

Don Bonham's Life and Art: Beauty and Horror of War Machines

Terry Graff

Veteran Marine Don Bonham (1940 – 2014) was a surprising and formidable anomaly in the art world. The first American visual artist to be appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy, he came to prominence in the late 1960s in London, Ontario, where he quickly gained international notoriety for his highly original, finely crafted, figurative fibreglass sculpture based on evocative human-machine hybrids. Characterized by uncompromising attention to technical detail and finish, his work merged fantasy and reality in a life-long exploration of the physical, symbolic, and psychological relationships between humankind and technology.

Bonham attributed his success as an artist to his experience as a Marine, which he claimed "really made me believe that I could do the impossible. They teach you that in the



Don Bonham, Marine, 1961

Marine Corps. It was good for me. No one thought I could make it as a Marine, but I did extremely well. I served in a counter-insurgency unit in Southeast Asia and at Guantanamo Bay. I worked really hard and became a non-commissioned officer (NCO), responsible for training military personnel so they would be prepared to execute their missions. I was very proud of serving in an elite recon unit and I

excelled at reconnaissance, which sharpened my observation skills. It was the first time I was successful.”

My first encounter with Bonham was as a Fine Art student in his drawing class in 1973. He taught the course like a drill sergeant in a military boot camp and later confessed: “Although I was a bit of a hard ass, I was always honest and straightforward with my students, and very involved in getting them excited and getting them to produce. Many of my students have excelled and become good friends, like Terry Graff, who I really went out of my way to teach back in the 1970s at Fanshawe College.”

Bonham was the real deal. He talked the talk and walked the walk. For his School-of-Hard-Knocks advice, support, and loyal friendship, I am eternally grateful, as he played a vital role in my development as an artist. His philosophy about art and technology embodied in his many sculptural fusions of machines with the human figure inspired the creation of my longstanding series of War Bird sculptures (See: “Feathers and Flak: The Inextricable Link Between Birds and War” (Volume 36, 2024), “Revenge of the Warbirds: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Nature” (Volume 34, 2022), and “Warbirds: An Ornithological Tour de Force” (Volume 31, 2019) in *War, Literature & the Arts: an international journal of the humanities*).

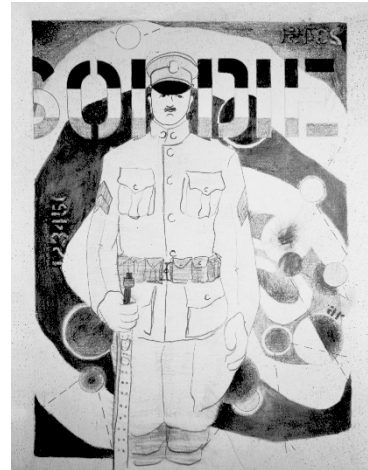
I kept in touch with Bonham over the years and, in 2012, I had the special privilege of curating his monumental retrospective exhibition *Don Bonham, RCA: Stranger in a Familiar Land* for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Shining a light on over more than forty-five years of art production, it chronicled the artist’s distinctive creative vision. The presentation of his extraordinary sculptures included several of his anthropomorphic flying and ground machines, many of which were inspired by his early military experience as a Marine. During that time, I

interviewed him about the impact of his military service on the evolution of his art. The following is an excerpt of what he shared with me:

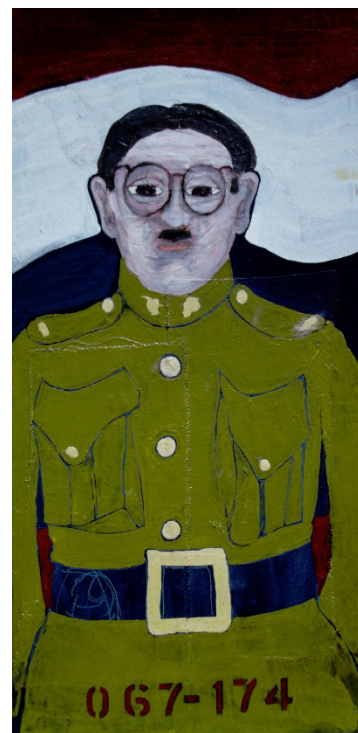
*When I was a Marine, I drew cartoons of my sergeant and many of my early paintings and prints were of military personnel. I started looking at art more seriously when I received a copy of John Canaday's book *Mainstreams of Modern Art* from my wife, which I carried with me in Southeast Asia. Although I am totally opposed to war, I was fascinated by the mythology and the beauty of the weapons of war. My first exhibition in London, Ontario, and many of my later sculptures came from my experience as a Marine and played off of this contradiction.*

To me, war machines are very beautiful, absolutely aesthetically beautiful. Take a look at the P-51 Mustang, a WWII fighter plane, a good example of how war has elevated aircraft to the level of art. It seems odd, but war actually brings out the best of technology.

*My sculpture *Dark Angel* (1981) has a sixteen-foot wingspan and is built primarily from fibreglass moulding with aluminum panels and metal wings. It is derived from the Cutlass F7U-1 built by Chance Vought Aircraft Company in the early fifties. Only a limited number were*



Soldier, 1967



Portrait of a Marine, 1967



Dark Angel, 1979–81, molded fiberglass, aluminum, wood, metal, hardware, aircraft cable, acrylic lacquer, 5' x 17' x 16". Collection: Art Gallery of Hamilton. Photo: Wendy Saby

produced and they were deemed obsolete a few years later, but I feel this aircraft best portrays the engineering aesthetics of the period.

The Russian MIG-29 is one of the most beautiful and effective fighter aircraft ever made. It first took flight in 1977 and is still in active duty today. As art, my sculpture, MIG-29 (2005) goes beyond being simply a representation of it. I am not just making a MIG; it's something more than that. I put the human body there, and not just as a figurehead, but as an integral part of the machine. I like to go from organic to geometric and from geometric to organic. But you don't know which is organic or geometric. It is both. And it is both erotic and frightening at the same time. My work is a statement about how we look at technology, how we have always humanized our machines.



MIG-29, 2005, molded fiberglass, wood, metal, aircraft cable, acrylic lacquer, 15' x 16' x 5'. Photo: Roger Smith

I refer to my flying machines as angels. Both angels and technology are misunderstood. Technology has the capability to kill and destroy, but it is humans creating those machines and pressing those buttons that bear full responsibility. So, like angels, technology is innocent, and like angels, it can sometimes go bad. It's the struggle between good and evil. Technology has the capability to kill and destroy, but it is humans creating those machines and pressing those buttons that bear full responsibility.

Other of Bonham's compelling sculptures also reference actual war machines. For example, *Rheintochter* (aka "Rhine Maiden") (1985) is based on an experimental German surface-to-air missile developed by Rheinmetall-Borsig in Nazi Germany during World War II.

The name "Rheintochter" comes from the mythical warrior Rhine maidens of Richard Wagner's opera series *Der Ring des Nibelungen* who whisk fallen soldiers to their heavenly reward in Walhalla.



Rheintochter, 1985, fiberglass, wood and metal, 55" x 45" x 32". Photo: Roger Smith

Bonham was a captivating storyteller. While staying at his house and enjoying a savory breakfast of grits that he prepared for me, I asked him about his decision to join the armed forces and to tell me about his time in the Marine Corps:

I was a greaseball who was raised on a dirt ranch. Abandoned by my mother, I always seemed to be looking for where I belonged. I was an outsider. I was unhappy and tried to run away several times. My first goal in life was to get the hell out of Oklahoma, and it was the U.S. Marine Corps that provided the way out.

I joined the Marines at age eighteen in November 1959. At boot camp in San Diego I was punished, along with many others, by being ordered to do squat jumps until I would fall on my face. This was a drill that was banned a few years later because of the many injuries it caused to knees and legs.

Once I became a Marine, I had found a home. Suddenly, I was something. I was a Marine. The Marines became my family. I guess that's why I got along so well there. I'll tell you also, the Marines made it quite clear right off the bat the way things are. This is good and this is bad; whereas, with my family, my so-called family, I never knew when I was going to step on a land mine. I never knew how to act and I was usually wrong. In comparison, the Marine Corps was easy. I knew where I stood. The saying is that a Marine is your absolute best friend and absolute worst enemy. And I found that to be true.

I liked the Marines because I got three meals a day, a place to sleep, and clothes, and I got a chance to see the world. I liked the Marines because they take you with all of your problems and never hold anything over you. Sometimes I got into trouble because I couldn't keep my mouth shut. If you fuck up, they punish you, but that is it. In those days the Marines was kind of like the legion of the lost of America, home of the undesirables, so it was a place where I fitted in quite well. The Marines was an easy out for a lot of guys, including many hard-ass criminals. I remember one time in boot camp we were

woken up by two FBI guys who came to get a young man who had robbed a bank in Columbus, Ohio, before he had signed up.

The inveterate raconteur kept the stories coming:

I was a squad leader in the 8th Marine Regiment, which is the infantry regiment of the Marine Corps, but for my last nine or ten months they sent me to Norfolk, Virginia, as an admiral's orderly kind of thing. Basically, it was security police work. We policed all navy headquarters. I was corporal of the guard, sometimes sergeant of the guard.

One time at the barracks in Norfolk, some of the guys came running down the stairs screaming "Corporal Bonham! Corporal Bonham!" One kid had found out that his buddy was messing around with his wife, and they were both sitting on a bunk upstairs and he had a forty-five up against his buddy's head, threatening to blow him away. So, everyone wanted me to go upstairs and take the forty-five away from him. Well, that was my job. So, I had a buddy of mine with me, and we had these shot-guns, and I told my buddy to come up from behind and be ready to blow that son of a bitch away. I said if he starts to pull the trigger, you fire, because otherwise I'm going to die. So, I put down my own forty-five and opened my weapon holsters and I just talked to him, a simple kid. I said, "So far, there's no damage done, give me the gun, we'll settle this. You don't want to kill your buddy." And so, he started crying and gave me the forty-five. We put him in chains and marched him to the brig. That's how it was in those days. Listen, I would have lied my ass off to keep from getting my head blown off.

Bonham continued, telling me how his life had intersected with certain defining moments in American history:

When I was honourably discharged from the Marines and back in Oklahoma, my ex-Marine buddy showed up and said, "Holy shit, I think a friend of ours shot Kennedy." Lee Harvey Oswald had served with us in the Marines, but was dishonourably discharged for threatening to kill a sergeant. He had been riding Kennedy for years to get him to reverse his dishonorable discharge. He had an Italian carbine and he was crazy.

Another time, in his youth, Bonham witnessed a significant event that not only shaped his perspective on technology, but had a lasting impact on the world. Although he professed his love of technology, calling it "a gift from God," he also asserted that it could be a curse:

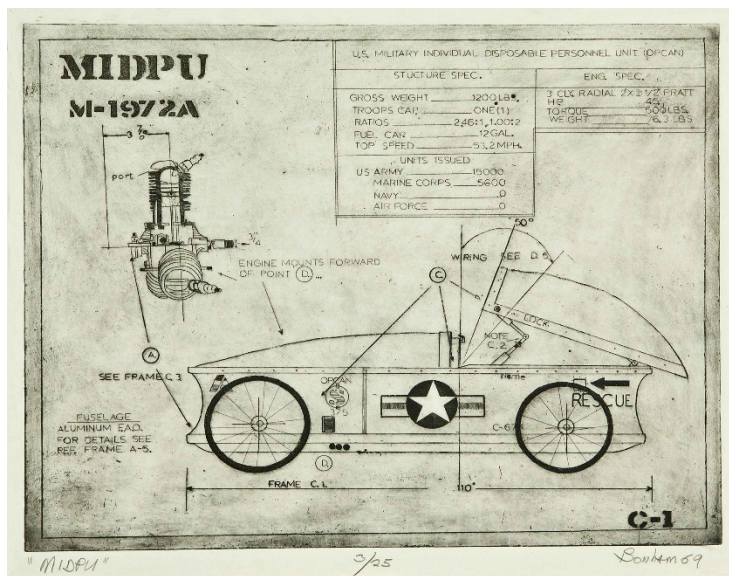
I'm not afraid of machines, but I'm scared of humankind. It's how technology can be used that's frightening. In 1945, when living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I remember being woken up around 5:30 in the morning on July 16 by a tremendous blast. It was suddenly light outside and I was shaking. The next day it was reported that a huge ammunition base in Sandia had blown up. Years later I found out that what I had experienced was actually the detonation of the first atomic bomb over the New Mexico desert, the test of the weapon that was dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So, you might say I was there for the big one, the technology that changed the history of the world.

Bonham's many stories prompted me to question him about the content of his art, how it communicated much more than an appreciation for the formal beauty of war machines to deliver powerful messages of anti-war advocacy. In response, he recounted how his perspective on the Vietnam War became one of disillusionment and opposition:

When I was in the U.S. Marine Corps, I was the All-American Boy in search of adventure. I was patriotic and served with pride in arms. I fought beside men who died in what I thought at the time was the defense of freedom. Their bodies were sealed in plastic bags, and within minutes computers were coding their death and sending a telegram home to their folks. I was a dumb kid and didn't know shit about what was happening. When you're in the military, all you're worried about is eating, staying alive, and not marching too far.

But my attitude toward the values of the U.S.A. soon changed when I realized that the war the Vietnamese were fighting against us was for them a just war, and that it was our presence in Vietnam that was unjust. The same goes for U.S. intrusion in Latin America, Canada, or anywhere.

The first anti-war piece I made was in 1969. I was living in Canada, teaching printmaking for the fine arts department at the University of Western Ontario and



MIDPU (Military Individual Disposable Personnel Unit), 1969, etching on paper, 20" x 25". Collection: McIntosh Gallery, Western University

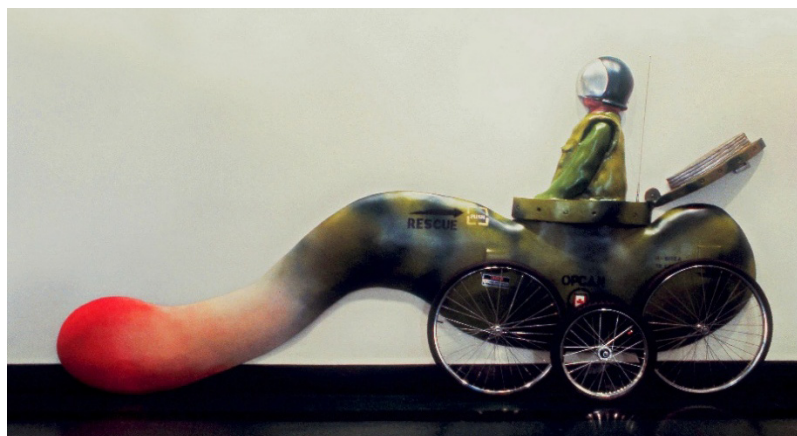
sculpture at H. B. Beal Secondary School in London. While watching CBC Television, I saw these aluminum coffins being offloaded in Delaware, so I started doing drawings of aluminum coffins with wheels. As everything in the military comes down to initials, I called them M.I.D.P.U., which stands for Military Individual Disposable

Personnel Unit. I made a whole series of American War Machines that included the SARMU, or Self-Administering Religious Mobile Unit for worship under fire, a sexy morale builder called the American Flocking Machine, and the OPCAN Tank or Operation Canada Tank, which comprised an eight-foot penis with snow tires for the Canadian winters. I also made cut-out models of M.I.D.P.U. like you'd find on the backs of American cereal boxes. This whole series of work dealt with the American intervention in the Vietnam War and in the Canadian economy and presented my vision of an imaginary invasion of Canada.



SARMU (Self-Administering Religious Mobile Unit), 1969, wood, metal, wheels, paint. Photo: Ian MacEachern

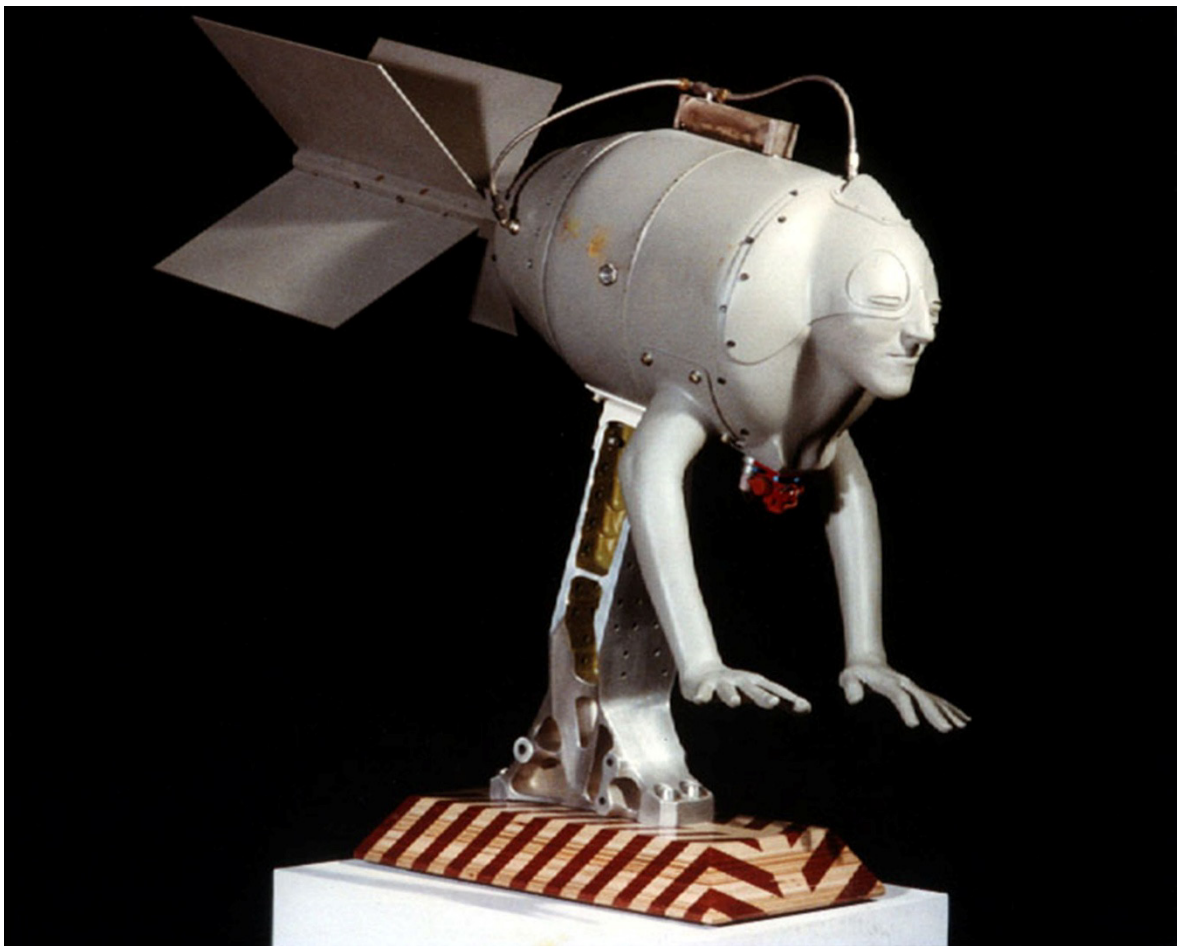
The Invasion of Canada was my first one-man show. It was funded with a \$600 grant from the Canada Council (the jury almost peed themselves laughing at the eight-foot penis) and was shown at the McIntosh Gallery. Because London was such an



OPCAN (Operation Canada) Tank for the Invasion of Canada, 1969, fiberglass, metal, wood, wheels, paint. 5' x 8' x 2'. Photo: Ian MacEachern

uptight city, I made maps showing how the invasion would come up through Michigan to London. Some people thought it was humorous, others thought it was dangerous, and some people actually knew what I was doing.

Indeed, Bonham's American War Machines are thought-provoking and politically profound. He underscores the cold, dehumanizing effects of war by literally putting a human face on his sculptures, such as *Smart Bomb (Esoteric Obus)* (1986), a precision-guided air-to-land missile.



*Smart Bomb, (Esoteric Obus), 1986, fiberglass, wood and metal, 48" x 42" x 22".
Photo: Roger Smith*

My favourite Bonham work is *Twentieth-Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality* (1993), a fantastic fusion of an MI-24 Hind helicopter with human limbs (six arms and six legs), a wooden wheel (circa the Dark Ages), and the skull of a horse. Bonham logged



Twentieth Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality, 1993, fiberglass, wood, and metal, 7' x 12' 6" x 5'. Photo: Roger Smith (Side view)

hundreds of hours in helicopters as a Marine, but the impulse behind the creation of this extraordinary sculpture was a shocking television image of starving Third World children juxtaposed with a group of Hind helicopters. Designed to attack tanks, vehicles, and any "soft" target on the ground, the formidable Ukrainian-built Hind is one of the fastest tactical and most expensive helicopters in the world. Bonham's surreal predatory chopper, which is seemingly capable of both flying and walking, speaks to this incongruity, the displacement of

bodies from the Third World by the globalization of modern technology and colonization by the rich industrialized nations.



Twentieth Century Technology Utilized by Third World Mentality, 1993, fiberglass, wood, and metal, 7' x 12' 6" x 5'. Photo: Roger Smith (Nose-to-tail view)

While most war monuments are dedicated to the brave sacrifice of war heroes, Bonham's activist anti-war art rather gives focus to the forgotten innocents who are tragically killed in unrecorded numbers during a war. In reference to *Monument for the Children of the 20th Century* (1998) he said, "I made a monument dedicated to all the children who starved or were lost in wars in the twentieth century. It's like a sarcophagus and it's cordoned off like those mini-monuments you see. We don't know how many millions of children were killed in



Monument for the Children of the 20th Century, 1997, fiberglass, metal, wood, mixed media, 66" X 72" X 72". Photo: Roger Smith

wars over the past century. There are some things that really irritate the shit out of me and killing innocent people always bothers me."

Another monument that Bonham created is *Unicyclist* (1988), which is a comment on forgetfulness in relation to war. As Bonham explained, "I had been driving through the little towns in Northern Ontario, many of which have concrete monuments. There was one monument dedicated to a cavalry outfit in the Boer War, but nobody in the area knew what it was about. How strange, I thought, how little Canadians know about their history. So, I decided to make a monument for no reason and that means nothing to make the point that

any country that fails to learn its history soon ceases to exist.”

Over his career as a sculptor, Bonham had one-person exhibitions in Chicago, New York City, Florida, Montreal and Toronto, among other places, and his work was included in numerous group shows across Canada, the United States and Europe, including at the Museum



Unicyclist, 1988, fiberglass and wood,
48" X 30" X 18"

of Modern Art in Paris. In 1997, he was awarded the Alex J. Ettl Grant from the National Sculpture Society for lifetime achievement as a sculptor.

While visiting Bonham at his home in the Hudson Valley in New York in preparation for his retrospective exhibition, I noticed a sign on one of

the walls in his studio. It read: "Not as Lean, Not as Mean, but still a Marine." And so it was that when the artist passed away in 2014, he was given the Military Funeral Honors ceremony, which included the folding and presentation of the American flag, the firing of three volleys

from rifles, and the playing of "Taps." He was laid to rest at the Orange County Veterans Cemetery in Goshen, New York,

where his gravestone identifies him as "beloved husband, father, sculptor, scholar, and Marine." After the funeral service, there was a big party in

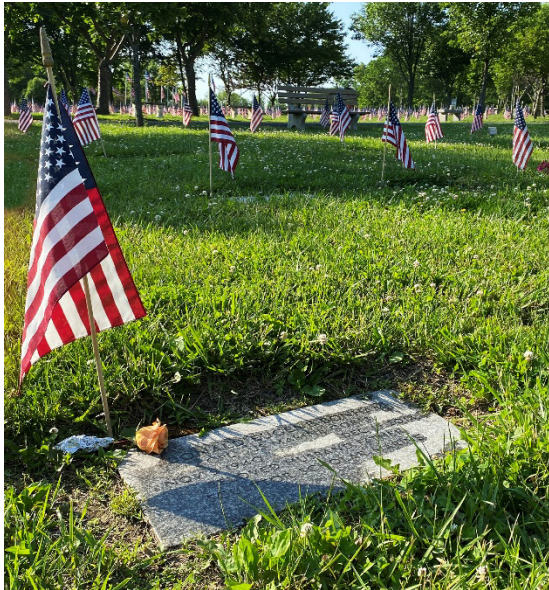
celebration of his life held in his Salisbury



Bonham's Funeral

Mills studio amidst his life's work and favourite music by Merle Haggard and The Persuasions.

Hunter S. Thompson wrote: "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside



Bonham's Gravesite

in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming 'Wow! What a Ride!'" Florence Ondré elaborated on Thompson's verse by adding "with chocolate in one hand, champagne in the other." Bonham's wife Lisa Jensen Bonham stated that her husband's choice would have been with a cigarette and a whiskey.

Terry Graff is a visual artist, curator, art educator, art writer, and a former director of four public art galleries in Canada. He has curated over 200 exhibitions and has authored numerous articles, catalogues, and books on both contemporary and historical art. In 2012, he curated the monumental retrospective exhibition Don Bonham RCA: Stranger in a Familiar Land. He is currently working on a major book on Bonham titled Stranger in a Familiar Land: The Irrepressible Art and Life of Don Bonham.