



Vulture Notes and Ruminations
By Gary Carlson

Before picking apart the vulture I should probably comment on some of the text being overly conflagulatory. I try to keep the tangential stuff to a minimum (one day I was trying so hard I thought I was sweating blood, but it turned out to be grenadine on my shirt cuff). Regardless, I was engaged in a (failed) campaign to stay on point but then Jenny Madia (celebrity minx-about-town) was in my bar one night demurely downing a few growlers of Newcastle and said she had been to the site and "...read all the text twice, but not compulsively." So that was that. Onward.

Early in the design of this piece I knew I wanted a softball for the head. It was the right size, bald and I could see (in my mind) that the stitching could be a brow ridge as well as a mouth line. I didn't want a real hostile, angry look, just a suspiciously cunning gaze. I found that it didn't matter that the stitch line extended; if it was correct where it met the eyes and beak the frown was accomplished and the line could wander off anywhere it wanted.

I assumed that finding a softball would be the absolute least of my problems in building this piece. Not so, as I found out after visiting three "sporting goods" stores. Most of the stock in these places is shoes, selling for the kind of money I ordinarily pay for a car. I did find some softballs but they were green – almost florescent lime green. Store staff was not particularly hip on softball-ology but I was able to distill the idea that green softballs are for girls and retards (don't shoot the messenger here – I'm only reporting) and regular old white balls are for men's leagues, which there aren't any of anymore. After about a month (Persistence was my middle name before I had it legally changed) I found white softballs at Dick's Sporting Goods, which is a very nice big store, especially if you need footgear.

I like the cartoonish renditions of lawyers as vultures so it was a natural to use pinstripe suitcoat arms as wings. I sawed the forms out of light plywood, leaving very distinct peaks at the top (you know how perching vultures always have their wings kind of hunched up). The body is a small version of those trash containers you used to see in public places where part of the top swings in and out and says "PUSH" on it. The wings were to be attached to the swinging part because I needed the more solid front to mount the

neck and head. I wanted the wings to hang fairly close to vertical so I needed to put some curve into them. Weight was a consideration everywhere so I used light steel strap to hold the curve. I got the curve by putting the forms in a very big bar clamp and screwing in the jaws, causing the form to bow. Then I hammered out the same curve in the straps and screwed them in lengthwise (grinding off the screw overage). The strap kept the plywood from unflexing and I had my curve. I soldered a short bolt near the top of the strap for attachment, put the bolt through a hole at the right spot for the hunched-up look and put a nut loosely on the inside. Gravity (what would we do without it?) makes the wings hang naturally and the two of them equalize the flapper thingy so no edge is sticking out.

I am more of a designer/technician than an artist (which is better than being more of a pompous charade than an artist) but I did have a brush with greatness while building VULTURE. It happened when I was splattering white paint on one of the rocks for bird poop. I said to myself "Jesum Crow! This is how Jackson Pollock felt when he was slinging paint all over the place." But then I realized that I was aiming the paint for a purpose and the moment passed. Easy come, easy go.

I have a piece of wooded property where most of the trees were sawed off at a height of 20 feet or less back in the 80's, to secure an approach to a military runway. Those were the days, huh? – when all we had to worry about was commie infiltration. (WOLVERINES!) Most of the cut off trees died so there are many, many tall dead stumps and branches. This makes for woodpecker paradise and I have every Northeast variety living there, including the occasional pileated.

Now, as far as birdwatching is concerned, the lowliest chickadee is well worth your attention but the pileated woodpecker is a truly magnificent bird. Big bird. Big Woody-the-Woodpecker hairdo. I had a chance to watch one at work through 20X binoculars (they are very shy). You may think that an oversize bird with a huge pecker can really demolish a rotted tree and you are right. So many chunks of wood came flying off it looked like he was dealing cards.

So I have a good selection of old dead stumps to choose from for a vulture perch. I set up a ladder and sawed one off and soaked it in bleach to give it a more ghostly appearance and to de-bug it. I wanted the windswept desert look on a small scale. Then I got a similar looking branch for the horizontal actual perch and pegged it into the vertical stump. All of this had to be very solid and geometrically right (branch extending level and straight) because the whole vulture sculpture had to be fixed on a 1 1/2" surface. The feet, of course, are the points of attachment and they carry all the weight and maintain the position and they are the most complicated part of this piece. To make them I measured the maximum depth of each glove finger (3 3/4", 4 1/4", etc) and cut pieces of copper tubing 2" longer than each finger. I hammered the extra 2" flat and soldered each finger (and thumb) to a piece of flat steel about the size of a credit card. After some snipping and grinding I could slide the fingers all the way into the glove, pull it tight and clamp everything in place with epoxy. So then I had a relatively flat "platform" (hammered flat,

remember) that I could drill and screw into the horizontal branch and then drill and screw the flat base of the vulture body into the platform. Only then did I bend the fingers around the branch to look like a grip and apply the tres chic claws.

I think the beak is what really makes this piece work. I looked at about a hundred (no kidding) plastic jugs before I spied one with a nice pooched-up curve at the top of the handle. It was liquid laundry detergent so I started washing clothes with it to empty the jug. Big mistake. I like perfume about as much as cats like vacuum cleaners and it turns out it was apple-mango-strawberry detergent and it was like washing clothes in fruit salad. Outdoors, bees attacked and dogs ran away (even pitbulls). We started washing bar mops in it and stunk up the whole building. Yes, I know. Artists are supposed to suffer, but cutting off an ear is chump change compared to what I went through. I would give you more details but Dr. Bhutbiter says I should try to block it.

Anyhow, I got a good beak out of it. I practiced a couple times on some other plastic jugs and started cutting the real one with a heavy-duty scalpel. The jug was injection-molded plastic and the parting line was much thicker than the rest of the material, which made it difficult to make a smooth cut. (The parting line is where the two halves of the mold meet and runs the length of the center of the handle.) So I made a rough big approximate cut and did a little trimming and fitting and a little more trimming and fitting. The problem was pulling the blade through the thick parting line into the thinner areas without making a big gougey miscut. (During my years as a part-time brain surgeon I learned that carefree gouging and slicing may have devastating consequences.) I got the beak to fit up nicely to the contour of the ball and the stitching line accentuated the somewhat frownish look. (I say again: that stitching line can really add character to a face if the eyes and mouth are correctly placed upon it. I think it's the most important element of this piece.) Attachment is a piece of cue stick that I bandsanded to fit inside of and be flush with the "perimeter" of the beak. I glued it inside of the beak and then epoxied it in place on the ball.

Eyes were fairly easy to make. I glued small orange buttons onto larger white buttons and ground them into about the same curvature as the stitching. This was easy because the diameter of my grinding wheel is close to the diameter of a softball so I just ran the buttons into the wheel straight and perpendicular and the curve was automatically there. I did have to lap the orange irises on emery paper to degloss them; if they're real shiny they won't appear to focus. Now they not only focus, they seem to follow you as you pass by, like those novelty pictures of Jesus or Elvis. So the vulture is in good company.