

# STEAMPUNK

## A Calibration Of Longing

by Brian Catling

The highly detailed and intensely wrought sculptural objects that nest like swollen and outrageous cuckoos alongside the museum's permanent collection of scientific and optical instruments are all fakes. They do not attempt to measure, operate or test any scientific principle. They have no truck with instrumentation. They are only concerned with their own visual splendour, which reflects a deep desire to construct enigma. These lavish objects of polished wood, machined brass and buckled leather are the physical manifestation of an obsessive imaginative cult that denies the cleanliness of progress by violently jamming the brakes into historical fact somewhere just after the turn of the 20th century. Steampunk rewrites technology without the aid of electricity or nuclear power. It gives its sermons and tells its tales in an ornate courtly language that has never been mass-produced or suffered the humiliation of being simplified by plasticity. It remains defiantly obstinate to notions of change. Preferring to assimilate and fetishistically modify all new ideas rather than giving way to their essential difference. This can be brilliantly seen in the countless numbers of laptops and personal computers that have had their sleek uniform skins peeled off and now hum more outrageously inside holy contrivances of walnut, mahogany and gleaming brass. More Nemo than Neo.

Steampunk literature has never really let go of the apron string of Jules Verne. And many of its more outstanding recent testaments still glow in a sinister amber twilight of gas lamps, smoke and sepia. Where overdressed heroes and mad scientists stalk and clatter beneath mummbling dirigibles armed with an array of gadgets, over-polished firearms and hissing clocks. This is a world populated by a different kingdom of machines than the ones we know. Personality is engineered into their existence and crafted into their intension. The mechanical is given a new status that elevates it beyond slavish function. Steampunk does not celebrate the finished job that the machine has created or manufactured. It does not concern itself with the techno morals of efficiency and accuracy. It prefers instead to see the mechanism as an icon to itself. A robot made in its own image to worship itself. Complexity and insistence are its radiant ambitions. The levers, cogs, valves and pipes of its con-

struction are a proud interweaving of its static brittle heritage.

The most essential element in steampunk objects is their visuality. Whether these magnificently constructed devices are art or craft is a thorny and debatable point. When questioned about the difference I have always seen the answer as a simple one. The craft object's first principle is to be loved. Appreciated in the perfection of its invented existence. The art object does not need that, certainly not as a first principle. Steampunk sculptures seem to comply with this definition of craft, while often boisterously engaging in bad taste and the obstinacy of purpose that is symptomatic of contemporary art. The major point of balance that allows a critical appraisal of each work seems to be between its original levels of invention and its auto referential meaning. This can be seen more simply as a tug of war between ingenuity and nostalgia. The former allowing an expressive freedom to flourish inside the given range of materials and processes. The latter imposing at best a whimsical romanticism and at worst a mannerism of kitsch sentimentality. Steampunk really comes into its own when it transgresses its definitions and allows an essence of its obsessive and often macabre aesthetic to take off and occupy a more undefined space. This can be seen in its intensity of making, more than in its dressing up box of identity.

Perhaps it is a mistake to over-intellectualise such objects of desire. Their appreciation for being engaging and beautiful artefacts might just be enough. However there is something about their contradictory nature which still keeps asking questions and seeking comparisons and answers. That is why this exhibition at the Museum of the History of Science is so inspired. It will be intriguing to witness the conversation between the imaginary and the actual. To see

how the exuberant pretenders stand up against their more modest instigators. It might just be that an entirely other subject is engendered between them. That enigma itself is seen as a measurable quality. A useable, tincture that is fundamental in the display and housing of all collections. We can all describe an object or picture that has gained a permanent place in our own remembered store of wonders. Many of these would have first been seen in a museum or gallery without the knowledge of their purpose, function or meaning. The mystery of a first hand-made thing lies, for some part, in their need to exist. To become, to be structured out of inert substance into an idea.

**It will be intriguing to witness the conversation between the imaginary and the actual.**

I began by describing steampunk as being totally ascientific and without the ability to perform or measure any known rationale. That may be untrue. The crafted metaphor when set in contrast to the factual inventions that inspired them, could expose something of the drive that stirs them both into life. These beguiling trophies of steampunk fantasy can be read as thermometers gauging the unattached impulses of creativity, whose purpose is not to find a solution, but to dream of impossible alternatives. At the core of these Edwardian science fictions burns a need to understand by telling fibs. To use the impossible to redesign the world more fairly, allowing shadows and eccentricity to stand as equals to the cold analytical truth that is normally considered superior. This is what might be recorded and measured during the exhibition, the visiting fictions, carefully betraying their calibration of longing...

© B. Catling 2009

Professor Brian Catling is a poet, sculptor and performance artist at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford

### BROAD SHEET

BROAD SHEET communicates the work of the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford.

It is posted on the Museum's website, sold in the shop, and distributed to members of the mailing list, see [www.mhs.ox.ac.uk](http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk).

Broad Sheet is produced by the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford  
Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3AZ  
Tel +44(0)1865 277280 Fax +44(0)1865 277288  
Web: [www.mhs.ox.ac.uk](http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk)  
Email: [museum@mhs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:museum@mhs.ox.ac.uk)



£1.00

# BROAD SHEET

## No.9

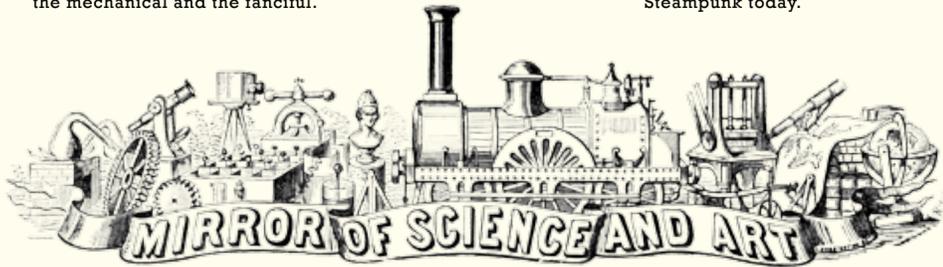
Museum of the History of Science

# STEAMPUNK

Steampunk is rooted in the aesthetics of Victorian technology. Yet it is not a nostalgic recreation of a vanished past: its devices are both imaginative and contemporary. This exhibition reveals the many possible responses to Steampunk's characteristic preoccupation with the historical and the contemporary, the mechanical and the fanciful.

In imagining a Victorian future that has not come to pass, Steampunk artists cast an oblique light on the present. But their unrealised 'futures' are more celebration than commentary. Steampunk revels in the ingenuity and absurdity of mechanism and the unqualified pleasure of making.

Curator Art Donovan has brought together work by many of the leading practitioners of Steampunk art. It is fitting that it is shown at the Museum of the History of Science, which showcases relevant material from the past. The second room of the exhibition contains original objects of the kind that inspire Steampunk today.



[www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/steampunk](http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/steampunk)



SYDNEY PADUA'S "THRILLING ADVENTURES OF LOVELACE AND BABBAGE" CAN BE FOUND AT [WWW.2DGOOGLE.COM](http://WWW.2DGOOGLE.COM)



© Copyright Sydney Padua

## DATAMANCER

Datamancer (Richard 'Doc' Nagy) works in Chino, California, in the fields of 'prestidigital datamancy and paraphernalic technofetishism'. His extraordinary and distinctive computing machines have gained an international celebrity.

His work offers the computer a creative, craft-based history that was bypassed in its rapid development: 'Due to both the lack of creativity in most of the technically inclined and refinements in plastic forming and mass production, the home computer was denied what I feel to be the proudest time in the life of any technological device. It was robbed of the fleeting, wonderful period right after invention, where it is celebrated and honored by the finest craftsmen and creative minds, and given a structure befitting its potential and greatness.'



## MOLLY 'PORKSHANKS' FRIEDRICH

Molly Friedrich is a Seattle-based artist, originally from Waukesha, Wisconsin. She first became interested in sculptural arts through Lego brand building elements, and by designing her own 3d paper cutout constructions. She has been working as a freelance artist since 2002.

'I am excited about exploring and celebrating the nexus of the past and the future through the lens of modern designs and techniques. I generally use antique materials as much as possible, but my eye is focused on creating something unique and avant garde. I also lavish attention to detail and try to imbue each item with a narrative of some sort so that it feels more like an artifact from another place and time.'



## JOS DE VINK

Jos de Vink lives and works in Bovensmilde in the Netherlands. 'After a career of 32 years in computer technology, I had the opportunity to retire. But what to do next? My next door neighbour, an ardent model builder for 25 years already, advised me to try to build a hot air engine which runs on a tea-warmer. After successfully building my first Stirling engine the production of hot air engines went very quickly. Within a period of about 7 years I've been building 25 engines.'

The intention of these vertical hot air machines is to demonstrate the possibility of setting a heavy mass in motion by means of a difference in temperature, using very little energy (heat). But all these machines can also be regarded as Steampunk Kinetic Art Objects. I achieved this by unifying the design technically and artistically.

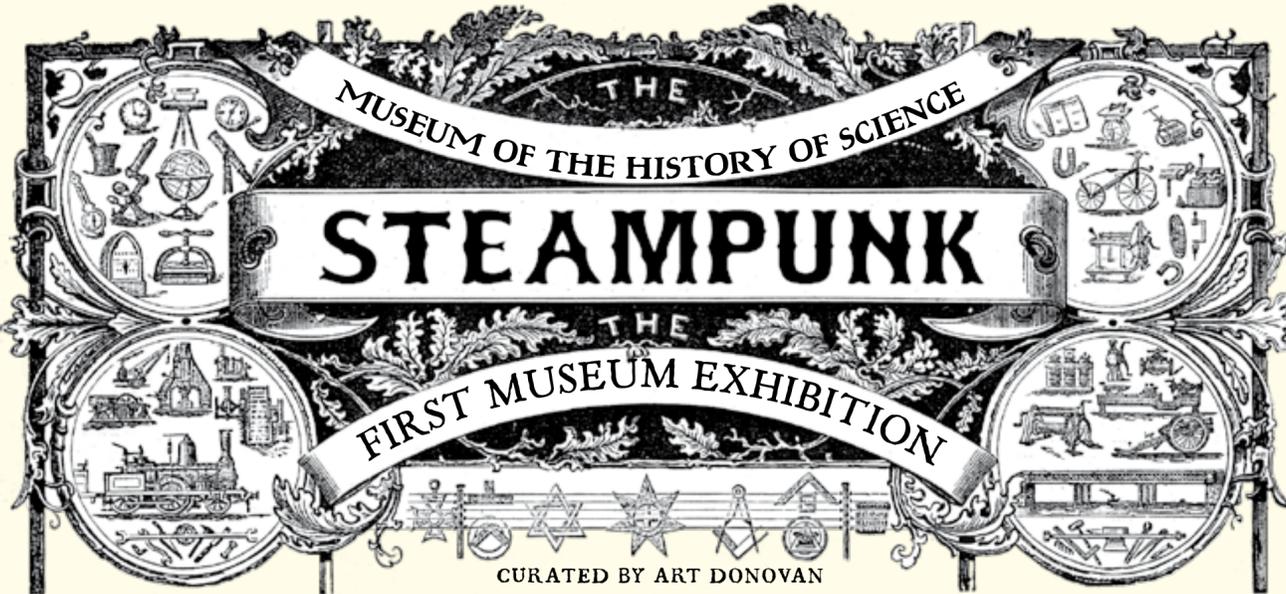
One of my objectives is to bring a love for technology to the attention of the youngsters. A passion.....or will it become an obsession?'



## DOCTOR GRYMM

Joey Marsocci (Doctor Grymm) resides and creates his eccentric Steampunk artistry in Middletown, Connecticut. His design work can be found in various places including theme park attractions, films, art galleries, and personal collections of private clients. Marsocci has been proprietor of JMARSDesign.com since 1994 and until recently was also the lead design and fabricator with SteamGearLab.com. Marsocci has coined the phrase, 'Steampunk is the scholar's Science Fiction.'

'Today, the Steampunk movement is alive with artistic creation and ideas to bring "a world that never happened" into reality. Steampunk artists create an alternate world not bound by the modern millennial conventions of physics, science and convenience technology. Steampunk is another outlet for artists to build with their hands and their imaginations, just as the great innovators of the Industrial Revolution did.'



13 OCTOBER 2009 TO 21 FEBRUARY 2010

## TOM BANWELL

'I have no formal art training, and am largely self taught. I have dabbled in a variety of media over the years, including batik, woodcarving, mixed media art dolls and leatherworking. Creating art in a steampunk genre suits me exceedingly well because it combines several of my interests - history, costuming, mechanics and fantasy - and I can bring these together and get wildly creative in my leatherwork.'

As a child I was fascinated with helmets and other hats, and I collected them. As an adult I've had a business designing and making men's Western leather hats that sold throughout the United States. My current business is casting custom resin pieces, and much of that work consists of imitating other materials: bronze, marble, wood, etc.

In my creative leatherwork I draw on this experience and incorporate resin components into my artwork. Today I find my greatest creative expression in fantasy masks and helmets.'

My studio is in the little town of Rough and Ready, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in northern California.'



## DANIEL PROULX

Daniel Proulx is from Montreal. He makes wire-wrapped Steampunk jewellery with brass, copper and gemstones.

'In April of 2008 I started to make rings just for fun ... I spent several hours every day perfecting and developing my own technique to create an original design. I quickly started to make very retro-futurist models of rings. At that time I decided to embark on this adventure, quit my job and try to live on my jewellery full-time. One day a friend told me what I was doing was Steampunk. I researched the subject and fell in love with this culture. I always liked Steampunk but I didn't know there was a name for it.'



## JESSE NEWHOUSE

Jesse Newhouse was born in Manhattan under a full moon on Friday the 13th in 1976. In 1994 he went to the University of Colorado in Boulder and studied maths before returning to New York. He briefly studied film at The New School then, in 2001, left for Los Angeles. There he worked his way up through the ranks of film production. Today he is back in New York City producing films for the Sci-Fi Channel under Paradox Pictures along with his long-time business partner, Brandon Hogan.

His love of Steampunk began with the 'Myst' video game series in 1991 created by Robyn and Rand Miller and has been a passion of his for many years. He has always loved model building and working with his hands. He never dreamt of being an artist but is committed to doing his part for the Steampunk movement.



## MAD UNCLE CLIFF

Mad Uncle Cliff is the Steampunk persona of Australian artist and former industrial designer Cliff Overton. He creates new objects from old wares, making machines that bring back the lever, the gear wheel, the valve and the big brass button.

'Consider it a desire to move from high tech to slow tech. Time can never move fast enough for people today - unless it starts the nano-second you push the soft white button you are not satisfied and you want a faster one', says the Mad Uncle. 'I want to change all that, move away from the latest amorphous satin steel device with no visible parts back to a product that shouts out its function by showing you how it works.'



## VIANNEY HALTER

Vianney Halter is an independent watchmaker based in the village of Sainte-Croix in the Swiss Canton of Jura. Trained in Paris, he has established an international reputation for making watches of the finest quality and originality.

Vianney Halter's inclusion of such watches in the exhibition is a striking testimony to the extraordinary range of the Steampunk genre. In his youth he enjoyed films of the stories of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. A later inspiration, in this case towards the most challenging aspects of mechanical horology, came from the work of the celebrated 'celestial clockmaker' Antide Janvier (1751-1835), who was born in a village in the Jura. Vianney Halter has called his own workshop 'La Manufacture Janvier'. One of Janvier's famous astronomical clocks is on display in the entrance gallery of the Museum.



## ART DONOVAN

Arthur Donovan is an artist and designer based in Southampton, New York. His illuminated sculptures are best described as a sub-genre of Steampunk called 'Electro Futurism'. This style takes its literary inspiration from the works of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne and Mary Shelley.

Some of Mr Donovan's works displayed here, such as the 'Siddhartha Pod' and 'Thin White Duke', were designed and rendered entirely from raw materials: solid brass, mahogany and glass. Still other pieces are inspired by and may include actual antique components. The historic collection of scientific devices featured in the Museum of the History of Science has also served as rich inspiration for the physical form of many of his works.

Mr Donovan signs and dates all of his works and all are one of a kind. He and his wife and partner, Leslie Tarbell Donovan, own Donovan Design, a bespoke lighting design studio. Some of their clients include Tiffany & Co, Benetti Luxury Yachts, Italy and St Francis Cathedral in Lake Tahoe, NV.



## AMANDA SCRIVENER

Amanda Scrivener lives in Winchester and studied jewellery design, production and textiles at Art College, where her work became inspired by the shadowy side of Victorian England. She enjoys making one-of-a-kind wearable pieces of art.

She is now a fabricator and designer of Professor Maelstrom's Steam Laboratory, collaborating with Thomas Willeford at Brute Force Studios. There she invents all her wonders of mad and sometimes downright surly science. As her creator persona, Professor Maelstrom, she crafts items in her laboratory which will bring to mind romance by gaslight, arcane science, the steam age, and carnival sideshow curios inspired by aged materials from the tombs of Victorian England. All in all the professor's curiosities have been hailed as imaginative oddities epitomizing the rich landscape of Steampunk design.



## THOMAS WILLEFORD

With degrees in physics, history, and art, it was nearly inevitable that Thomas Willeford would be a Steampunk enthusiast. His work is an attempt to blur the line between art and engineering. If upon viewing a piece one does not ask 'Does that actually work?' then he considers the piece a failure. Sculpture and wearable art are his preferred forms because he can not draw or paint to save his life. His alter ego Lord Archibald 'Feathers' Featherstone and his partner Professor Isadora Maelstrom (aka Amanda Scrivener) were shown their work over much of the United States and Europe for years and hope to continue to support the cause of Mad Scientists everywhere for years to come.



## JAMES RICHARDSON-BROWN

Born in London in 1982 and working in the UK, James Richardson-Brown is a published author, Steampunk commentator and enthusiast, and 3-D visual artist. His first interest in Steampunk stemmed from the 1990 film 'Back to the Future 3' and also from the tales of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. Pursuing a career in IT originally, he took up writing and 3-D visual art in a style then known to very few people, Steampunk.

James has written articles on Steampunk (including its aesthetics and sub-culture) and his views on the possible advantages it could have for the modern world have appeared in several magazines and in numerous places on the internet.

James's art is inspired by a Victorian world that never existed and the possibilities that changes in our history could bring about. The Steampunk genre is his main interest, allowing him to mix his love of science, history and adventure.



## HARUO SUEKICHI

Haruo Suekichi, working in Japan, has made thousands of Steampunk watches. Each one is different and has an individual name. His watches have become famous across the world.

'I started to work as a salesman in a wholesale shop which included toys. One of the vendors who did business with the shop was a watchmaker. I visited him once in a while and began to be interested in watch making. We became friends and I asked him if he could teach me how to make watches. ... In the beginning, they were pretty simple, a strange drawing maybe, but that's about it. But at the flea market, a one-armed man came up to me. And he said to me, well, with only my left arm, I can't put on a watch. Wow, I thought, he's right ... I made a watch that you put your wrist in and it shuts around your wrist.'



## SYDNEY PADUA

Sydney Padua is an animator, story artist, and tiresome bore working mostly in visual effects in London. She started drawing comics by accident and is still trying to figure out how to stop. 'The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage' is a monstrous perversion of nature, viewable by horrified bystanders at 2dgoggles.com.



## HERR DÖKTOR

'Having been brought up on a steady diet of Doctor Who and classic science fiction, I found it inevitable that I would somehow end up working in a creative vein. This is why I became a professional model maker, working in a variety of media, to a number of different ends - either as a toymaker, a museum exhibit builder or as a prop-maker.'

In the last few years, my interest has returned to some of the classic science fiction of my youth. With the works of Wells and Verne firmly in mind, informed by a modern sensibility, I started to make devices as I'd like to see them.

I reside in the Home Counties, surrounded by the green and pleasant land that so inspired my ancestors to build and control the environment around them, something I now do today, to follow in their footsteps, in boilerplate and brass, as Herr Döktor.'



## STÉPHANE HALLEUX

Stéphane Halleux is Belgian and lives in a very small village in the countryside in the province of Namur. He has been making sculptures in the general style of his current work for nearly twelve years.

'Part of my work consists in prospecting, finding, buying machines, antiques and original objects. ... Either I have an idea, something I want to construct and then I draw a first outline and I search for the necessary elements, or I search for inspiration with the loose pieces all around me and then it depends on what I find and I begin drawing.'

'I've always been fascinated by robotics, its advantages and contradictions. ... But where are the bounds? How far is a robot useful to men and when does it begin endangering their life? That's what I want to make: caricatures of robots that have gone beyond the limits, all that with a fanciful vision of the future. The future we imagined some years ago: big computers full of cables with warning lights everywhere. That's what I like: an old-fashioned universe's future - and I didn't know for a long time that it's called "steampunk"!''



## KRIS KUKSI

Kris Kuksi's work is constructed from pop-culture effluvia, such as model kits, injection-moulded toy soldiers and animals, plastic skulls, knick-knack figurines, and mechanical parts. 'These intricate assemblages combine mass-produced 'junk' into roccoco tableaux. At once grand and grotesque, these frieze-like works register from a distance as architectural ornamentation from the Belle Époque. Up close, the agglomerations of macabre parts take on a Bosch-style chaos, with skulls, skeletons, and other gnarled forms compressed into a dark tangle.'

Born March 2nd 1973 in Springfield, Missouri and growing up in neighbouring Kansas, Kris spent his youth in rural seclusion and isolation. Open country, sparse trees, and later alcoholic stepfathers perhaps paved the way for an individual saturated in imagination and introversion. His fascination with the unusual lent to his macabre art later in life. The grotesque to him as it seemed, was beauty. In adulthood he discovered his distaste for the typical and popular culture of American life and felt that he had always belonged to the 'Old World'.

His work has received several awards and prizes and has been featured in over 100 exhibitions worldwide as well as in international art magazines and fictional book covers.



## ERIC FREITAS

Growing relentlessly in the mind of Eric Freitas lies a realm of dark mechanical curiosities and horological contradictions. In this world gears are harvested and mechanisms are alive with the organic repetitions of nature's machine. Balancing carefully between creative conception and logical execution, this world would slowly be brought to life. In 2004 Eric began to study the dying craft of clockmaking so that his ideas could be executed, and it would become apparent that even an instrument as logical and precise as a clock could be compromised by ungoverned subconscious thought.

In his clocks the boundaries of horology are tested to make way for a style never seen in this very traditional world. The mechanical is always structured around the visual rather than changing the drawings to match the gears. After countless hours of precise work, the immediacy and essence of the initial sketch is still prevalent when the finished work makes its first tick.

Eric Freitas grew up near the small village of Chelsea, Michigan; he now lives in Royal Oak, where he slowly works away in his humble workshop.

