

Paintings at Ely House reveal eclectic artist's true colors

By Judy Birke

NEW HAVEN — In "Why I am an Artist," one of his drawings on display at the 10-year retrospective of his work at the John Slade Ely House Jason Robert Bell writes that "art is a cruel master, the muse often ripping away her beauty to reveal a satanic monster of fear." He adds that it is also "pure escapist fodder that allows the doer to leave this mortal coil for a few seconds and live in the world of ideas and myth."

And indeed, the artist is true to his words.

"Tetragrammatron," is a curious amalgam of Bell's work. Part fantasy, part social critique, part legendary spirit, part contemporary commerce, this hybrid installation of works that range from monumental paintings and drawings to tiny sculptures and photographs, takes one on a wild journey of disturbing expression and excellent painting.

The exhibit includes many variations based on Bell's numerous interests, and unless you're equipped with a program guide, it's a bit difficult to harness the concepts, connections, directions and boundaries of the artist's breathless and unruly approach to his subject matter in which trash becomes treasure and pulp fiction (comic books) assumes the ultimate form of expression.

There's the "Caveman Robot" series, in which sculptures, drawings, comic books, photographs of performance pieces,

ART REVIEW

- **Title:** "Tetragrammatron: Jason Robert Bell"
- **Where:** John Slade Ely House, 51 Trumbull St., New Haven
- **When:** Through Jan. 21; 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 2-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** (203) 624-8055

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John Slade Ely House

... "Roar" a 58- by 46-inch oil, acrylic and ink on canvas.



John Slade Ely House

Jason Robert Bell's Kala series includes "Kala Plays Harp," a 54- by 62-inch oil, acrylic and ink on canvas and ...

Exhibit: Work is part fantasy, part commentary

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express various states of frenzied activity, the hybrid hero, part prehistoric, part high-tech, flailing about in the modern world, contending with our vanities and mimicking our conceits in chaotic narratives laced with both an apocalyptic edge and demonic good cheer.

As if to reiterate the contemporary desire for wide public address, Bell creates some "artifacts" of commerce from his wacky inventions, comic pages, including a certificate for membership in the Caveman Robot Super Club and a commemorative plate, most objects individually packaged and marketed for sale, it seems, from the artist's private warehouse of never-ending comic-inspired themes.

In the "Trashures" series, an interactive project created from 2002 to the present, which is shown here in photo documentation, Bell leaves a network of abandoned hand-made sculptural objects within city streets, the goal to observe and reveal ordinary people's interaction with them.

In addition to the documented images, the presentation includes a few sculptural pieces that have not yet been designated for their trashure missions, like "Ape

of God, Undeployed Trashure" and "Proposal for the Freedom Tower 1:7000 to Scale, Undeployed Trashure," the latter composed of a mess of objects sculpted from random detritus.

The most interesting series of pieces in the exhibit is the "Kala" series. Like the Caveman Robot series, this group of works is also based on the theme of the noble beast, this time a mythic folk heroine. Kala, a gigantic, dreadlocked mythic fur-covered yeti woman of monumental scale, with bare breasts and behind, roams the earth, threatened and threatening, confronted and confrontational, brutal and brutalized, addressing and chaos and conflict and human brutality.

Never mind all the nonsense and the narrative, the mysteries and the myths, the impossibilities and the absurdities, when all is said and done, here is where we find Bell at his best — a beautiful painter who is first and foremost an artist who really knows how to paint. In the end, the personal demons, the angry images, and the frenzied activity matter less than the wonderful explosion of riotous color that seems to glow with an almost radioactive force, and the rich gestural brushstrokes that pound with a palpable tension, tough, garish and urgent.

Bell has a master of fine arts degree from Yale University. The guest curator at the Ely House for the show is Susan Classen-Sullivan, director of the Hans Weiss Newspace Gallery at Manchester Community College.

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Bell's "Orpheus Terminal" works such as this are mounted on remote-control cars.

Judy Birke of New Haven is a freelance writer and art consultant.

