



Frankenbambi - Notes and Ruminations
By Gary Carlson

Sometimes there are immensely disappointing moments in the creation of a piece of studio craft. It gets finished and it just doesn't work. It doesn't engage. All the sketches and notes and work turn into ashes right before your eyes and there's nothing to be done about it.

But the cosmic scales seem to balance and sometimes there are immensely satisfying moments when it seems like unknown forces have conspired to lead you into unexpected territory and that territory is the promised land.

I had a good moment like that when I was building Frankenbambi. More specifically, when I was building Frankenbambi's neck. I wanted something more than just a post to hold the head. I wanted something with a little twist and a little hump. (Salute to Marty Feldman as Igor: "What hump?") And I wanted something that looked like it had been resurrected from the dead.

So I got a piece of black locust (locust trees have quite a tendency to twist and corkscrew their branches). It was well-dried but still covered with bark, which was very tenacious. I couldn't make any progress with a hatchet or pick. I had used a 6" belt sander on Frankenbambi's head and snoutal area but that wouldn't work on a big twisty piece of wood. Still, sanding seemed to be the only way to get rid of the bark. So I put a 36 grit "flapper disk" in my grinder, held my breath and pulled the trigger. (This grinder has horsepower like a GTO and I had no idea what kind of control I would have when it bit into wood.)

Yikes. Yeow. The bark disappeared. I made long smooth sweeps and the bark just vaporized. This is what happens when the hounds of hell are unloosed with industrial-rated Hitachi angle grinders. Then came that good moment I was speaking of earlier. As the bark disappeared, longitudinal striations appeared, with color variation and swirly paths around old partially healed insect borings. It still looked like a tree branch but it also looked like the musculature of a skinned animal. I immediately saw that some of the bug borings (with mutant bark inside them) would be left as scabs and others would be filled with tufts of fur. And one nice full-length line was just begging for a row of stitches. There it all was. Bark dust was still in the air and I knew that I had my neck.

Now, I knew Frankenbambi was going to be horrible and gruesome to the point where it should not be viewed by pregnant women or women who may become pregnant. Nonetheless, I wanted to evoke a little sympathy, a little compassion for the demented creature (as Mary Shelley did for the original). So I tried to place the head on a very slight cant; about 5 degrees, like the dog will do when you say “Good boy. You can have a Milk Bone tomorrow.” This was a tough, tough cut, requiring a compound bevel because the neck was not a straight up-and-down column. I had to do an extensive review of my fifth-grade plane geometry lessons to get a line scribed around the diameter. The line was a wild deviation from what I would have intuitively eyeballed (and I’m pretty good at that) but one has to trust science so I got a very long blade for my Sawzall and carefully followed the mark. It was a nervous cut. If the angle wasn’t correct I would have to start from scratch on a new neck and I really liked the neck I had (see paragraph 5).

It turned out just the way I had visualized it. I got lucky but I would have debarked and sawed ten locust branches to get what I wanted. A coat of amber shellac turned it into what one of my old-time art instructors would have called a “feelie” – something you want to run your hands over. But I reckon some scabs and hair tufts will put that idea to bed.

This piece is loaded with tricks. They just kept on coming as I designed it. The snout is the front part of a raccoon skull except the lower jaw is a pelvis/spinal column of a bird. The original raccoon skull has a mechanically wonderful rocking peg socket that is a pure joy to see but I needed to get rid of some of the skull appearance so it would pass as a snout. To help this along I used a jelly bean for a nose and sparked out two front teeth (get it? Buck teeth). Then I found a nicely shaped toothbrush handle for the little tongue. (All this bone cutting and grinding was the worst part of building this piece. It aroused very strong memories of being in a dentist’s chair. I also caught a dose of Mad Cow disease but fought it off by thinking only positive thoughts: half a brain is better than none, etc.)

I had the ears right from the start. Years ago I noticed these little “candle flame” light bulbs and knew that I would use them for ears on something someday. Getting them into costume was a little dicey. I cut two notches on opposite sides of the rim of a paint can top; the plastic cap you struggle to remove from the can. I laid the light bulb in this little cradle and gave it one sweep of “Ballerina Slipper” pink paint. The cradle kept the bulb from rolling around when the paint propellant hit it. After half an hour I gave the bulb a half turn and shot it a few times with brown paint. I wanted the whole ear to be a little translucent and I wanted the light bulbs to remain recognizable as light bulbs.

Much has been made of the abnormal brain the creature got stuck with so I thought we’d better have a look at it. I found that packing peanuts make a pretty serviceable brain when you drift a little paint over them and squish them together a bit (not much paint – it dissolves the foam). So I bored a 2 1/8” hole, stuffed in the brain, cut a clear plastic circle and tacked down the edge, giving myself enough margin to cover the tacks with fur. I used longish, darkish fake fur over the top of the head and brain (you remember Boris Karloff’s

haircut) and shorter brown fur for the sides and front. The front is a one-piece “mask” to accentuate the eyes and I used a torch to sizzle down the fur there so it wouldn’t be so fluffy. It’s good to have a supply of toy stuffed animals on hand for these projects to give you some fur or skin variety to work with. A few dollars at a second-hand store will get you a whole menagerie but you’ll want to keep them secured because dingos (they are such pests!) tend to run off with them.

The design called for antique crystal ball lamp finials for eyes and I built the sockets to receive them. The splotches of light they refracted moved as the viewer or the light source moved and gave the head an illusion of animation. But as the piece got close to finished I began to have doubts. The eyes were too strong. They overpowered other design elements and fragmented the piece into (1) the eyes and (2) everything else. It’s a rare thing to change a major design feature late in the game but I could see that the lamp finials would have to go.

So here’s what I did: Drilled ½” holes in ¼” Plexiglas and put a big chamfer on the hole, kind of like a meteor crater. Cut oversize squares out of the sheet with the holes in the middle and rounded the squares into circles on a belt sander. It’s much easier than you’d think to sand or grind a piece of Plexiglas (or wood, or anything) into a visually if not geometrically round disk. A light touch on the abrasive will tell you where the high spots are. So then I had disks with a chamfered hole through the center (I drilled the hole first because the ground-down piece would be too small to hold onto, find center and drill). Then I glued translucent brown marbles into the “nest” made by the chamfer. These disks with marble centers went right into the holes I’d bored for the lamp finials and the marble/Plexi combination gave them some lifelike sparkle. (Clear Plexiglas is a wonderful material in many ways, one of which is its transportation of light in that it acts somewhat like fiberoptic material. Light can enter the edge of Plexiglas and show up at the middle or bounce back from a hole in the middle through the whole surface. That’s why the brown marbles have such a lively effect.)

Labels or titles can be important (if this piece didn’t say FRANKENBAMBI you might think it was roadkill mounted on a base – an interesting idea now that I think about it). I used fairly heavy paper with a little tooth (such as for pastel work) and lined in the Olde English style letters with a pencil. It’s supposed to look like calligraphy, which I can’t do, so I needed to disguise it somewhat. For that I used an old technique called “smoke graining,” where you hold a candle under the piece to be decorated and move the flame up and down and side to side. The soot from the flame will produce ethereal random overlapping shapes or figures, some lighter, some darker, and the effect is always subtle and mysterious. This label isn’t big enough to get hardcore mysterious with but the sooty forms give it some age and character (and none but the chosen few who read this will guess how it’s done). I gave the label a couple coats of shellac for extra body and it lays out nicely on the base.

There was one point with this piece when serendipity came banging on the door. That was when I'd changed the eyes and saw the forlorn look they gave him (no more frolicking through the daffodils for this guy). I just happened to notice a couple pieces of drool left over from the making of "Black Lagoon" and held one up against the left eye, like a teardrop. Oh boo-hoo-hoo. It was so sad. I fired up the hot glue gun and made more tears, got one I liked and glued it in place. It was the finishing touch I had never even thought of.