

## New York Art World ®

### **Panamarenko at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts**

by Donald Goddard © 2005

A few days ago about 70,000 slum dwellings near the airport in Mumbai, India, were cleared to make way for less objectionable landscaping in an up-and-coming city. So horribly uprooted, presumably most people and families still managed to save their possessions, in bags and such, but the effect was stunning, something like that of war. The objective realities of personal histories were destroyed, if not the histories themselves.

Panamarenko seems to work from a similar place, where everything is devised from ideas and materials at hand, perhaps in constant awareness of displacement by clearance, by war as it is imposed in the name of a better world. That program is relentlessly pursued in various guises, through ideologies and scenarios of dominance and progress, but, of course, reality, or at least practicality, including Panamarenko, lies elsewhere. Everything is at hand, and it could be the task of any human being to know as much about everything, or something, as possible. In fact, we know a great deal, if only for the sake of survival. But beyond that promising start, we continue mostly by rote, making pictures of what we already know. The only pictures Panamarenko makes are drawings and prints of objects and devices he is planning or has already constructed to provide us, and him, with various means for moving through the air or across the earth or water. He commands the means for his own displacement.

The devices themselves are profoundly material, composed of tape, wood, plastic, glue, string, electronic chips, Styrofoam, linen, wire, rubber bands, leather, fishing net, cellophane, copper, PVC, batteries, paint, and often motors of various kinds to get them to work. They are as profoundly ideational, meant to fulfill certain thoughts about movement and flight and to exploit certain physical forces, including magnetism, gravity, air and water movements, solar energy. They are also illusionary in their alluding to birds, insects, and fish, and in the expectation that they will actually work, which they do in theoretically, and at times in practice. And so they remain material but approach immateriality, a state of lightness and transparency, like the wings of *Flip the Fruitfly (A)*, on which strokes of green paint have the feeling of writing on water.

People are not designed to do many things that we have nonetheless figured out how to do, like flying and staying under water for long periods of time. Other animals do those things much better and are therefore exposed and adapted to parts of the world and the experience of life as we can never be, except as Panamarenko would take us there, sometimes as individuals with jets in our backpack (*Rucksack*, 1984-85) or propellers on our shoulders (*Pepto Bismo*, 1996-2002) to intimately explore the contours

of the Alps, sometimes as two or more passengers wending our way through the world in constant contact with the medium through which we are passing. *Knikkebeen* shows something like an enormous chicken that walks us with giant steps into a landscape as old as itself, a landscape we have been in all along.

Most of the works in the exhibition appear to be almost weightless, or are about to become so, except for the two painted bronze life-size male figures in the North Gallery, which in the dance-like unease of their weight contradict the shoulder propellers (*Pepto Bismo*, 2002) and long, tapered wings (*Brazil*, 2004) that should lift them. The first, helmeted and off-balance, is like a skate-boarder. The latter, inspired by the avenging, yearning, loving angel in the futuristic movie *Brazil*, is like a caped superhero with wings. He is also compromised and unsteady, a contradictory combination of the two sides of America's Civil War, with his black great coat and the Confederate insignia on his cap. He seems to fall forward, as though either landing or taking off, but is too heavy to go anywhere, and his feet are bolted to the pedestal. Despite its costumed playfulness, the figure cannot rise above its inner conflicts.

Early in his career, Panamarenko declared himself a multimillionaire and a competitor, with the Soviet Union and the United States, in the race into space, although his ambitions were grander than theirs. The sky is the place of superheros, of Apollo and Zeus, of Vishnu and Siva, Quetzalcoatl, and Snoopy (imaginatively) in his goggles, of heaven and God almighty. It goes on forever and touches every place on earth, and so it must be attainable. The earth itself is an occupant of the sky, and the *Vliegend Eiland* (*Flying Island*) is another earth, beautifully formed and perhaps superfluous, like humankind itself, a flying saucer on which the passengers are exposed to the universe in a plastic bubble on top.

In his introduction to a recent book on Panamarenko's work, Jon Thompson cites the adage that a Belgian is born with a brick in his stomach. The artist was born in Antwerp in 1940, the year that Nazi Germany occupied his country, and he has lived there since. He is there, with the bricks, and he is everywhere else. It is the definition of an artist.