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BRUCE BICKFORD • VOJISLAV JAKIC • WESLEY WILLIS • SALVATION MOUNTAIN

THE ASTOUNDING WORLDS OF BRUCE BICKFORD

Surreal animations, nostalgic models of 1950s America, exquisitely drawn landscapes: this artist put his cynicism, fear and astounding imagination into everything he created

BRETT INGRAM

By the time the American artist Bruce Bickford passed away in 2019, he had created more than a million modelling-clay sculptures, thousands of illustrations, 70,000 frames of line animation, and several unfinished graphic novels. However, he was best known for his startlingly original clay animation, and his filmic collaborations with musician Frank Zappa in the 1970s.

Bickford brought the same obsessive, precise, labour-intensive artistry to his illustrations and sculptures that he poured into his surrealistic, hallucinatory, action-packed –

and often violent – stop-motion animation and two-dimensional illustrative animation. The prevalence of vicious imagery in his work stemmed not from innate hostility but from a fearful imagination. Bickford himself was mild-mannered, of very slight build, almost elfin in appearance, with delicate hands, soft features and a quiet voice. He was no stranger to being bullied.

His work reflects a diversity of genres and subject matter, but a consistent theme in much of his work is the heroic underdog – "the little guys," as he referred to

Bickford animating a clay garden scene, 2007, photo: Brett Ingram





above: Big mouth babies, 1990s, modelling clay, 3 x 4 in. / 7.5 x 10 cm, photo: Alex Maness
below: Medium-size heads, 1970s, modelling clay, from 0.5 x 1 in. to 1 x 2 in. (1.5 x 2.5 cm to 2.5 x 5 cm), photo: Brett Ingram





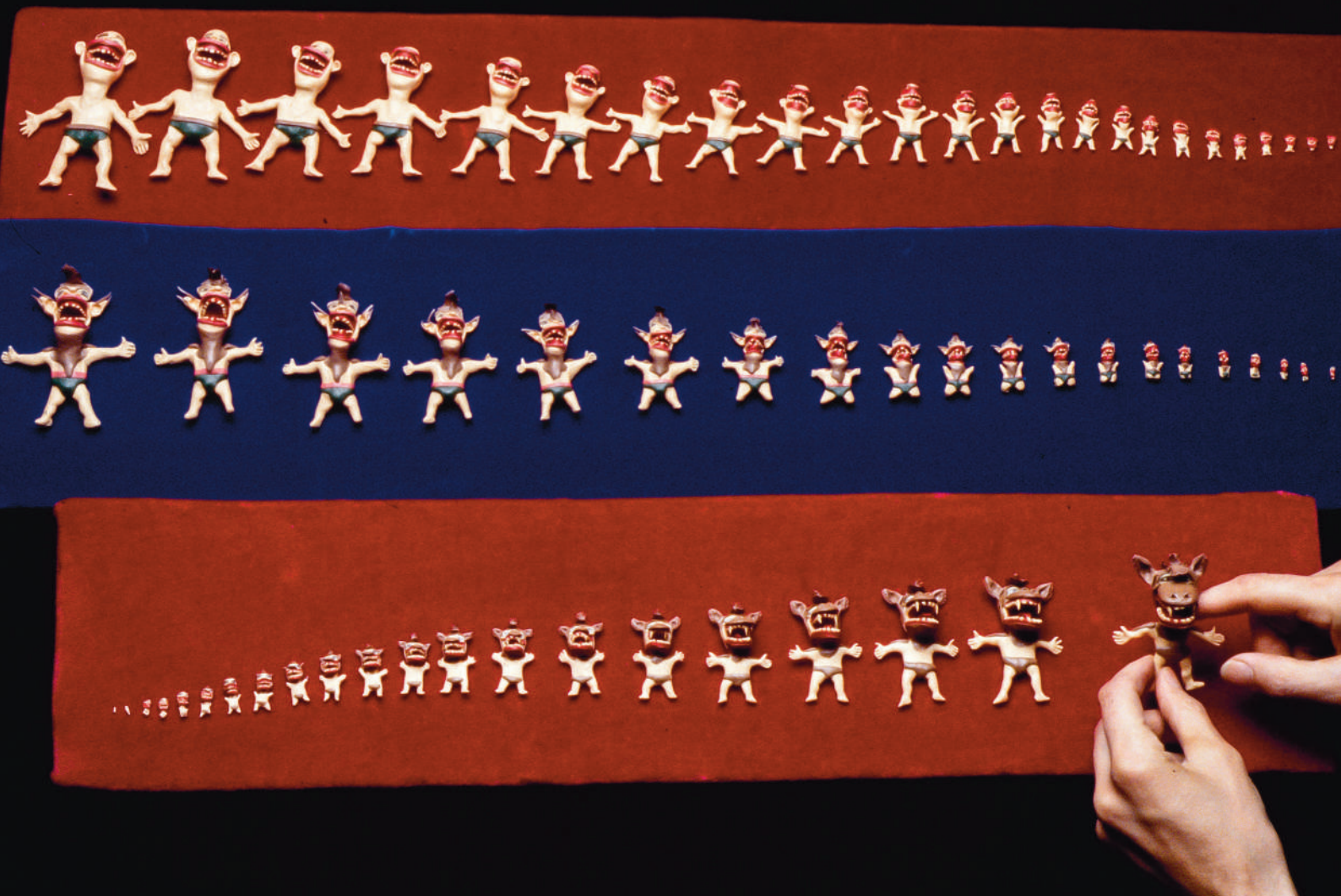
Big mouth werewolf babies, 1990s, modelling clay, 3 x 4 in. / 7.5 x 10 cm, photo: Alex Maness

them. Another motif is a nostalgia for 1950s Americana, a reminder of his early childhood when the world seemed simpler and purer, before innocence was lost and he realised it had been an illusion. His wariness of the government, and his contempt (to put it mildly) for large corporations, land barons and industrial magnates – responsible for the destruction of the environment and natural resources – runs through much of his work: the action movies, the mysteries and detective stories, the science fiction and paranormal narratives, the legends of mythical creatures, and the tales of government conspiracies or corporate corruption.

Bickford was born in Seattle, Washington, on February 11, 1947, the third of four sons, to George and Audrey Bickford. George was a structural engineer for The Boeing Company and worked on projects including surface-to-air missiles, and military and commercial aircraft. Audrey was a homemaker and unpublished writer of fiction and poetry. She instilled in her son an appreciation of books, art and nature (he remained an avid climber of trees, even well into his sixties, scaling firs and spruces up to 70 feet

or more). He showed artistic promise as early as the age of three, drawing with pencil and crayon, and modelling with clay. His parents encouraged his creativity, and his mother meticulously preserved his childhood drawings. At 15, he began making stop-motion 8 mm films using model cars and clay figures.

George Bickford designed and built the family home on Military Road in the city of SeaTac (named after the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport), just south of Seattle. Sited high on top of the Highline ridge, through which the Green River flows, the home overlooked Kent Valley farmlands – perhaps an influence in Bickford's proclivity for using the bird's eye view in much of his artwork. From his father, young Bickford inherited spatial visualisation, critical thinking, attention to detail, and an eidetic memory (of images, sounds, conversations). He also inherited his father's pareidolia – the tendency to see recognisable objects or patterns in otherwise random or unrelated objects (for example, faces in clouds, trees, planets, pancakes). Pareidolia was a distinct factor in the development of Bickford's signature animation style of



Big mouth babies / werewolf babies replacement animation series, 1990s, modelling clay, from 0.25 x 0.25 in. to 4 x 5 in. (0.5 x 0.5 cm to 10 x 12.5 cm, photo: Alex Maness

constantly morphing faces and objects, and it is also evident in his illustrations in which faces or bodies often seem to emerge from or blend into clouds or landscapes.

In 1966, Bickford joined the US Marines and, during the three years he served, spent eleven months in Vietnam at the height of the war. Honourably discharged in 1969, he returned home to Seattle and resumed drawing, sculpting, and shooting clay animation, gradually developing his unique aesthetic. By the end of 1971, he had loaded a van with hundreds of clay sculptures and a few film prints and headed south to look for work. Eventually, in Los Angeles, he was introduced to musician Frank Zappa. Impressed with Bickford's work, Zappa hired the artist to create animated sequences for a concert film he was producing. When *Baby Snakes* premiered in 1979, it received mostly poor reviews, but Bickford's animation sequences won awards at a French animated film competition.

When their collaboration ended in 1980, Zappa claimed ownership of all Bickford's animations. The musician went on to incorporate a few sequences

into his 1982 concert film, *The Dub Room Special*, and released the rest of it as *The Amazing Mr. Bickford* (1987), a compilation of Bickford animations set to Zappa's orchestral music.

Bickford returned to Seattle, moving back into the family home with his mother (his parents were by then divorced), and he began to work independently again. He completed two major clay animated films, *Prometheus' Garden* (1988, 28 minutes) and *CAS'L'* (2015, 48 minutes), and several pencil-drawn "line-animated" films.

All the while, in parallel with his work as an animator, Bickford was prolific in illustration and clay sculpture work. The garage his father had designed to house up to four cars, with room to spare, became the repository for most of Bickford's artistic output. His clay sculptures took up most of the space. Dimly lit by overhanging bare bulbs, stacked floor-to-ceiling in homemade cabinets made of cardboard with cellophane windows, his clay creations were roughly organised into categories, each cabinet labelled in black marker: "Faces," "Heads," "Torsos," "Monsters," "Animals," "Taverns," "Roadhouses,"



above and opposite: Bickford's garage archive of clay sculptures, 1970s–2000s, photos: Brett Ingram, Alex Maness

"Motorcycle Cops," "Speedy Alka Seltzer," "Robot Buildings," "Casino on the River," "Mr. G's Café," and so on). The sculptures – many of which he planned to animate but never did – ranged in height from eight inches to just a few millimeters, and depicted human characters, mythical creatures, monsters, animals, vehicles, buildings, trees, landscapes, and entire scenes featuring scores of tiny characters. Hundreds of additional three-dimensional creations were made from natural materials, such as leaves, sticks, twigs, vines, moss, and even grass clippings.

In the middle of the garage, a large wooden table

supported a scale clay model of the town of Twin Peaks, the titular setting for David Lynch's cult television series (for which exteriors were shot in and around the real town of North Bend, about an hour's drive east of Seattle). From memory or photographs, Bickford had also constructed many local buildings, restaurants, bars, roadhouses and other establishments from eras long past, unintentionally creating a sort of history museum of Seattle, SeaTac and surrounding towns.

He considered himself a perfectionist. Specially made contact lenses, and pencil leads as narrow as 0.2 mm

Scale model of the town of Twin Peaks, 1970s–2000s, modelling clay, wood, various, photo: Alex Maness





allowed him to draw at an astonishingly minute scale in his later work. And yet Bickford relished the imperfections in his finished sculptures – evidence of the artist's hand at every step of the way. He rarely sculpted just one of anything; out of either perfectionism or obsessive repetition, he usually made scores of an original piece, compelled to explore ideas and images until he had exhausted every possibility of its rendering.

Bickford's world view could be characterised as a childlike state of wonder and curiosity tinged by an intense fearfulness of people and organisations with

malicious intent, unseen evil forces and malevolent spirits. These fears were heightened by the carnage wreaked by serial killer Gary Ridgway who terrorised Seattle during the 1980s and 1990s and was dubbed the "Green River Killer" after his first five victims' bodies were found in the Green River just a mile from Bickford's home. When Ridgway was finally apprehended in 2001 and pled guilty to the murders of 49 women, it turned out he had lived mere blocks from Bickford's home and had been a schoolmate of his younger brother Steve in the late 1960s. The case captured the darker side of Bickford's

Lion heads, 1990s, modelling clay, 2 x 2 in. / 5 x 5 cm, photo: Brett Ingram

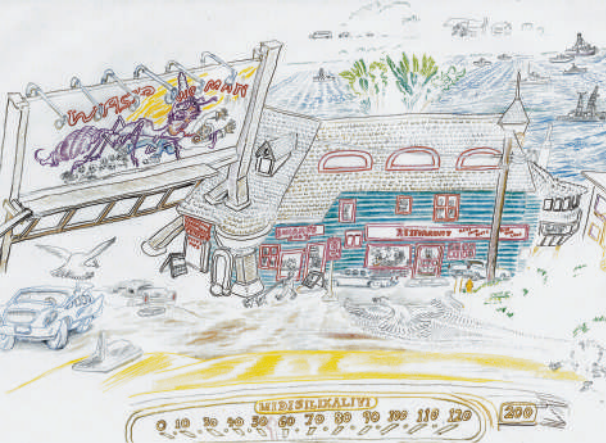




Spirit Faces



Wasp Woman scene 1



Wasp Woman scene 2



The CAS'L'



Uplands

all drawings shown: 2010s, pencil and coloured pencil on poster board, 17 x 11 in. / 43 x 28 cm, courtesy: The Bickford Trust

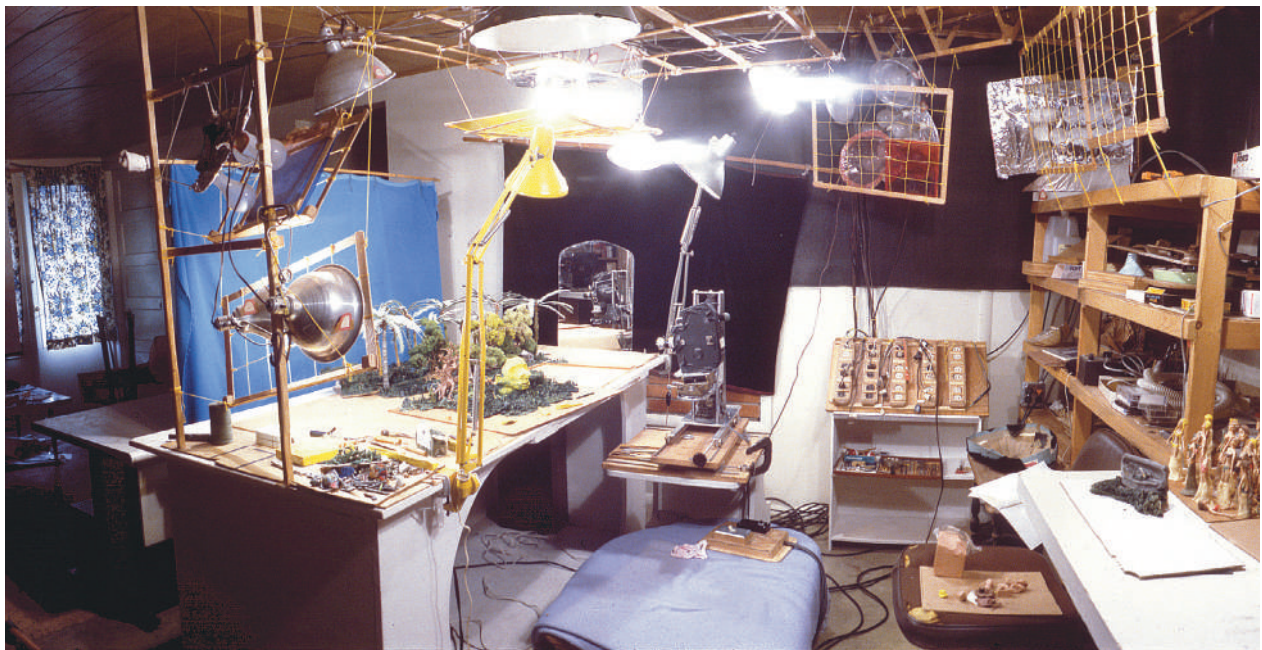
imagination, and he penned two stories inspired by it: *Tales from the Green River* and *Runway Runaways*.

Bickford had also experienced a lot of tragedy himself. His younger brother Steve committed suicide

in the family's garage at the age of 25. His oldest brother, Reginald, was a bush pilot in Alaska and died in a plane crash in 1989, and his mother passed away later that year. He lost his father to Alzheimer's in 2005, and



Clay buildings and heads, 1990s, modelling clay, wood, various, photo: Brett Ingram



Bickford's stop-motion animation set, 2000, photo: Alex Maness

Fred, his second oldest brother, to alcoholism in 2007.

While they were alive, Bickford was supported by his parents. His paid employment history was brief: after his time as a US Marine and his employment with Frank Zappa in Los Angeles (1973–1979), he was employed as a stock boy for a few weeks in a Seattle supermarket in 1989. As an artist, he produced some music videos for Seattle bands, and was commissioned for a few projects, such as an ident advert for MTV Latin America. He also received a few federal arts grants. Otherwise, he subsisted on monetary support from his parents and continued to

live in the childhood home that his father had built.

When Bickford died of a heart attack on April 28, 2019, at the age of 72, he left behind in that house a garage full of the products of his amazing imagination.

Brett Ingram is a filmmaker, author, visual artist, and John Simon Guggenheim fellow. He has directed two documentary films about Bruce Bickford's life and work: *Monster Road* (2004) and *Luck of a Foghorn* (2008).