

Willem Volkersz: The View From Here

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Large Print Labels



Willem Volkersz: The View From Here

A 25-Year Retrospective

Montana-based artist Willem Volkersz (b. 1939) is a significant contemporary artist known for his neon and paint-by-number-style installations. He was a pioneer in the use of neon in art and developed early and sustaining loves for photography, travel, American roadside culture, Americana, and Folk and Visionary Art. Volkersz came to the United States from Holland in 1953, after the devastation of World War II, and brought with him a rich history that is reflected in his works of art. Volkersz has often said that he has an immigrant's fascination with America, and as a teenager, he began hitchhiking and driving throughout the American West, camera in hand. The artworks featured in *The View From Here* were produced over the past 25 years and draw upon the artist's eight decades of life experience. They touch upon his early life in Holland under

Nazi occupation, his immigration to America, and his current life in the Western United States. The artworks also suggest the ways these personal experiences and passions connect to wider social issues of enduring relevance for everyone.

Volkersz studied art and architecture at the University of Washington before earning an MFA in painting at Mills College in Oakland, CA. After teaching at the Kansas City Art Institute for 18 years, he went to Montana State University, Bozeman in 1986 to direct the School of Art and teach until his retirement in 2001. His work has been featured in 46 solo exhibitions and in over 200 group shows in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, China, and Taiwan. He is the recipient of many awards, including a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award, grants from the Mellon Foundation and Gottlieb Foundation, and a

2020 Montana Governor's Arts Award. He has been a visiting artist and lecturer at almost 100 institutions in the United States, Canada, Europe, and China.

This exhibition is organized by Brandon Reintjes, senior curator at the Missoula Art Museum (MAM), and travels throughout the Northwest through 2024 to the South Dakota Art Museum in Rapid City, SD; Boise Art Museum, ID; Missoula Art Museum, MT; and Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University in Salem, OR.

***Organized by the Missoula Art Museum,
Montana***

Sponsored by Bev and George Harad

Gallery 1

Willem Volkersz

Canadian Hero, 1995

neon, wood, found objects

Collection of the artist



“When Amsterdam was liberated from five years of German occupation in 1945, the Canadian troops that came to our street handed out cigarettes to adults and chewing gum to the kids. After my promise to pass it on to my dad, a soldier gave me a cigarette. My father kept it for me until I was an adult. Although someone stole the original cigarette from the sculpture when it was exhibited in Canada (‘the Canadians giveth, and the Canadians taketh away’), the

cigarettes and the Canadian liberator
symbolize five very difficult years and our
eventual emigration to the United States.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***Slaughter of the Innocents*, 2006**

neon, paint, wood, found objects

Collection of the artist



“A few years ago, my elementary school in Amsterdam tracked me down and informed me of the upcoming 80th anniversary of the school. The focus of the anniversary was on how the school and its occupants (children and teachers) had weathered the war years. The school’s website listed the names of the 173 children who had attended our school but had died in concentration camps. Since Jewish children were sent to separate schools beginning in 1941 (and I did not start school until 1944) we did not know that these

children had perished. This sculpture is a response to this awful revelation. Another sculpture based on this event is now at the National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

When I Was a Boy,

2008

neon, wood, paint,

found objects

Collection of the artist



“There are three books from the war years that I treasure. Two are coloring books that were given to me at the very end of the war; their titles are *The Canadians Are Coming* and *Children and Canadians*. I rediscovered them as an adult and have used images from them in my sculptures (in this case, the charging Canadian soldier with rifle and bayonet as well as the scene painted on the stack of suitcases). The other book is a collection of political cartoons drawn during the

occupation; they were distributed surreptitiously during the war and published in book form later. As a boy I was totally fascinated by these powerful and beautifully drawn images and chose to use the image of a German soldier made up of mechanical parts (i.e. a war machine) as a metaphor for the Nazi occupation.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Breakfast, May 5, 1945, 1996

wood, tile, paint, found objects

Collection of the artist



“When Amsterdam was liberated at the end of World War II, the Swedish Air Force dropped food parcels suspended from parachutes and each parcel contained fresh bread (something we had not seen for many months). My father kept track of how much we ate; the 18 slices of bread I consumed that morning (I was not quite six years old!) are represented here in plywood, together with a glass of milk. I also included the dog tag I wore when I walked to school each day during the war. The spikes embedded in the chair say, ‘keep away; this food is mine!’”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***Immigrant's Dream*, 2012**

wood, paint, found objects

Collection of the artist

“Immigrant's Dream is on a favorite topic—immigration.

I came from Holland to the United

States with my family as a 14-year-old boy. As

we docked into New York harbor, we could

see the Statue of Liberty not far away and it is

not uncommon to see new immigrants

photographed with the Statue of Liberty in the

background. The suitcase is an obvious

metaphor for travel and adventure; each

suitcase in the stack shows a scene of an

often-idealized vision of America that

immigrants carry with them.” -Willem Volkersz

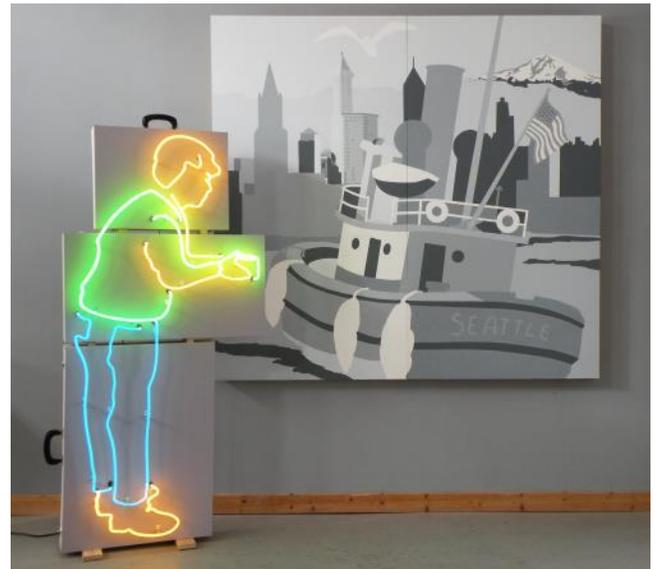


Willem Volkersz

First Camera, 2010

neon, wood, paint

Collection of the artist



“*First Camera* gives an indication of my early interest in photography. While in high school in Seattle, I had my own photography business and worked as a photographer for both the high school newspaper and the annual. I loved going down to the waterfront with my camera. Both Mt. Rainier and (then) Seattle’s tallest building, the Smith Tower (where I once had a job), are in the painting.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Journey (to the Promised Land), 2008

neon, wood, paint, tile,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“This sculpture tells the story of our emigration from Holland to the United States. On the left are images and objects of the life I left behind (placed on a copy of a bench I built in a carpentry class when I was 10). In the center is the ocean liner that brought us to New York. On the right are objects representing my new life, such as a camera (my initial interest in the visual arts), a paint-by-number painting (indicating my love of popular culture and folk art), and a small Statue of Liberty.”

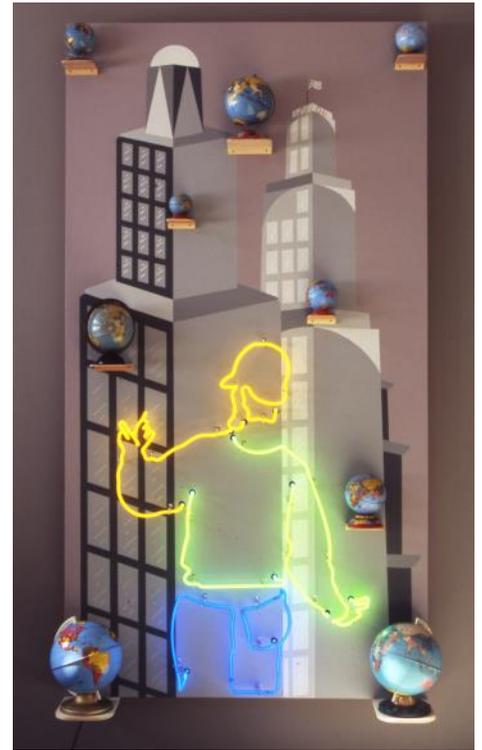
-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Global Positioning, 2006

neon, wood, paint,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“The title *Global Positioning*

is a pun based on the now ubiquitous GPS systems that are embedded in everything from phones to cars. But the sculpture also depicts what it is like to juggle a life in rural Montana with the demands of family, a teaching career, working in the studio, and travel to big cities to enjoy museums, concerts, and restaurants. (And, yes, I collect globes!)”

-Willem Volkersz

Gallery 2

Willem Volkersz

***This Land is Your
Land, This Land is
My Land, 2019***

wood, paint, found
objects

Collection of the artist



“This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land celebrates the rich and wonderful diversity of this country’s population. Most of these ceramic figures were found on eBay.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Follow Your Bliss,

1994/2015

neon, paint, wood, found
objects

Collection of the artist



“*Follow Your Bliss* is based on Joseph Campbell’s notion that each of us must find—and follow—a purpose in life that gives one a feeling of deep joy, or bliss. This sculpture is both a tribute to this great student of mythology as well as a recognition of the fact that I worked hard at following my own bliss.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

A Peaceable Kingdom,
2017

wood, paint, found objects

Courtesy of the artist and

Visions West Contemporary, Denver, CO



“The title for *A Peaceable Kingdom* is taken from a series of paintings by the same title by the American folk painter Edward Hicks (1780 -1849). Hicks was a Quaker preacher who loved to depict people and animals living together in harmony. In this work, I use a similar idyllic setting (like the lion and the lamb lying peacefully side by side).”

-Willem Volkersz

Gallery 3

Willem Volkersz

***America the Beautiful*, 2000**

neon, wood, paint

Collection of the artist



“As a high school student in the 1950s I had a variety of after-school jobs. Although I was expected to contribute financially to the wellbeing of our family, I saved enough to buy a motor scooter when I was 16. The first long distance trip took me from Seattle to Vallejo, California, to visit my sister and her husband (who was a doctor at a naval base there). I used a photo my sister took of me on the scooter to draw the pattern for the neon; the paint-by-number landscape suggests the idealized notion I had of our newly adopted country.” -Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***Western Living*, 2012**

neon, wood, found objects

Courtesy of the artist and
Visions West Contemporary,
Livingston, MT



“*Western Living* shows different aspects of life in the West, from outdoor living to cheap tourist souvenirs. My family lives just outside Bozeman, MT, where we often see elk in a field adjacent to our house. But we also live only a few miles from the highway that leads directly to West Yellowstone, a road that is littered with giant billboards. So we see both the best and the worst of life in the West on a daily basis.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Orion the Hunter, 1996

neon, wood, paint, chalk,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“*Orion the Hunter* is one of a series I have done over the years depicting various constellations. Here, the celestial hunter is juxtaposed with an earthly duck hunter (found in a paint-by-number painting); the duck decoy is from our Folk Art collection.”

-Willem Volkersz

Gallery 4

Willem Volkersz

Before and After, 2021

acrylic/latex on wood
panels

Collection of the artist



“*Before and After* juxtaposes an idyllic, pastoral and peaceful paint-by-number scene with a black-and-white photo I took in East Berlin in the late 1950s. It depicts a peaceful setting that is ruined by war. (One can also reverse the two panels, with the war-torn city image on the left and giving hope and promise to the immigrant’s dream of emigration to a better place.) The Berlin photo was taken after I had hitchhiked to Berlin and celebrated the New Year there in

December and January of 1957/58. I was astounded that, twelve years after the end of World War II, much of the city still lay in ruins while West Germany and my native Holland were already well on their way to rebuilding their housing stock and their economies.”

Willem Volkersz

***The Wall*, 2021**

wood, paint,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“Walls have been a frequent topic of political conversations in recent years—especially the construction of a wall between Mexico and the United States. There are, of course, historical precedents like the ancient Great Wall of China, the Roman Hadrian’s Wall in northern England (begun in 122 AD), the Berlin Wall, and the walls we have erected between ourselves and our neighbors. In this painting, migrants climb over a wall—we don’t know their nationalities or where the wall is

located—but the image is a reminder of the struggle of millions of migrants trying to reach a better place.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Yellowstone Wildlife, 2008

neon, wood, paint,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“*Yellowstone Wildlife* uses a circa 1920 photo postcard of *Old Faithful* by F. Jay Haynes, Yellowstone’s official photographer from 1884 to 1921, to take a humorous tourist’s view of the national park that is located close to our home in Bozeman, MT.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Lassie and Friends,

2018

wood, paint,

found objects

Collection of Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson



“*Lassie and Friends* uses the name of the iconic collie who was the main character in a series of movies starting in the 1940s. In this sculpture, Lassie is surrounded by her ceramic friends in a familiar and comforting Western landscape. I found this image of Lassie in a wonderful paint-by-number painting.”

-Willem Volkersz

Gallery 5

Willem Volkersz

Invasive Species, 2012

wood, paint,
found objects,
commercial neon
Collection of the artist



“*Invasive Species* is not so much about species that invade our native habitats (although those are a real problem in the West) but rather the ceramic birds manufactured in places like Japan, China, and Brazil that have invaded our domestic spaces. On the panels, different parts of the country are represented by sections of paint-by-number paintings.” -Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***Vincent in Paris*, 2013**

neon, wood, paint,
found objects

Collection of the artist



“*Vincent in Paris* imagines the Paris Vincent van Gogh would have experienced in the late 19th century. The neon hat is based on one worn by the artist in one of his many self-portraits. The prostitute and the small drinking glass are references to stories told in the letters from Vincent to his brother, Theo (who worked for an art gallery in Paris).”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Souvenir de Paris, 2015
wood, paint, found objects
Collection of the artist



“*Souvenir de Paris* uses a well-known paint-by-number painting *Suburb de Paris* (reproduced in the Smithsonian’s 2001 publication *Paint by Number*). With the introduction of the paint-by-number technique in the early 1950s, artists like Dan Robbins of the Palmer Paint Co. took inspiration from their World War II experiences in Europe (with Paris an obvious favorite). The original paint-by-number painting (which I found in an antique store) is placed on an easel as if an artist is working directly from the scene in front of him.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

The Bridge at Arles, 2018

neon, wood, paint

Collection of the artist



“*The Bridge at Arles* celebrates my love for the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, whose paintings and drawings I saw throughout my youth in Holland. Here, I use van Gogh’s iconic painting *Langlois Bridge at Arles* as the backdrop for four neon hats, each replicating a hat worn in one of the artist’s self-portraits.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***A Boy Visits New York*, 2007**

neon, wood, paint, found
objects

Collection of the artist

“This small sculpture recalls a day we spent in New York after our 8-day boat journey from Rotterdam in 1953. I have often used ladders to suggest our hard work to create a new life in America. This small stepladder is an exact copy of one I used around the house for many years. On the stepladder are a suitcase (a symbol for travel and adventure) with a New York skyline taken from a photo I took when I returned to New York two years later when I was 16. The steaming neon coffee cup suggests an urban



sign (this is one of the first times I had ever seen neon). The small objects on the steps refer to my schoolboy age.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Night Watch, 2018

neon, wood, paint,
found objects



Courtesy of the artist and

Visions West Contemporary, Denver, CO

“*Night Watch* tells the story of a boy visiting New York City. We see the Empire State Building, a Yellow Cab and several souvenir items, all watched over at night by three neon birds. If there is ever a quiet and contemplative time on Times Square, perhaps this is it!”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

Inside/Out, 2006

neon, wood, paint,
collage, found objects

Collection of the artist



“*Inside/Out* consists of two panels (a diptych) and depicts a straightforward juxtaposition of images of a domestic interior (chair, a small towel, a globe and a glass filled with pencils) with those we normally see outdoors (birds, a deer, and a California Redwoods souvenir plate.) The large bird is made from some of the art exhibition announcements I regularly receive in the mail.”

-Willem Volkersz

Willem Volkersz

***Bird Season*, 2007**

neon, wood, paint,
found objects

Collection of the artist

“I became increasingly aware of birds after we moved into our rural home on Cottonwood Creek near Bozeman, MT, and I started to keep a record of the migratory birds moving through our property. *Bird Season* shows an iconic neon bird mounted on a paint-by-number hunting scene painted on a suitcase. The suitcase is placed on a bench that is a direct copy of one I made in a carpentry class as a child (the original version is still in my studio). Staying with the bird theme, I collected ceramic birds



in second-hand stores. This piece is not a commentary on hunting but just a small sculpture on one of my favorite subjects, birds.”

-Willem Volkersz