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Artist builds on Anabaptist background to dream of yesterday's tomorrows today

By **Tim Huber**

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WICHITA, Kan. — A rocket-powered scooter is taking shape in Randy Regier's downtown studio.

A good deal of the rear half is made from some old fenders he bought from a fellow up the road in Goessel. The rocket — being fabricated by a rocket builder in Oregon — will be added last.

The artifact is the world's first rocket scooter, a prototype pieced together at the deadline for a trade show decades ago.

But in reality it's the product of an artist who works in the space between fact and fiction. The rocket scooter will function, but only look old.

Like all Regier's works, it's art with a fictional backstory that's genuine. In his quest for authenticity, he's leaving himself and his collaborator only two days to piece the scooter's two halves together.

He's not sure what will happen, but the result will be better — and more real — than refining it well ahead of time.

Regier has built a few larger works: [a spaceship](#) once, and a somewhat itinerant [NuPenny toy store](#) that never opens. But a bulk of his art takes the form of toys — and packaging — that appear to be from an earlier golden era of robots, spaceships, cars, jets and action figures.

His background in auto body work makes for a collection of whimsical robots and vehicles that can stand on their own simply in terms of craftsmanship. But much deeper forces are in play — themes of imperialism, promises broken, consumption and the American dream.

"My toys are no more about toys than the Trojan Horse is about ponies," he said.

Instead, they are a medium Regier uses to seek a place. For the moment, he's "comfortably in exile in Kansas" after a life spent between Nebraska, Oregon, Maine and Spain.

"Spaceships have to do with travel and exploration," he said. "I grew up in a very agrarian culture — no television. It wasn't *verboten*, we just didn't need it."

He said robots and spaceships allowed his imagination to travel in a way Scripture didn't.

"They can explore, and a big part of childhood is play-acting, experimenting with what you want to do as an adult," he said. "They allow the imagination to travel."

Anabaptist themes

Those ideas, and the boundaries necessary to define them, have Anabaptist links. Regier is drawn to a Mennonite

tension of being perpetually outside power structures yet still having agency and power by virtue of being American. Even if he doesn't use it, his nation and its actions give him an advantage.

"When I went to this master of fine arts program in Maine, some of the things they talked about in art classes are very Anabaptist ideas," he said. "How do we be part of the world without being part of the military structure? How do you contribute in a meaningful way without taking from others? How do I add to the world without stripping away from someone else?"

He uses found objects not because of a monetary issue, but because it just seems better. He prefers "to get the maximum meaning from the least amount of materials."

Parts of an old salon hair dryer sit behind two-thirds of his late father Richard's [1951 Chevrolet truck](#). (The former Mennonite pastor was restoring it when he passed away recently, and Regier is finishing it.) Bejeweled shower hooks hang like a chain nearby, waiting to become tiny tail lights. Egg beaters, film projectors and metal housings for a menagerie of earlier times sit carefully arranged on shelves, waiting their turns to be reincarnated.

"It's not junk. Junk doesn't have potential," Regier said. "All these pieces have an industrial integrity. We don't have that anymore, and what we do make only has one use... . My work has this sort of historical integrity because it's built into the source material."

(More on Regier's historical emphasis: "[Historical Details Are Artist's Obsession](#).")

Promises broken

The toys — [curvaceous rocket ships](#), "[Electronic Man Waiting for Train](#)," a [once-gleaming metal atomic oceanliner sunk and lost in a pond for a year](#) — are only part of the product. The antique-looking packaging and advertisements tell the story, sometimes selling something far different than the pieces within.

"The boxes make a promise. The toys either show how the promise is broken or fulfilled," he said.

"American consumer culture and militarism is about promises made. And the results of these promises never satisfy or ease the ache that led to the promise to begin with. And you go, 'Aw man, this doesn't fix it.'

"Growing up I was never told a theology that achieving a certain status or buying something would ease something... . The only thing that will do that is to pursue something spiritual or communal."

A prime example, what Regier calls his most Anabaptist work, is "[American Battery-Using Astronaut](#)." The piece is designed to use seven batteries at once. It exists to consume.

"That's about as Mennonite as a robot gets," he said. "That came out of an NPR essay about how we Americans are 5 percent of the population but use something like 80 percent of the resources. That robot is about stewardship... .

"I don't make the work thinking about my Anabaptist origins, but I can't make it without my Anabaptist origins."

Ancestral influences

Those origins influence his medium and his message. His ancestors came to Whitewater in south central Kansas searching for freedom. His grandfather Harry E. Dirks, of Newton, worked at Hesston Manufacturing. Another

grandfather, Wilbert Arnold Regier, taught at Grace Bible Institute in Nebraska before being a minister at Mennonite churches in Pratum and Dallas, Ore. His father, Richard, was also an Oregon Mennonite pastor in Hubbard and Salem.

That ministerial legacy left an imprint on Regier. He cannot simply fabricate an item to cash a check. There has to be meaning, something more.

“I put these things in the public eye and hope to address my fears and limitations, and that’s not so different from what a minister does,” he said.

A childhood spent in church circles also influences what he will and won’t do with his art. He’s never made a war toy.

“They have been about war or came out of war, but I don’t think I’ve ever incorporated a gun or cannon,” he said. “I couldn’t have war toys as a kid.

“I got some of those ubiquitous green Army men from a kid at school, and dad said I could have them, but he disapproved because war is not a game, so I had to play with them in secret.”

As a child during the Vietnam War, he often heard radio reports of bombings, casualties and the horrors of war. Seven-year-old Regier processed that information surreptitiously, aware even then of his little bits of symbolic plastic.

“Walter Benjamin said toys are the ways kids find the rhythm of being adults,” Regier said. “We enact the adult world as we perceive it, and we do it in our scale, whether it’s dolls or war toys or Monopoly. So toys are never outside the scope of the world.”

For more visit Regier’s [website](#) and [Flickr page](#). Also see: “[Historical Details Are Artist’s Obsession.](#)”

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