

CURATED



The Canadian artist's digital mockups include one that makes a polite request of prominent curator Beatrix Ruf, emblazoned atop the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.

VISUAL ART

# Are you there gods? It's me, Bill

A Canadian artist is beseeching the art world's curatorial heavyweights for a little intercession from above



SARAH MILROY

It-world fame is hard to come by, and some artists have even made works about that, from Andy Warhol's uber-glam society portraits (in which celebrity aura is siphoned from subject to artist and back again) to the Canadian conceptual-art trio General Idea, who enacted their own fabricated fame in a series of faux histories and artifacts so witty that their ersatz star power turned real.

Bill Burns, a soft-spoken Canadian artist based in Toronto, has been thinking about fame recently — and his relative lack thereof — and has been trying a more direct approach. If the international art world's leaders are elusive gods, with the powers to bestow good fortune and plenty with the wave of their curatorial wands, then why not appeal to these deities in the traditional way: through prayer. Yes, it may seem a tad excessive, but the art world works in mysterious ways,

with its own subtly shifting hagiography. One must be observant.

The series began earlier this year when Burns sent a digital mockup to celebrated London-based curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, whom he had met in Paris a decade ago. "He is one of those people who is always very gracious and responds with a little note every time you send him something," says Burns. "I think he does the work of 10 bears."

In bold capitals atop the Tate Modern, Burns had emblazoned the invocation: Hans Ulrich Obrist Priez Pour Nous. "It is a traditional Catholic prayer," says Burns, who grew up in a large Roman Catholic family in Saskatchewan — his francophone mother routinely led the family in their devotions — "and I thought the French gave it a certain *je ne sais quoi*."

His sign for the top of the Mass MoCA building — the site of the current *Oh, Canada* survey of contemporary Canadian art in North Adams, Mass. — is somewhat more blunt. It reads, simply: ADAM WEINBERG HELP ME. "I know that the director there is a friend of Adam Weinberg," Burns says, referring to the much-respected director of the Whitney

Museum in New York. "It's pretty Machiavellian." Likewise his appeal to Beatrix Ruf, *Watch Over Me*, emblazoned above the entrance to the Hamburger Bahnhof, "she's the new Obrist," Burns says. "Lots of energy." Even the deities, it seems, can be replaced.

Art-world survival is the aim. How to thrive in an ecosystem that, in Canada particularly, can be discouraging? Yet Burns is doing pretty well. He shows his work commercially in Toronto and Sao Paulo. And he has had exhibitions at the ICA London (where he showed his *Safety Gear for Small Animals* — a suite of miniature life vests, gas masks and other emergency supplies for environmentally beleaguered forest dwellers), and at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, where he recently showed *Bird Radio*, a project that invites the gallery-going public to interact with his extensive collection of mechanical bird calls, with the results broadcast on local radio. Communication is the aim.

Currently, Burns's museum signs exist only as electronic phantoms, but he is thinking about building a series of architectural scale models this fall, and does not rule out the possi-

bility of erecting a few atop the landmark buildings in question, should the opportunity present itself. As for his shout-out to MoMA director (and former AGO head) Glenn Lowry, which Burns has imagined dragged aloft behind an airplane, it's not out of the question. "I have made a few calls about it," Burns says.

It seems the Art Basel Miami Beach art fair in December might be the perfect venue. "I hear there's a lot of that kind of advertising down there — it's very common," he says, "and that might bring the cost down." As well, the mass migration of top-flight art professionals to those sunny shores seems auspicious.

But is Lowry likely to answer the call? After all, Burns did show his safety gear at MoMA back in 2006. "Well, so far he hasn't answered back," says Burns. But there's no harm in trying.

Bill Burns's *Veblen Goods* is on view as part of *Oh, Canada*, at Mass MoCCA, in North Adams, Mass., until April, 2013. *Bird Radio* will be on view at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon from Sept. 28. His new CD, *The Dogs and Boots and Airplanes Children's Choir*, launches Oct. 13 at 2 p.m. at Art Metropole, 1490 Dundas Street W., Toronto.

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Clockwise from left: Burns makes heartfelt pleas on the roof of Mass MoCA, in North Adams, Mass.; to MoMA director (and former AGO head) Lowry; and at the Tate Modern.