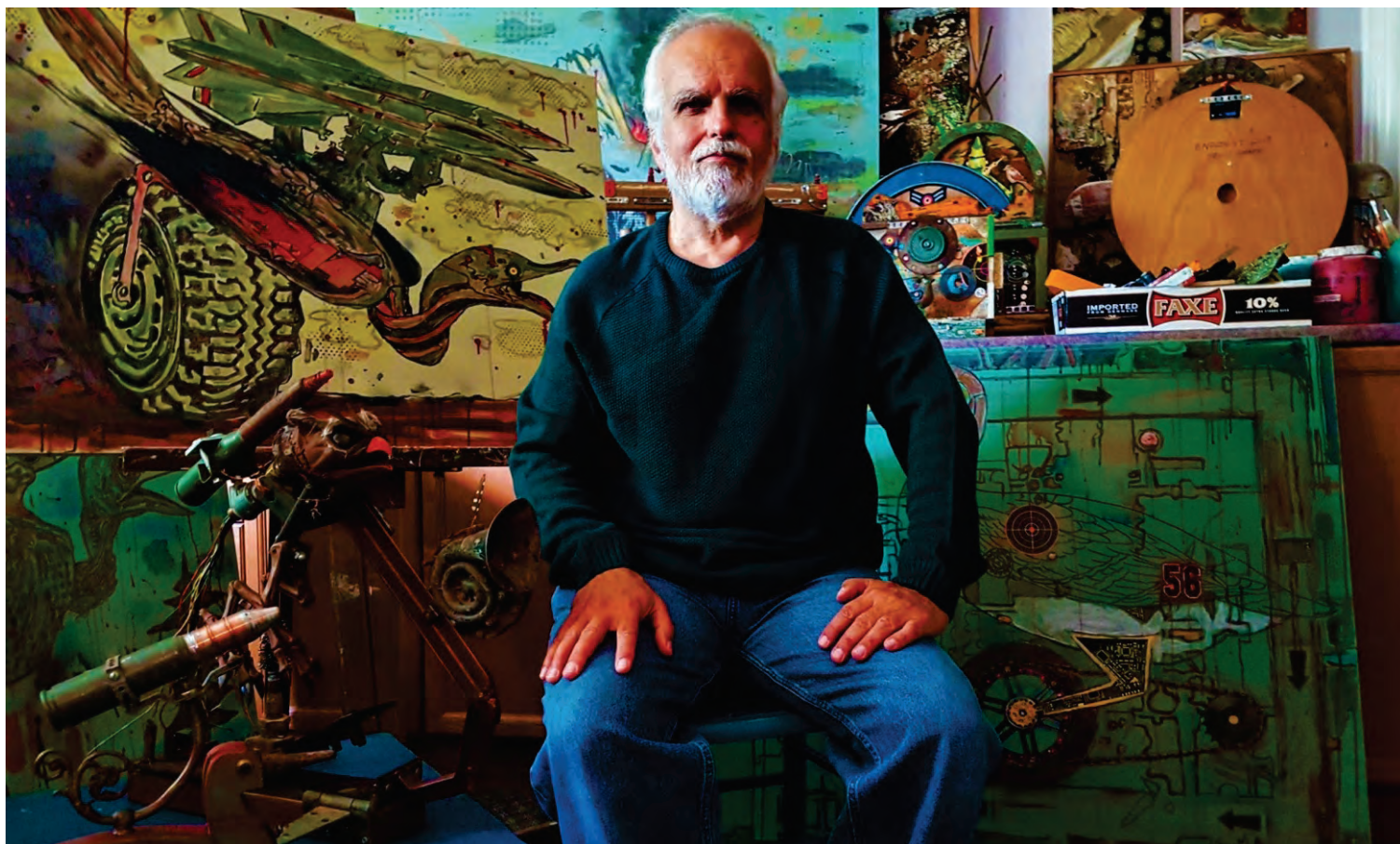


Badass Warbirds

FROM PROTOTYPE TO PROGENY





Cover Page, 88. *TRIUMVIRANT*, 2020

This Page, above, *TERRY GRAFF*

Terry Graff

www.terrygraff.com

Exhibition Tour Itinerary

Cape Breton University Art Gallery
Sydney, NS

April 28 – July 14, 2023

Art Gallery of Sudbury
Sudbury, ON

September 14 – December 17, 2023

Woodstock Art Gallery
Woodstock, ON

February 17 – June 17, 2024

UNB Art Centre
Fredericton, NB

September 13 – October 25, 2024



This Page, above, 51. WARBIRD ON WHEELS

Why do **Terry Graff's** horrific images of war and mutated birds command our attention and keep us returning to see what we may have remembered from previous viewings?

In attempting to provide an explanation, we need to carefully look at a variety of images and compare them, not only to each other, but to other experiences we have from film, the visual arts, literature and nature itself.

In the 1970s, Graff began fusing images of ducks with machinery as a visual expression of the process of becoming modified or transformed for survival in a dystopian world. Over the years, he has continued to employ both whimsy and dark humour to draw attention to serious social, political, and environmental issues, creating a wide range of Eco-Deco works: “ornithotronic” constructions and sculpture, robotic duck decoys, mechanical simulations of wetland environments and other ecological systems, and futuristic, post-apocalyptic aviaries.



This Page, above, **30. WARBIRD #5**

These often include quirky visual source material from his childhood encoded or embedded with cultural constructions of nature and that reference old-fashioned shooting galleries and pinball machines. At once humorous and horrific, Graff's most recent work, the Warbird series, continues his focus on hybridizations of nature and technology through the fusion of birds with war machinery and combat weaponry in a black comedy of nature fighting back for its very survival.

Three works Graff created in 1979: *Warduck #1*, *Warduck #2*, and *Tweeter Tank*, which can be considered prototypes for his later extensive Warbird series. Graff has produced over 1,000 warbirds to date in the form of paintings, collages, assemblages, and sculpture.

In *Warduck #1*, we see a modified Mallard with giant industrial wheels where its feet would normally be. With "No. 54" tattooed on its left wing, it looks as if it is rolling out of the factory where cyber-birds are created.



This Page, above, **80. SHOOT AND SCOOT WARBIRD ARTILLERY TANK**

Premonitions of the violence to come are seen in the blood-soaked area behind and on the back of its head. How does this bizarre image command our attention? I believe that, in part, it may be because the Warduck has its head turned so that its eye is looking directly at the viewer, creating a bond between the viewer and the Warduck, not unlike the way the best portraits do.

In *Warduck #2*, we are presented with a giant bird, number 88, with five human figures on or near it. One of the figures is with an accurately depicted bomb attached to the left wing, while several others are loading a box into the “hold” of the duck/warbird. Lastly, a lone figure is crouched atop the bird’s back. While this image lacks the commanding eye-to-eye connection seen in *Warbird #1*, it has a striking similarity to so many on-the-ground photographs of warplanes that we have all seen many times over. A barn is vaguely sketched in the distance, like a hangar for this killer avian.



This Page, above, **5. WARBIRD #9**

Here the horrific combination of nature and war is presented as “commonplace” making it an even more disturbing image.

In *Tweeter Tank*, a songbird has become a passenger in a traditional twentieth-century tank, which appears to have blasted from a black hole in the artwork. The debris from this activity suggests a violent bursting through with matter scattered everywhere. This bird, like that in *Warduck #1*, has its head turned to look directly at the viewer. To my eye, one of the most interesting things about this image is how the bird appears to be in a nest, which is the tank itself. Many variations on this bird-tank image run throughout the Warbird series, and there are also images of nests with baby birds spitting missiles.

In Terry’s own words: “I began the Warbird series in 2015 with several collage-paintings of predator birds with combat weapons, which I called ‘warbirds.’ I started the series after I noticed how many fighter jets are named after birds.



*This Page, above, 7. ONE BADASS BIRD
Following Page, 83. KRIEGERKOPFBE DECKUNG #1*

The US Air Force's primary fighter jet aircraft is called the F-15 Eagle. Since I started the series, I've done extensive research on the long history of the association of birds with war and militaristic nations that extends back to ancient times. Montu, the Egyptian falcon god of war, was representative of the conquering vitality of the Pharaoh and is depicted wielding weapons of war, such as a curved sword, a spear, bow and arrows, or knives.

For many different cultures across thousands of years, the eagle is a symbol of authority and divine power. Its image appears in both German Nazi propaganda materials and in Mexican anti-Nazi posters, and it is featured on numerous military awards throughout the world. In mythologies of the Indigenous people of the Plains, the golden eagle, also known as the 'war eagle,' is traditionally associated with warriors and courage in battle, and its feathers were given for acts of valour in battle and worn in war bonnets."





This Page, above, **84. THE WATCHER**

A sense of motion, and even sound, characterizes many of Graff's works. We should note that in the intervening years, between the prototypical Warducks and production of the Warbird series, he was engaged in the creation of many elaborate motorized installations involving movement along with complex sound and lighting effects.

One of the earliest of the warbirds is *Krieg Vogel* (2016). The title means "War Bird" in German. Like the early Warducks and *Tweeter Tank*, this warrior is childlike, a toy of sorts. Yet, it is also a toy with a rocket launcher on its back. Note that it is looking at you, eye to eye.

Contrast the nostalgic representation of *Krieg Vogel* with the forward propulsion of *One Badass Bird* (2016). This creation also has a rocket launcher on its back, but it's wildly ferocious and energetic.



This Page, above, **II. WHIRLYBIRDS**

Notice too that Graff has morphed the badass bird's wing into an object resembling a fuel tank that features the number "14," like the numbers on war planes and racing cars. Graff explains that the numbers on most of his warbirds are "also a reference to annual bird counts, to the taxonomic cataloguing of bird skins in museums, and to military service identification tags, which are useful for identifying the bodies of dead soldiers." Along with numbers, many of his warbirds are decorated with roundels and other military insignia.

Consider *Post-Apocalyptic Cyclist* (2017) as a vision of what the world could be like after nuclear war. The figure is a cyborg, half human, and half animal. Unlike the mythological figure known as the Centaur, this figure, instead of being armed with a bow and arrow, has a rocket launcher mounted on her head and beak, so she is always ready to shoot.





Previous Page, **47. PORTRAIT OF WARBIRD**

This Page, above, **82. FOUR WARHEADS**

Her adornments include the image of a skull and crossbones and the three-bladed radiation warning symbol. She is death and poison personified. Yet she is off for a bike ride! Her exaggerated torpedo breasts are a contrast to the ever-present staring eye in full contact with the viewer. We should note that the Centaur shoots the arrow over the horizon and hits an unseen target. How our mythologies have changed!

Finally, we come to *Bird and Bomb* #1 (2017) and *Nature Morte* (2019). With both versions of *Bird and Bomb* (#1 and #2), we see the doomsday “logo” of the time we live in – the awful image of a mushroom cloud, the signature of a nuclear attack. In the foreground is a lone bird, devoid of feathers, burnt beyond belief with empty sockets where once there were eyes.



This Page, above, **31. BOMBER BIRDS**
Following Page, **14. STEAMERS**

In *Nature Morte*, the composition resembles a flag, with the overall image divided into four sections containing a military star, an undetonated bomb that contains a stillborn bird, a diagram that may be a box of rockets or the layout for a cemetery, and lastly, a military green armoured tank with a huge skeletal skull of a bird. Do these images represent our future?

My final thought is to encourage you to look at the warbirds of Terry Graff with an eye to seeing each image in its fullness, especially as it relates to the others, to the social, political, and environmental issues of our time, and to your personal inventory of experiences.

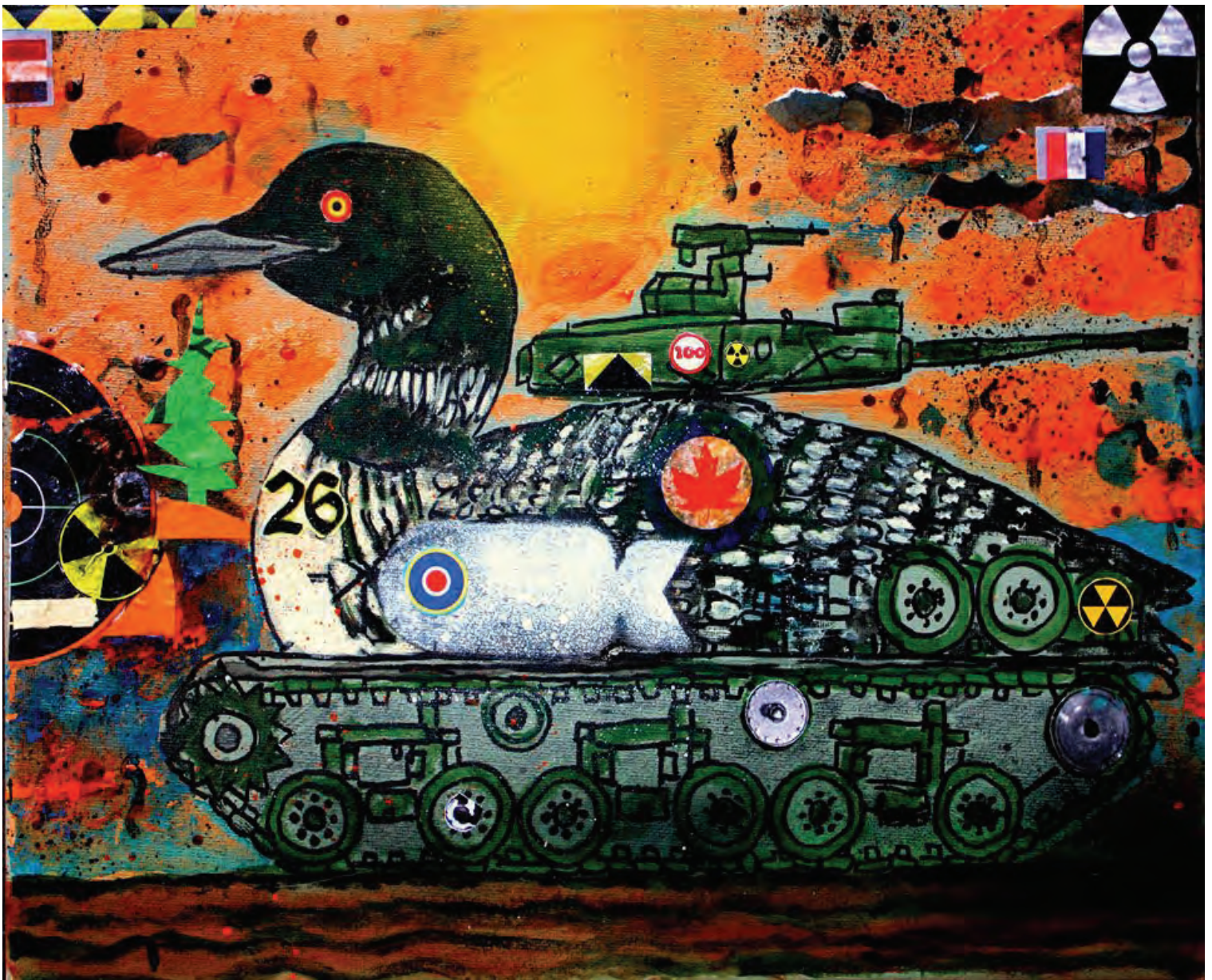




This Page, above, 77. WARBIRD 458

It is perhaps most fitting to give the last words to the artist: “I’ve always been perplexed by the many contradictions and complexities of war. There’s the paradox of ‘fighting for peace,’ the use of force and destruction for achieving peace and security, and the collateral damage to the environment that sustains us. There’s the contradiction between violence and aesthetics, the compulsion to see beauty in artists’ images of suffering, destruction, and carnage. And then there’s this: War embodies at once both the basest, most barbaric aspects of human nature and our most vaunted and valued civilized virtues personified by heroic soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the greater good.”

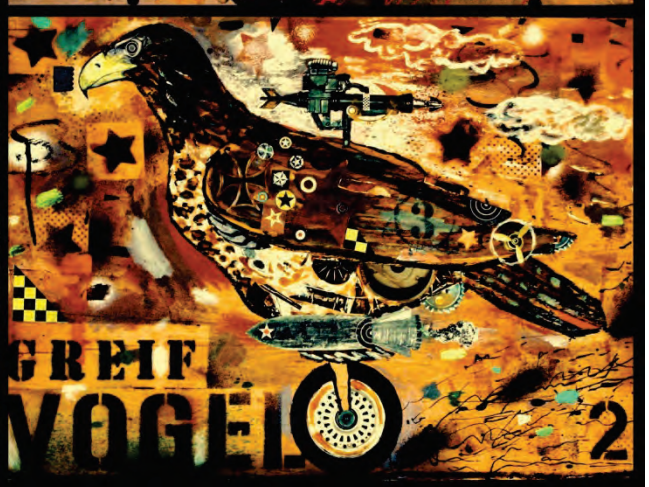
written by Bill Auchterlonie



This Page, above, 26. LOON TANK

Beginning in May of 2023, Terry Graff's Warbird series will tour Canada, along with other works from his nearly 50 years of work. This article is an excerpt from a book that is being published by Xeno-Optic Research Lab in collaboration with the University of Cape Breton Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Sudbury, Woodstock Art Gallery, and St. Thomas University.

Note: This is probably one of the most amazing collections of its kind. It is truly unique and special. If you can see the show in person please go. It is one thing to see it here on the pages of ARABELLA – it is another to see it in person. Terry Graff and his work is a special combination of both the creative soul and intelligent mind. Both he and Bill Auchterlonie are treasures to the art community. We were extremely sorry to lose Bill earlier this year – he will be dearly missed.





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