

## Sculptor Benjamin Kelley on Superfund Sites, the Auto Industry, and the Appeal of Found Objects

By Chloe Helton-Gallagher on Feb. 13, 2013



If you're not Indiana Jones, how do you get away with acquiring human bones on the Internet, shooting arrows into an old prop plane in an abandoned bank building, or procuring a prison shank from a knife dealer without winding up on an FBI watch list? By being an artist.

Baltimore-based sculptor Benjamin Kelley has done all of that. His work blends superior fabrication skills with a keen eye for unique and sometimes grisly found objects. His [current exhibition at Connersmith](#), which opened last week, brings together a suite of sculptural works exploring the pride and folly of industry and the peripheries of violence. Recently, Washington City Paper had a chance to talk with Kelley about his work—but we didn't ask where he got the bones.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Washington City Paper: Where are you from and how did you get to Baltimore?

Benjamin Kelley: Flushing, Mich., outside of Flint. I did my undergrad, a BFA in sculpture, at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Mich., which is a cornfield. Straight from undergrad, I came to Baltimore for grad school at Rinehart School of Sculpture, Maryland Institute College of Art. Did two years there, graduated, and then the next year I started working at MICA as a technician and started teaching adjunct.

WCP: Have you always worked primarily as a sculptor?

BK: Yeah.

WCP: What attracts you to working in 3D, as opposed to other mediums?

BK: It seems more real to me. Most of the time I operate on a real human scale, so you can relate to it immediately. It has the potential to hit you a little harder.

WCP: You have a piece in your upcoming show that's made from a 1971 Chrysler Newport. Is there a Michigan reference in that, a nod to the auto industry?

BK: Yeah, definitely. I'm one of the first people in my family that's left that industry.

WCP: Is there significance to the year and the make and model of the car?

BK: Yeah, I like that era. It's the peak of big body automobiles. It's almost 20 feet long. It's the longest car I've ever seen.

WCP: That's a whale!

BK: It's huge. And it just represents that glutinous peak of consuming resources, like steel and gas. But at the same time I love it.

WCP: So you like large scale?

BK: I think it comes back to idea of working on a real-world scale, or a human scale. You can relate to it, you can feel it when you're in the presence of it. I'm working on the car; I've cut it in half length-wise. It's just the shell, the exterior. In my studio is this car that takes up most of the space and I'm monkeying around with that, but then I'm also working on this hand carved bald-eagle skull. So I go between the car and working within a thirty-second of an inch for hours and hours. I've often done that, worked really small, petite and then really big. It's a good exercise, the back and forth.

WCP: What attracts you to using found objects?

BK: Found objects have a whole load of content and history unique to themselves that's unbeatable. You can't replicate that.

WCP: Do the found objects fulfill a narrative you have in mind?

BK: I usually have a narrative in mind, but I withhold that somewhat from the viewer. It helps me get to know those objects, place them, alter them if needed.

WCP: In your artist statement for the upcoming show you talk about exploring the moments directly preceding or following an act of violence. What got you thinking about that as a theme you wanted to explore?

BK: There are a couple things that have taken me here. It seems abstract, but I've been working through it, making work, and finding that point that I'm looking for. The first thing I'm starting to pull from it is in reference to this idea of the fall of the American industrial empire. Within that there are acts of violence that have happened. We could say it was one big act of violence. Henry Ford had all these giant auto factories but he was also acquiring large amounts of steel and iron ore. Then he had to build

steel mills, which engulfed much of the Detroit River area. Then he needed coal, and I found that he had coalmines that were Ford company coalmines. In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, he had forests that he was hauling lumber out of. These were all under the guise of making cars, and they all seem like pretty violent ways to cultivate materials.

I looked at EPA Superfund sites, like one in Ringwood, N.J., where Ford bought land and disposed of paint sludge in decommissioned mine shafts. Just think about how nasty that is. That's an act of violence that's really gruesome. I was trying to think of something to equate to that and I thought of a prison shank; this real raw violent act that leaves the victim with more than just a stab wound. It could have bacteria or who knows what. This Superfund site went on for decades and decades, just a long, drawn out violent act.

WCP: Is research a big part of your artistic practice?

BK: Yeah, I read a lot and I also like to talk to different people that come from these places. Whether it's some old timers from the old factories, or a car dealer, or a guy who's working for the EPA.

WCP: The show includes a neoprene survival suit. The suit certainly implies disaster, but it also implies rescue and maybe hope. Are you positing a kind of response to violence?

BK: The optimism of rescue is definitely there. There's a little bit of positive in there. Inevitably I'm not all doom and gloom. There's light somewhere.

"Benjamin Kelley: New Sculpture" is on view 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays–Sundays to March 30 at Connersmith, 1358 Florida Ave. NE. (202) 588-8750. [connersmith.us.com](http://connersmith.us.com).

Photo: Benjamin Kelley, Untitled, 2013 via Connersmith