

**Bordering Utopia:  
Sculptures by Brian Tolle**

October 6 through December 12, 2015

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**Acknowledgements**

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**Artist Biography**

Tolle received his B.A. in Political Science from the University at Albany in 1986. Perhaps best known for his *Irish Hunger Memorial*, a public commission for Battery Park City, New York, he credits the skills needed to realize a public project of this complexity to the experiences in negotiation that he learned as a Political Science student and to his two-year internship at the New York State Assembly. He has a B.F.A. from Parsons the New School for Design, New York, and an M.F.A. from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. His major public works include the *Irish Hunger Memorial* in Battery Park City, New York (2002) and other projects in Wales, Los Angeles, and Miami Beach (2010). He is currently working on public projects in Brooklyn, Calgary, and Columbus, Ohio. His work has been exhibited in the *Whitney Biennial* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City (2002); the *Liverpool Biennial* at the Tate Modern in London (2006); the *Institute of Contemporary Art* in Philadelphia (2006); the *Queens Museum of Art* in New York City (2001); the *Havana Biennial* in Havana, Cuba (2009); among other institutions. He is the recipient of awards from the Irish American Historical Society, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, and the Design Commission of the City of New York.

**Museum Hours:** Tuesday, 10 am – 8 pm;  
Wednesday through Friday, 10 am – 5 pm; Saturday noon – 4 pm.  
Telephone: (518) 442-4035 www.albany.edu/museum



LEFT:  
*Promised Land*, 2015

ABOVE:  
*Cheaper by the Dozen*, 2008  
*Go Ask Alice*, 2009  
*Father Knows Best*, 2009

RIGHT:  
*Vanitas Vanitatum*, 2009  
*Trimcycle by Battle Creek*, 2009  
*Jerusalem Ave.*, 2009



**Exhibition Checklist**

*In the Beginning*, 2015  
Inkjet print on fabric  
96 x 132 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Promised Land*, 2015  
Inkjet print on fabric  
96 x 108 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Salvaged Overmounted Interior*, 1996/2015  
Hand-carved Styrofoam  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Father Knows Best*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber,  
salesman sample recliner,  
braided rug, and plywood  
24 x 56 x 56 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Go Ask Alice*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber and  
found vinyl bean bag chair  
24 x 56 x 56 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Jerusalem Ave.*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber,  
plastic nativity set, and metal  
shopping cart  
60 x 40 x 28 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Loyal Order*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber, wood  
plaque, and synthetic moose  
head  
42 x 24 x 24 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Mobile*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber, white  
wall tire, and rope  
145 x 24 x 26 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Out of Service*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber and  
crutches  
60 x 36 x 24 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Outgrown*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber and  
toys  
58 x 40 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Phytophthora Infestans*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber,  
wheelbarrow, and plastic  
potatoes  
55 x 42 x 44 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Trimcycle by Battle Creek*,  
2009  
Platinum silicon rubber and  
vintage exercise bicycle  
45 x 28 x 44 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Vanitas Vanitatum*, 2009  
Platinum silicon rubber, found  
hairdryer, and linoleum tiles  
50 x 36 x 36 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Cheaper by the Dozen*, 2008  
Platinum silicon rubber, dolls,  
AstroTurf, and plywood  
40 x 69 x 54 inches  
Collection of Ruth and Bil  
Ehrlich

*Old Glory*, 2008  
Platinum silicon rubber and  
wheelchair  
38 x 31 x 31 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Alice and Job*, 2006  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
robotics, and acrylic paint  
14½ x 10 x 6 feet each  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Common Consent*, 1998  
*A Long Deep Furrow*  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
urethane, paint, Duratran,  
and light box  
43 x 96 x 68 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Boundary*  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
urethane, and paint  
39 x 108 x 22 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Meeting Place*  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
urethane, and paint  
37 x 96 x 78 inches  
Collection of Stefano  
Basilico, New York

*Common Place*  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
urethane, paint, and light  
projection  
53 x 55 x 55 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Over the Wall*  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
urethane, paint, and light  
projection  
48 x 63 x 132 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Shape*  
Light projection  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Views from America's Attic*  
(8), 1997/99  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
hand-colored photograph,  
and light restoration glass  
36½ x 32½ x 2 inches  
Collection of Ruth and Bil  
Ehrlich

*Views from America's Attic*  
(6), 1997/99  
Hand-carved Styrofoam,  
hand-colored photo  
33 x 29 x 2 inches  
Collection of Stefano Basilio,  
New York

*Views from America's Attic*  
(5), 1997/99  
Hand-carved Styrofoam and  
hand-colored sepia  
photograph, and light  
restoration glass  
31½ x 42½ x 4 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Views from America's Attic*  
(3), 1997/99  
Hand-carved Styrofoam and  
hand-colored sepia  
photograph  
33 x 29 x 3 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

*Autumn Compost*, 1997  
Pine, glass, and Duratran  
22½ x 22½ x 3 inches  
Collection of Laura and  
Norman Tolle

*WitchCatcher*, 1997  
Acrylic, hand-carved  
Styrofoam, and mixed media  
133 x 78 x 78 inches  
Collection of The Frances  
Young Tang Teaching  
Museum and Art Gallery,  
Skidmore College, Saratoga  
Springs, New York. Gift of  
Private Collection

*Cut Off Beams with Drops of  
Quaint Design*, 1996  
Hand-carved Styrofoam and  
paint  
63 x 24 x 20 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
CRG Gallery, New York

COVER:  
*Salvaged Overmounted  
Interior* (detail), 1996/2015



**Bordering Utopia  
Sculptures by Brian Tolle**



*Bordering Utopia* is the first exhibition to bring together Brian Tolle's earliest sculptural work from the 1990s with his more recent work. The exhibition focuses on Tolle's interpretation of three distinct reference points in American history, each emblematic of the pursuit of a better life. A sense of upending authority runs through all of the pieces; as a viewer, the balance between what you know and what you see is not meant to be resolved. You have only to knock on one of his sculptures to realize that it defies its own supposed materiality. These are hollow, empty vessels, but in their making—and their viewing—Tolle proposes a new history of how we have lived or might live, and a new understanding of what we have left behind.

Tolle came to prominence as a sculptor in the 1990s along with such artists as Robert Gober, Keith Edmier, and Charles Ray, all of whom shared the desire to challenge perceptions of both truth and fiction. Demonstrating a commitment to process and specificity, they are all mold

three dimensions where nothing is solid or secure.

Tolle and his compatriots began their artistic careers in the long shadows of AIDS, racial unrest, and identity politics, where instead of being suppressed, shifting ideologies and public and private transgressions bubbled to the surface to challenge once-established beliefs and definitions of normative behavior. Thus while Tolle's methodical approaches to verisimilitude serve to reaffirm his artistic skill—assiduous color matching, replication of the tiniest surface dent, ding, or crag, pursuit of the perfectly curved line, joined corner, or grooved edge—they also speak to states of mind synonymous with *fin de siècle* anxiety. However, anxiety and disjunction are less personal in Tolle's sculptural manifestations than his interest in reviving and reconsidering America's collective history: its missteps, lofty ambitions, false starts, and thwarted dreams. Through experimentation and invention, Tolle brings back to life—and lends new weight and significance to—forgotten histories, but he distorts the facts

utopian quests, clearly attracted by their visionary, aspirational promise as well as their dark side. On one hand, the intense work ethic and powerful communal bonds of utopian experiments explore the boundaries where the individual ends and the community begins; on the other hand, such ideals, by their very nature, are destined to fail. Tolle's choice of materials combines the utopian ideal of realizing a vision with the desire to recoup past failed visions into new reconfigurations—to transform “no place” into “someplace,” a site where new meanings can be formed.

The earliest work in *Bordering Utopia* is based on Colonial American structures and includes Tolle's signature hand-carved Styrofoam beams and frames. *Views from America's Attics* (1997) is a series of window frames that contain light boxes and photographs taken from inside the attics of colonial houses at The Old Bethpage Village Restoration, a 209-acre recreated living museum on Long Island. These are, in turn, inspired by the photographs of Wallace Nutting

backlit photograph of a sprouting cornfield is tucked into a rectangular stone bin; the outlines of a book, a hat, a bird, and a rifle with a finger stuck in its barrel cast their shadows onto yet more stone forms—symbols that embody the sinister implications of “spectral evidence,” the legal proof of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England courts of law. Whatever combination of factors propelled Salem's inhabitants and their neighbors to turn against one another, their mass hysteria did not occur without consensus; Tolle's constellation of forms and images creates a weighty and airless space in which to reflect upon the mutable nature of the historical record. Throughout Tolle's work, a palpable sense of a community undergoing physiological rupture, violence, and spiritual crisis suggests that the American psyche is a fragile thing—pragmatic, determined, and continually undone by its ability to twist and distort the truth to suit conflicting goals.

At the center of the exhibition, a pair of enormous chimney forms, painted to look like



Common Consent, 1998, installation view

# Bordering Utopia

## SCULPTURES BY BRIAN TOLLE

makers: they cast and carve as a means of physically reinforcing connections with ruptured pasts. At the core of their practices is a labor-intensive process that holds the promise of breathing new life into arcane objects or moments. This attention to historical accuracy and minute details allows these artists to build close ties to their subjects and to (re)establish a link to the past.

Although Tolle's sculptures take on the appearance of familiar objects and structures, on closer examination this familiarity challenges our perceptual foundations. Throughout *Bordering Utopia*, Tolle's deft execution of a wooden beam or a stone wall looks authentic down to the smallest knot or groove—but everything is made from hand-carved Styrofoam and paint. These unabashedly fake surfaces are like Potemkin villages: they may feel real, but the façade is a ploy. Tolle's world is a *trompe l'oeil* in

through faux materials and the distance of time.

His investigations begin with his commitment to exactitude and to the preeminence of the handmade over the technological. He spares no physical labor in the making of a work—for example, carving massive pieces of Styrofoam with the small blade of an exacto knife. And by executing a piece in ordinary material, his goal of banishing falsehoods by convincing us of “surface truths” creates a cognitive dissonance that challenges our definitions of solidity and artifice, allows us to imagine scenarios that broaden our original understanding of the historical record, and invites us to consider history and its mutable nature more deeply.

Tolle's use of unexpected materials not only compliments his vision; it also reinforces, if obliquely, certain utopian ideals embedded in his subject matter. Throughout his career, he has maintained an interest in the history of American

(1861-1941), an influential cultural critic whose reproductions of Colonial artifacts deftly combined myth and materialism and contributed to the growth of consumerism, as well as to the development of an anti-modern worldview in early twentieth-century America. *WitchCatcher* (1997), an eleven-foot stacked brick chimney rendered in Styrofoam, is distorted and twisted to suggest the power of an unknown psychic force that thrusts it upward. Here, as in all of Tolle's work, the conceptual context of such replicated historical fragments is designed to trigger associations between past and present aspirational yearnings.

In Tolle's installation *Common Consent* (1998), a series of multi-configured stone walls made of carved and painted Styrofoam are paired with light projections that symbolically reference the conflicted history of the Salem witchcraft trials. A swirling psychedelic mandala is projected onto the surface of a stone well; a

stacked and grouted rocks, hover over the space. *Alice and Job* (2000) are two sixteen-foot sculptures that Tolle created in commemoration of the Llano del Rio Colony (1914-17). Once the largest Socialist experiment in the United States, today it is just an abandoned site on the southern edge of the Mojave Desert; all that remains of the colony is the ruins of two large chimneys. At its height, Llano del Rio boasted a population of 1,200 European immigrants and trade-workers. Led by two influential figures in early twentieth-century Socialism—Job Harriman, a labor lawyer and Eugene V. Debs's vice presidential nominee, and Alice Austin, a suffragist and self-trained architect—the colony's aspirations of becoming a full-blown city were foiled by a combination of elements, among them internal strife and the loss of water rights. Tolle envisions *Alice and Job* as dislocated emblems of a place that once aspired to be more than the sum of its parts.

*Levittown* (2009) is based on another planned living community. Built between 1947 and 1951 on the cusp of the American baby boom, Levittown, Long Island, neither urban nor rural, became the model of American suburban life in the years following World War II. Returned veterans armed with low-interest VA loans bought into the community, and by 1951, 17,447 houses had been built—small, affordable, and unabashedly redlined: every Levittown rental lease and homeowner's contract barred those who were “not member(s) of the Caucasian race.” Tolle's sculptures are cast in platinum silicone rubber and are based on the prototypical Levittown house, a Cape Cod Colonial. All are flexible in form, meticulously crafted, and bear the house's original architectural details. Draped over emblematic objects of 1950s mass production, such as a Radio Flyer wagon, a shopping cart, a hair dryer, or a reclining armchair, these

house forms take on the contours of the objects while partially concealing them—Tolle's way of both reinforcing connections with a divided past and nostalgically reconstructing domestic fragments that speak to an entire generation raised on this utopia's self-limiting ideals. Each sculpture embodies a separate narrative that delineates the two opposing and irreconcilable forces that have always driven America: the lure of conformity and the pursuit of individuality.

Spanning over twenty-five years of Tolle's career, *Bordering Utopia* stakes out new territory in his exploration of the aspirational goals of American visionaries and ordinary citizens. Tolle avows that these goals, while not always successful or inclusive, continue to shape our national character.

Corinna Ripps Schaming  
Curator

*Alice and Job*, 2006, installation view