

## William Cannings: Pop Up

By Peter S. Briggs

Late on a Sunday evening in mid June, a rerun of a 1970s episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* flashed across my television screen. Toward the end of this witty cacophony, an image—a chain of bursting bombs, perhaps atomic—reverberated in black and white commemorating the gape of modern insanity. I immediately had a fleeting epiphany, conjuring indeterminate connections between British humor, art and explosions. Mentally jumping across the proverbial puddle, I landed in William Cannings' exhibition *Pop Up*, a two-person show with Charlotte Smith at the Pan American Gallery in Dallas. Cannings originally from England, studied art in Virginia and New York and now lives in Texas where he teaches at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Cannings had eleven works in this show; all but one, *Silver Clouds*, were created in 2006. These sculptures materialize from but sheets of steel or aluminum welded, heated and, while pliable, expanded by forced air. On occasion—both by design and happenstance—the metal explodes from excessive pressure. These ragged breaches stand in sharp contrast to the sensual plumpness of the surrounding inflated metal works—a juxtaposition that may connect with the artist's former occupation: doing bodywork on Formula One race cars.

Cannings obviously fetishizes over the surfaces of these sculptures. *Silver Clouds*, an homage to Andy Warhol, is a suspended constellation of hand-polished aluminum pillows whose reflected light penetrates the eyes like sun spots. Other works, all floor, pedestal or wall-hung pieces, trigger blistering retinal assaults with blazing retro-Pop colors; pink, iridescent green and orange, silky, rubbery black and more. One group of pastel-painted sculptures, *Patched*, *Full* and *Split*, echo the palette of another Englishman; Richard Hamilton. The shapes of Cannings' works morph to suggest vernacular inflatables: a vinyl recliner for the swimming pool (*Raft*), the inner tube of a large truck tire (*Tube*) or throw pillows. Other shapes (e.g., *Fold*) are vaguely familiar growths that rebuff common parallels. Cannings frequently leaves attached to his sculptures remnants of the structure of pipes and air nipples used to inflate hot metal, as in *Kink*, providing not only insight into the

mechanics of the work's creation but also the accord between formal and functional structure and the inherent suppleness of the inflated forms. "Inflated objects have become a symbol of our popular culture: cheap, disposable, fun and whimsical, sometimes frivolous and distasteful," Cannings notes in his statement. But his work certainly suggests much more than overinflated colorful vinyl beach balls. The unstable edge between awe and the potential danger of exploding metal versus its containment within sensual, wonderfully organic forms mimics the Monty Python crew's fascination with the bomb and its seductive but deadly mushroom cloud. There is a tinge of nervous anticipation about what the potential limits of the container might be and more than a little anxiety about the tension between each objects destructive capacity and its attendant ability to maintain itself as an artifact. Cannings' inflatables seek a similar expectation: latent destruction or transcendent control.

The childlike fascination with the gesture of blowing air into something pliable and watching it expand into some preconditioned shape guides Cannings' sculptural process. We can calculate with near accuracy the physical effects of heat pressure and other material dynamics to predict the range and character of each sculpture, but the rigidity of such calculations seems at odds with the seductive playfulness of the work. The visual and ideological tug of war between the serious, and the material, the scientific and the flamboyant colors and eccentric shapes lend these works an energetic tension.

Sex. It seems almost too obvious that it finds a welcome home in Cannings' heated processes. Whether as a metaphor for prolonged orgasm or selective forms that suggest male and female genitalia, his sculptures embrace eroticism, and autoeroticism seems to fit unreservedly within his artistic passions, given the physicality of the work - a sensual adventure of creases, folds and subtle nuances between welded seams and skin-like flourishes of metallic flesh. Touching these intimate zones is like stroking a body, but the metal's hardness amends our erotic expectations, unyielding to searching, pliant fingertips.