

Zen and the art of a motorcycle from hell



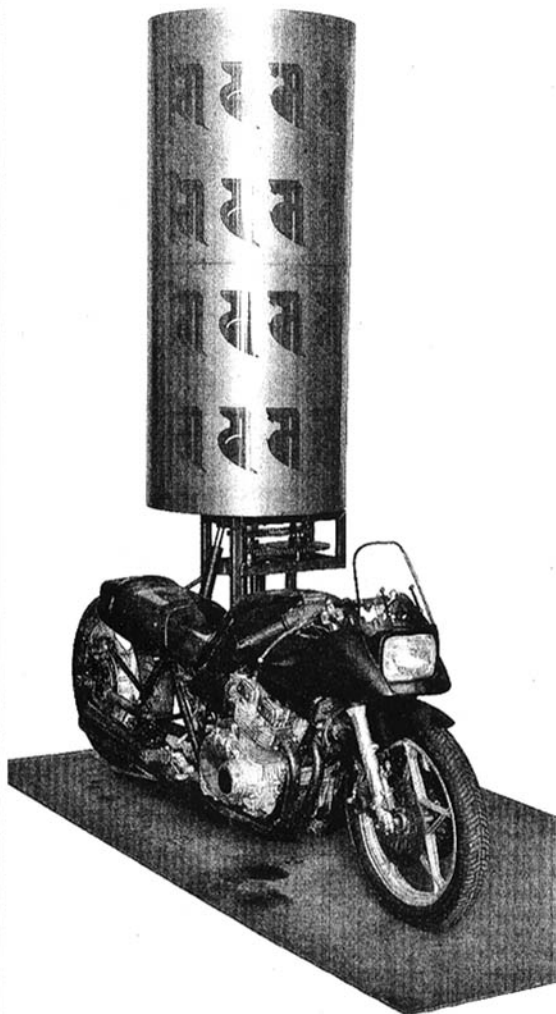
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**JOHN SCOTT AT NICHOLAS
METIVIER GALLERY**

\$3,000-\$85,000. Until July 26,
451 King St. W., Toronto,
416-205-9000

Throbbing darkly and menacingly at the heart of this latest exhibition by veteran Toronto-based painter/draughtsman John Scott is a prodigious construction called *Prayer Wheel*. Built on (and adjacent to) Scott's Suzuki Katana motorcycle, *Prayer Wheel* – superbly crafted for the artist by designer and virtuoso metal fabricator Steve Richards – is constructed so that when the motorcycle is fired up, it sets in motion a heavy, horizontally installed steel flywheel, the rapid spinning of which generates the torque needed to revolve a golden anodized aluminum cylinder mounted above the flywheel and rising three metres into the air. The cylinder is covered with large red characters, the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism, written in Sanskrit.

This is the prayer wheel – a huge, mechanized version of the traditional prayer wheel (called a Mani wheel by the Tibetans), which is a cylindrical casing used to hold multiple copies of the prayer *Om Mani Padme Hum* printed on thin sheets of paper lining the container. The spinning of the cyl-



John Scott's *Prayer Wheel* is constructed so that when the bike is fired up it powers the rotation of a golden cylinder.

inder invokes the blessings of Chenrezig, the embodiment of compassion. "The revolution of the wheel," Scott stresses, as we poke around the machine in Steve Richards's studio, "generates Buddha-consciousness in the world ... it releases a good spirit."

Most of Scott's exhibition – which is titled *Event Horizon* and is now at Toronto's Nicholas Metivier Gallery – features the artist's vigorous trademark drawings: rough, passionate, sometimes violently agitated images on paper, frequently made either as a caustic critiquing of the dark machinations of the military-industrial complexes of the world (night-black aircraft, for example, threatening our well-being – as in *Raven* and *Dogfight*), or as beneficent visual hymns to the sufferings of a powerless humanity (as in the darkly humorous *Split Hare*, for example, or the wrenching *Making and Unmaking*, or the grim, blood-red *War Child*).

There are also a number of drawings – as there were in his last exhibition – of a strange, coal-black figure, clearly a military man (you can tell from his tricorne hat) who looks like Napoleon, but who Scott says is actually Nelson. These are the *Dark Commander* drawings, and they seem to be about the embodiment of despotic power (the figure is always as dense and dark and inescapable as a black hole).

But the drawings – as raw and persuasive as they undeniably are – seem inescapably peripheral to the haunting presence of the towering, rather fearsome *Prayer Wheel*. As it stands – majestic and troubling in equal measure – the

machine, which Scott sees as essentially about entropy and endings, is his attempt to crystallize an image of "the breakdown, in our time, of any meaningful religious belief system. I guess it was also about my trying to find images – like the dying internal combustion engine – as emblems of how things are generally in decline."

Steve Richards – who was once a student of Scott's at the Ontario College of Art and Design – estimates that *Prayer Wheel*, which was a couple of months in development, took him almost 100 hours to fabricate. The chassis and frame of Scott's Katana have been elongated, the front forks lowered. The body has been refinished – in a sinister, matte-black, wrinkle-finish paint.

The whole construction – motorcycle, gears, flywheel and prayer-wheel cylinder – sits in a heavy, 1.5-metre by 3-metre steel plate – "to keep everything from flying apart," says Richards. It looks demonic.

But how can the machine's slightly creepy, motorcycle-from-hell aura be squared with the centrifugal compassion generated and expressed by the spinning prayer wheel? In essence, it can't. Except to say this: As Scott originally envisioned the work – and one of the drawings in the show attests to this – the spinning prayer wheel was supposed to be hauled behind the motorcycle – a kind of spiritualized trailer.

As such it was to be eternally in motion: "I saw it travelling from one town to another," Scott says, "moving through desolation, endlessly praying."