

michael a. salter





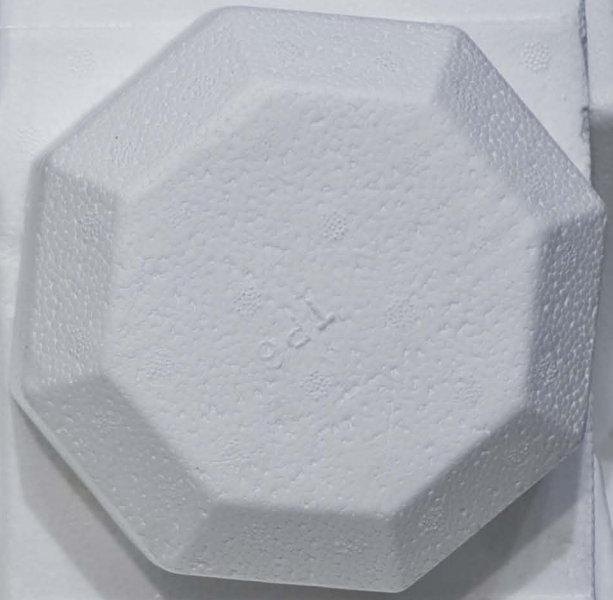
IP-035 NOT TO BE REUSED

*too
much*

michael a. salter

6 november – 14 december 2008

Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



XB605 STAND-R

FOREWORD Michael A. Salter's installation *too much* seemed simple at first: a giant white robot and grey painted walls covered with bright yellow images. A closer look and a little time spent in it however, revealed it to be an elegant distillation of Salter's response to the media-saturation all of us have come to take for granted in our lives. Salter finds meaning and beauty in the logos, pictograms, and imagery he observes every day at dollar stores, flea markets, second-hand stores, fast food outlets, Wal-Marts, and what he calls "countless other empires of corporate branding." Images that strike him as particularly poignant, absurd, or baffling become the inspiration for his work, including his ongoing drawing project, *Visual Function*, a collection of 300 graphic icons he has created over the past eight years. Selections from this series, plus 100 new icons drawn for *too much*, were stand-ins for the non-stop demands and enticements of our consumer culture.

The giant Styrobot, head bent, slumped in the corner, was just plain worn out from it all. Salter uses molded Styrofoam, the environmentally unfriendly packing material, as the building blocks for his monumental Styrobots, thus incorporating another aspect of consumerism into his artwork. For *too much*, more than 3,000 cubic feet of Styrofoam were collected over a two-month period, and we thank our colleagues on the Rice University campus who saved the packing material from new computers, racks of test tubes, and office coffeepots, among many other items. By the time Michael

Salter began to construct the Styrobot, his largest to date, the Rice Gallery foyer was stacked floor to ceiling with Styrofoam and when Michael surveyed the massive pile, he pronounced it to be enough. Since Salter had only one week to complete his installation, he worked quickly and intuitively to select shapes, apply glue, and bind them together with lengths of blue painter's tape. His speed and craft amazed those of us who watched him.

Visitors were fascinated by the ingenious way that Michael had created a figure that seemed so "real." Some said they identified with the robot's tired posture. However, it was students, in particular, who were drawn to *too much*. Student attendance was exceptionally high and when I asked one of our gallery attendants if he knew why, he responded simply, "It speaks to us." Maybe that is why, of all the Rice Gallery installations reviewed in the university's student newspaper, *The Thresher*, Michael A. Salter's *too much* is the only one to receive its highest rating of 5 stars. I thank Michael for putting his finger directly on the pulse of our time by confronting the profusion – and confusion – of the imagery we encounter. With a sophisticated eye and economy of means, Michael created a space in which to stop and think about why we so often find ourselves saying, "It's too much."

Kimberly Davenport
Director



Every city and town has a street, never downtown, lined with strip malls, fast food, and discount stores. Here, I am inspired. It is the most prolific evidence of our current culture. As an obsessive observer I am fascinated, repulsed and hypnotized by the tidal wave of imagery that our visual culture crashes down upon us everyday. I challenge this onslaught and examine it. I want to sort out the cacophony of visual noise and rethink meaning, motive, perception and narrative. In the middle of this infinitely chaotic flow of information, I have a nagging desire, the desire for truth and beauty. Images,

moments, situations, spaces, and environments can be so coldly anonymous and at the same time so loaded with meaning. The closer I look the stranger it all becomes. Nothing is as it seems. In a world where mind numbing volumes of stimuli assault my consciousness and elevate my anxiety, I seek peace and clarity. My work is an attempt to slow down, sort out, and focus information. The seemingly simple, runs away from me so fast, and leaves a cloud of dust so thick, I have to stop and wipe my eyes.

— Michael A. Salter









Michael A. Salter on *too much*

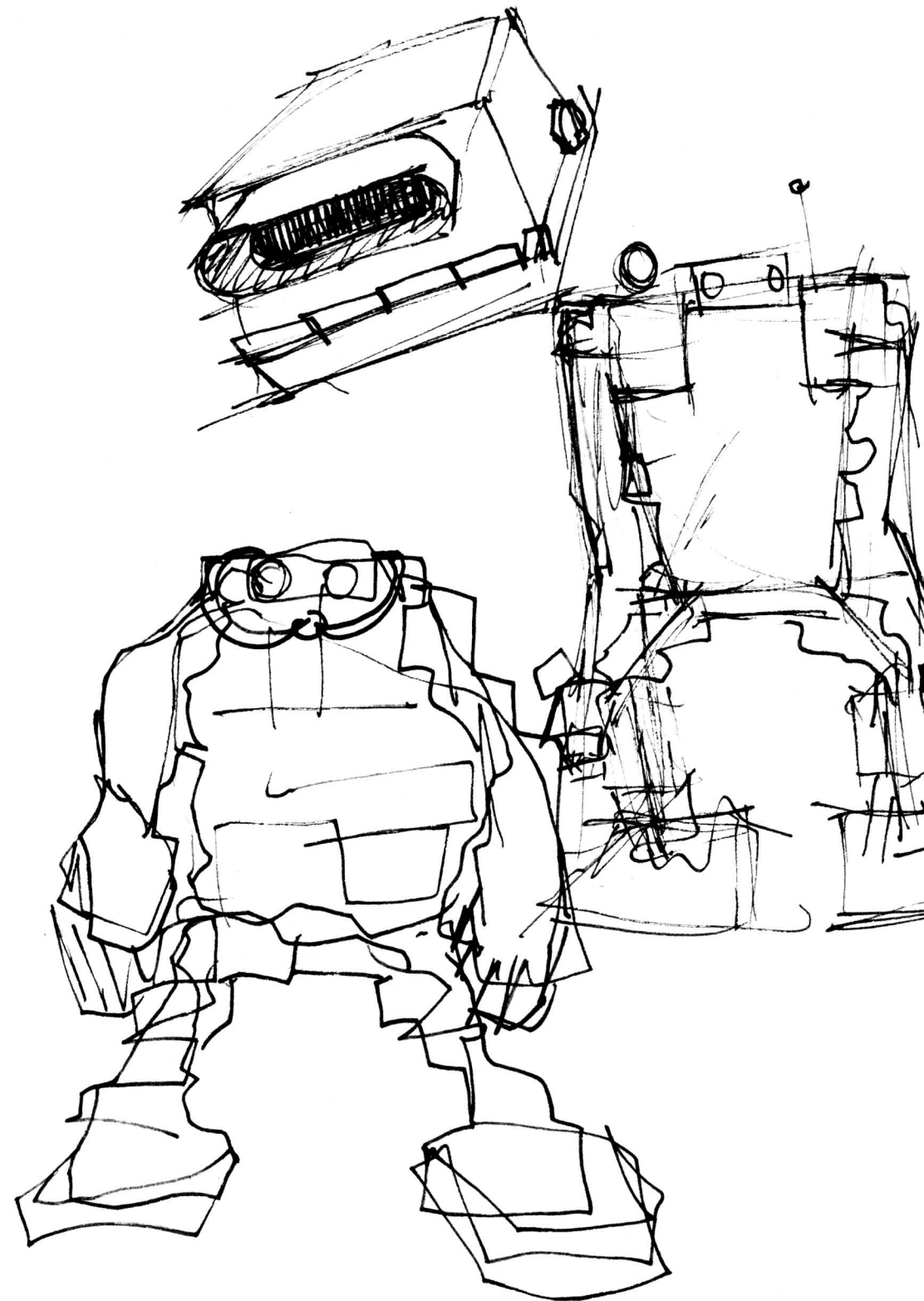
Excerpts from Opening Luncheon Talk

7 November 2008

There are several anecdotes I use to make clear what it is that I do, or how I see the world, and this is one of my favorites: I was on I-95 on the east coast, this generic freeway, and I pulled over to get gas. I filled up my tank, went to pay for it, and while I'm standing in line, I realize that it [the station] also houses a McDonald's, this fast food place inside what I thought was a gas station. So, as I'm standing in line to pay for my gas at McDonald's, which I'm already having a hard time understanding, I look next to me and there's a life-size cutout of the actor Johnny Depp, dressed as a pirate and pitching some sort of toy or a soft drink. Here are these layers, corporate controlled moments in my singular existence that I can't cognitively process. All I want to do is pay for my gas, and all I see is McDonald's, and Johnny Depp, and the toys, and the soft drinks. It's something I just could not make sense of, and something that I see happen a lot in my life.

I'm a self-described obsessive observer; I think I'm hyper sensitive to my environment. Partially, I can thank the MTV, Viacom Corporation for that. I am assaulted with a huge number of images daily. Aesthetically, you can see that my response to popular culture is driven by the media, by screen-printing, by signage, by fast food packaging, by toys, by cartoons, by comics, by corporate branding, and by sneakers.

What I've tried to create is a very minimal but very active two-element installation with an absurd amount of graphic information on the outside and the one, singular, overwhelmed, evidence-of-consumer-culture-himself, the giant Styrobot. I was a commercial designer for a short number of years. I acquired a clear grasp of the power of that language, corporate branding, and graphics, the authority of the reductive graphic language. Each of the images you see in the installation is part of a 300-icon collection that has been going on for about seven years. They've been delivered in



a variety of formats, but never in this number, volume, or size, which is one of the reasons I was excited about doing a proposal for this specific space. The scale of this space and the outer windows [of the building] were pretty exciting, and at night there's this beautiful multi-reflection thing that happens from the back wall and through both planes of glass.

Q&A

Q: Can you tell us what you used, what the yellow is? And how you put them [the vinyl icons] on the wall?

My idea about media is that an artist should use anything and everything. I don't practice the idea of mastery in one specific discipline. Very often I look at other industries to steal or appropriate the way they apply things, use things, deliver things, those kinds of systems. This [the icons] comes from a commercial signage business. Every local sign shop has the ability to make these so I bought the machine that allows me to make them. I draw them all on paper, and eventually draw them on a computer. I then have them in a digital format, which allows me to deliver them a variety of ways. Each one is basically a giant sticker. I have this collection of drawings from which I can make stickers in multiple sizes, but this is about as big as they can get before I have to invest in a new machine.

Q: You have taken images from the multitude of imagery that you get, and you sort of appropriate them or change them in some way. With the Styrofoam robot, have you changed the actual Styrofoam in any way? Or were you lucky enough to get things that look like bolts?

It's a good question because the images are not appropriated. They're not. They start from scratch, on paper. They are certainly a result of my being exposed to all kinds of information. What I'm after is that familiarity like, "He must have just taken it and flipped it over or put a sad face on it." I didn't.

I think the Styrofoam has that same kind of question: "Did you find it like that? Did you just turn it over?" From a fabrication standpoint about 10-15% of it has been kind of custom fit in there. I think, hopefully, anyway, that my talent or skill is how to put it together and make it look like you can't quite tell if it's just stacked together. Maybe it took an afternoon or maybe it took five days or three months, it's hard to tell.

Q: In your dream, what effect would you like to have on all of us who ever see your work?

If people could leave here and have a heightened sense of their own visual culture, their own visual world. Ultimately, in the dream, the world would be full of truth and beauty. I think that's a big dream. What I'd like is for people to be more analytical, more discretionary, more conscious – that would be great – to have a heightened sense of what the world looks like. I have a sincere faith and belief in aesthetics and their effect on me. I think that ultimately a generation exposed to this kind of imagery has been affected in the way it thinks. If that's true, it affects who I am, why I'm here, and my perception of myself. Those are pretty heavy existential questions being affected by sugar coated cereal and fast food joints.

Q: Do you have a favorite icon, and if so, why is it you like that one?

When I'm making an icon, I know that it is ready to be put out in front of people when I simply cannot nail down a single narrative. When I have no idea what this thing could mean, I know that it's right; or the narrative is infinite and looping – it could mean this, this, this, and doesn't stop. Then I feel like it's exactly where it needs to be. That replicates my response to a lot of stuff I see out there: it makes no sense to me at all, or it could mean so many things.



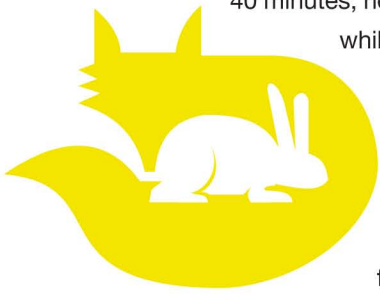
There are several signs and images I've seen out in the real world that crack me up. One was outside of a restaurant. It was a giant foot; the big toe had on a cowboy hat and a bandana, while the four little toes also had on bandanas. So it was like the head chief, big toe cowboy and his four buddies, and it was outside of a restaurant. I don't know about that; feet and food just don't go well together for me.

Q: What sources have you drawn from? Who has inspired you?

The first that comes to mind is certainly Marshall McLuhan's phrase, "The medium is the message." I still think that stuff is very fresh. In the scheme of history, it's not that long ago, and it's very potent. I also like Naomi Klein's writings. She

wrote a fabulous book called *No Logo*, and it talks about the power of branding and the global impact of consumer culture. Really, I find myself drawn to cultural analysis more than anything. Scientifically, there's this big hole. There's a lot of data on responding to certain very reduced symbols like circles and squares, and what sort of reaction happens in your brain. But when it comes to iconography there's very little, because it's so psychologically laden. I have noticed that if I put up one icon somebody might look at it, have a narrative right away, and walk away. Somebody else might be there for three minutes, his or her mind running this maze of process, this flowchart of familiarity, of memory, of guessing, and then come to a solution. Somebody else may come for 40 minutes, never have a solution, and leave. I love this suspended time

while it's figured out, and that's influenced by our psychology, our experience, our history, our understanding, and our environment. It's almost a Zen-like experience, a thought-less moment while your brain hovers until it can find a pigeonhole of comfort to move on. I really like that. I think Carl Jung's idea of a universal consciousness fits that a little bit.



Q: I love the walls because I think they represent my life. I'm over stimulated. I'm overwhelmed. But when I saw the robot, I just wanted to cry. I wanted to run up and sit on his lap. He seems so calming to me. I wanted to know, why the robot? Why Styrofoam? What's his place in all this?

Robots are just because I think robots are interesting; I really think they're cool. I stood in line to see *Star Wars*, and have seen all the *Star Trek* reiterations. I even watched the Saturday morning *Clone Wars* cartoon, which is poorly animated but the story still holds.

Styrofoam is because I had a history of using what I had around. I did a lot of "found object assemblage" as it is called in the art texts. It was around. I had nothing to work with for a long time – I still don't have much – but Styrofoam is there, and I thought, wow, you know, it actually looks a lot like a robot. What if I just stick a few pieces together? I work in this very methodic, research fashion. I made one about this big [makes a gesture indicating a small size]; if one works, I make a hundred. So I made a lot. And then if they work at that size in a hundred, I thought, well, I'll make a bigger one. So it was six feet. And then I was like, I need to make one bigger. I made one that was about eighteen feet. Now I'm up to – if this was standing, it would probably be about 25 feet.

I think, in the end, my response to this stuff is really sad. It's ultimately cynical, like, I can't escape it, and it's too late. If I go off the grid and live in the tundra for the rest of my life, it's still too late. So he [the Styrobot] is kind of bummed out. Really, he's overwhelmed, exhausted. Last night at the opening there was an interesting question about why he's not intimidating or militant. I understand there to be different cultural understandings of robots. A Western idea is that the robot is a missile throwing, dangerous robot. The Eastern version would be like: This is my big robot buddy. He protects me. He goes with me.



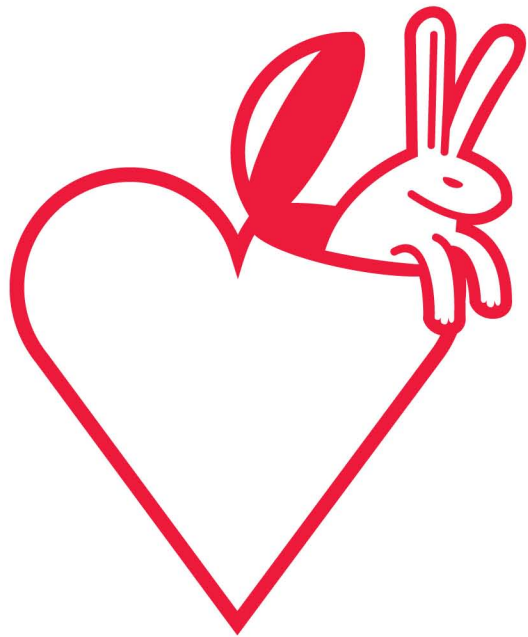




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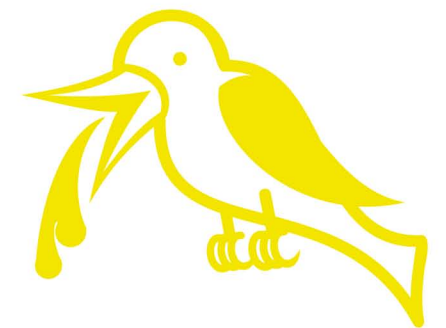
MICHAEL A. SALTER @ RICE GALLERY 2008



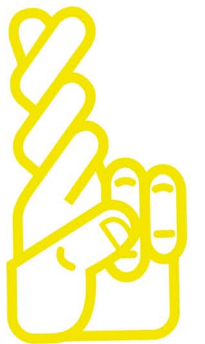


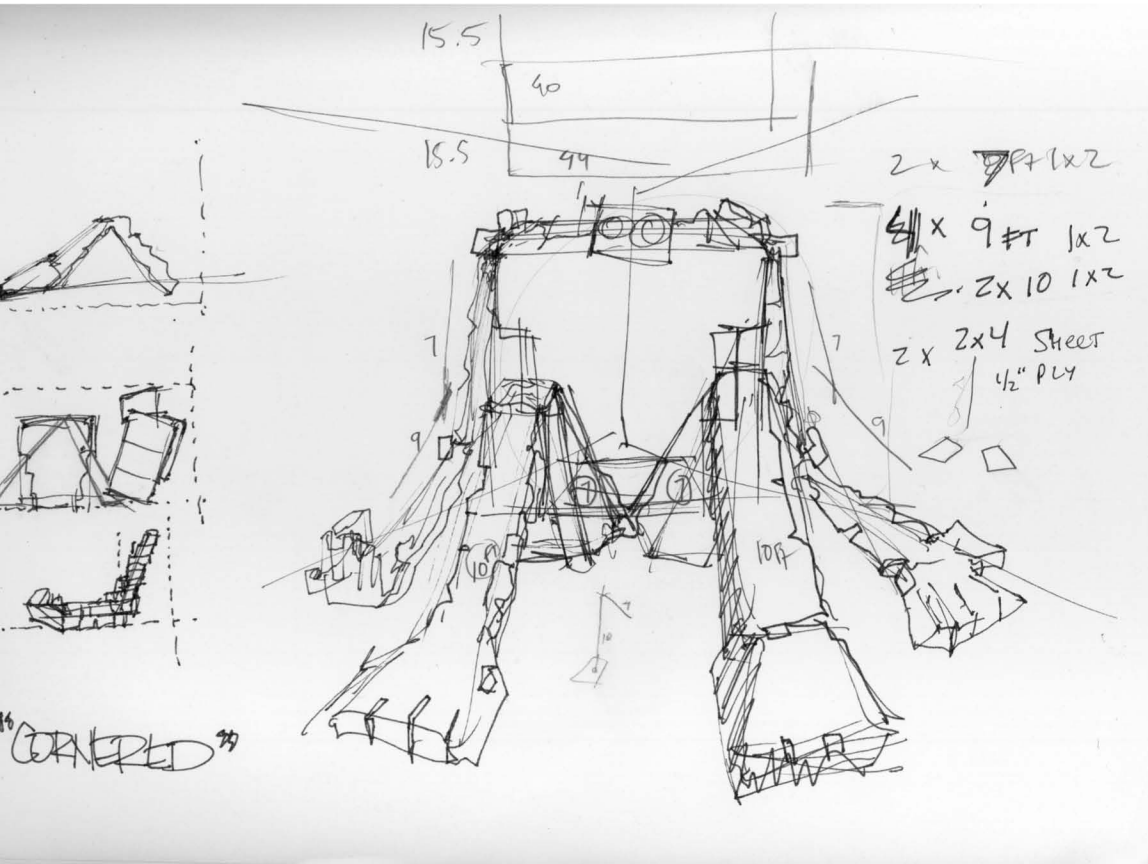


















ABOUT THE ARTIST Michael A. Salter was born in Bristol, Connecticut in 1967. He received a BFA in sculpture and graphic design from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio in 1992, and an MFA in studio art from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 1994. Solo exhibitions include *If You Don't Buy It From Us, It's Not Our Problem*, think.21 Contemporary Gallery, Brussels, Belgium (2009), *Visual Logistics*, The University of Texas, Arlington (2006), and *Situations Unknown*, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art [SECCA], Winston Salem, North Carolina (2004). In 2007, Salter created a 22-foot tall Styrobot for *Robots: Evolution of a Cultural Icon* at the San Jose Museum of Art, California. Salter's work has appeared in many publications including the books *Best New York Art, 2008* (Theredoom: New York, 2008); *Tactile: High Touch Visuals* (Gestalten Verlag: Berlin, 2007), and *Dot Dot Dash!* (Gestalten Verlag: Berlin, 2006). Salter is an Associate Professor of Digital Arts at the University of Oregon, Eugene.

Michael A. Salter, *too much*
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
6 November – 14 December 2008

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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– Michael A. Salter



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