another detail is the aerosol cans. It is used as a skin, mostly over the feet. The cans are also part of a custom pedicure: Individual toenails are cut out of the flatten silver cans and given subtle color shifts by heating up the thin metal quickly with a torch.

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<sup>20</sup> Much of my work is made out of steel which is inherent to humans. It is a material that was created by man. Because of that, I feel that it is a perfect material to be making figures with.

I use aerosol spray cans for their symbolic potential. Many people only think of aerosol cans in reference to counter-culture or in outsider art. But, in fact, it is also a common tool used in commercial and industrial settings to quickly cover defects in manufacturing. In my sculpture application, the can itself could be considered the defect. Not only is it discarded material, but when this work is exposed to the elements, the bare iron of the can will rust very quickly.

The material used in my sculptures is not precious. My figure to the common person reflects common material. Although it is created as a monument to them, the materials used reflect that wealth is not experienced by everyone. In my thesis research, I go to the scrap yard and I find giant cubes of scrap metal that are tangled and twisted into an endless variety of shapes but all encapsulated to the form of a cube. I bring back the cube to my studio and begin to carve away at it with my torch with the idea of finding what is imbedded in the twisted block. Peeling back the layers of unwanted steel, until I began to see something that resembles a portrait.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sometimes I wonder if this is what Michelangelo felt like when he freed the figure trapped inside the stone he got at the Carrara marble quarries. Such a romantic thought to even consider.



Figure 5 *Effluence*

In *Effluence* I show the body, but I did not want to represent it as flawless, as it has been portrayed throughout history. It is interesting to think about the misconception that Greek and Roman sculptures were white and pristine. It is true the sculptures were carved out of marble; however, the marble was never intended to be the finished surface. The sculptures were often colored in very vibrant colors. Surprisingly, they were almost gaudy. We have invented this idea of white and pristine antiquity.<sup>22</sup>

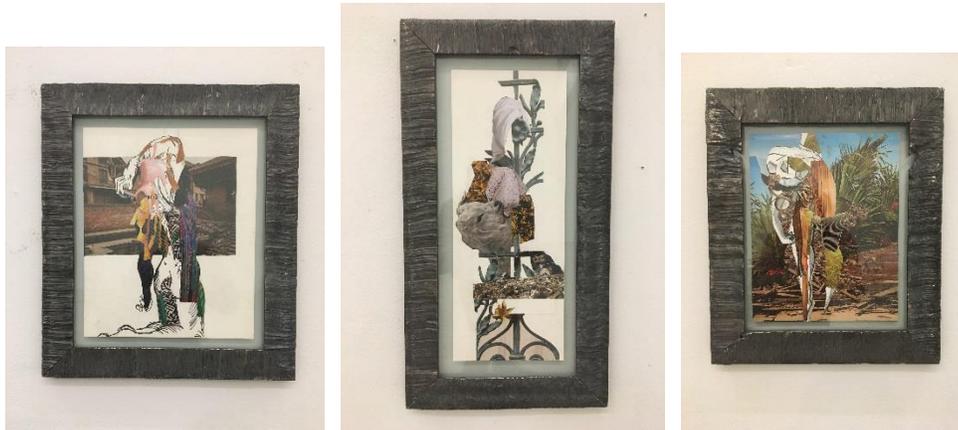


Figure 6 *Three Colorful Collages*

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<sup>22</sup> Hull, Greg. 2017. Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis. Indianapolis, Indiana.

Thinking along these lines, I created these three collages.<sup>23</sup> These are drafts of what could be three-dimensional sculptures. Thinking about bright colors, textures, and mix materials, these are definitely not white and pristine. There is a juxtaposition between the figure that is bright and lively against the backdrop of ruin.

## **Conclusion**

Through figurative sculpture, I use the monument with non-traditional pedestals to comment on inequitable wealth and power structures. I am interested in reexamining history; calling out, drawing light to our failures and shortcomings, and questioning our ideals. By doing so, my art results in both a dialogue and a comparison between the classical and the contemporary. We always think of history as some reliable truth. I want to challenge the notion of history, and question the stories that have been told to us, what is implied by what we hear, and what we actually find. It doesn't have to be from today – today could be a hundred years ago, or a million years from now – what matters is what is in front of you at the moment and how you go forward.

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<sup>23</sup> Each collage is suspended between glass, surrounded by a custom-made steel frame.

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