

Life out of sync with Valley-guy

artist Vallance

From the wilds of Canoga Park, he pursues life of an artist/adventurer

By Hunter Drohojowska
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Blinky died — or was murdered — in 1979. Jeffrey Vallance, who bought Blinky in the poultry section of his local Ralphs, then proceeded to the L.A. Pet Cemetery in Calabasas. Blinky was left in the car, while Vallance told the mortician that he wanted to bury his dead bird. After filling out the forms, and ordering a head stone, he paid them almost \$300 in cash. "I sent the mortician to the car to pick up Blinky who was in a shoebox," explains Vallance. "He took Blinky to the back room and after a few minutes, came back, his face white. He only asked one question. 'How did your bird die?' I told him, 'I don't know exactly how it died.' Which was true.

"Blinky was laid out in a powder blue casket with pink satin lining, funeral flowers and a pink spotlight," Vallance continues. "Even though Blinky didn't have a head, they set the chicken up in such a way that if a head had been there, it would have been resting on the pillow. I liked that part because it was a creative decision they had to make."

Maybe this is what happens to artists who grow up in the hinterlands of Canoga Park, like Vallance: They wind up with a purview that is slightly out of sync with the rest of the world. A lifetime of watching the game from the sidelines.

There are artists who choose their role models from the pantheon of Rembrandt, Ingres, Picasso, Duchamp or Rothko. But not Vallance. His would more likely be the artist who traveled with Captain Cook in the 18th century, exploring the South Seas, documenting the foreign animals and natives. In fact, Vallance, 29, went last year to the islands originally explored by Captain Cook, in search of Tiki and its origins. This year, it was a different trip: two weeks in Reykjavik, Iceland, followed by five months in Origgio, Switzerland.

Vallance chose Iceland because it was at the opposite end of the world from the South Pacific.

He got off the airplane at Reykjavik and immediately posed a profound question to himself: "What am I doing here?" Iceland, according to Vallance, is cold, barren and covered with volcanic ash. Dogs are prohibited by law and the only surviving trees are protected by barriers for warmth. The island's population is 213,000, smaller than the West Valley.

Vallance ate pickled herring for breakfast; slept at the Salvation Army Guest House and Home for Retired Fishermen; visited the president and the Soviet Embassy; drank at the Kontiki bar; and drew the pictures which are currently on view at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

"I'm trying to give you a feeling of what it was like being there with out using a photograph," Vallance offers, attempting to explain both his purpose and process. "Artists used to go with the explorers and that's a big influence for me. But now when I get there, they already have snack bars and heavy industry. I'm going through the steps of an explorer but it's been explored, and commercialized. So I explore it anyway. You find the same symbols of a primitive culture but also things that just don't belong. Like a disco in Reykjavik, decorated in country-western style. It has nothing to do with anything that has ever been in Iceland. So discovery is in the incongruities."

Vallance, dressed in a long tweed overcoat, his round face accentuated by gold wire-rimmed glasses, blond hair neatly combed and trimmed, looks the part of the anthropologist/artist. He carries a briefcase full of books on heraldry, maps, souvenirs and flags — all sources for his art. He has painted an enormous map of Iceland on the gallery wall. Swiss flags dangle from the ceiling, and heraldic cantons — shields representing various areas of Switzerland — have been altered by Vallance. A rearing bear — symbol for the city of Bern — has been changed to one

of the artist's typical bristly dogs. The ambiguous red dart between the bear's legs is now an obvious penis, as it was originally, a Germanic symbol of strength.

Vallance's drawings offer a visual diary of his Iceland visit, less in the style of Audubon than a child's records of a field trip. Sketches of artifacts from the collection at the National Gallery are surrounded by the stuff of everyday life in Reykjavik. For instance, the Norse deity Thor — god of thunder — is placed in the center of one page, bordered by labeled renderings of a milk carton, a squid, the volcano Hekla, a Viking sword, a barnacle and a weird round thing labeled "snakur."

"It's their version of a snake, but there were no snakes in Iceland at all," he says. "The myth was brought by the Vikings. The artists could make up whatever they wanted since they didn't know what a snake looked like."

Vallance speaks slowly, with a slight Valley accent (he still lives in Canoga Park) and a peculiar attention to every word. He explains mixing imagery from the ancient past with the symbols of contemporary life. "I'm comparing it to the fact that there is no avant-garde art anymore. Everything has been done, discovered already, so what else can you do?"

This statement connects Vallance to a diverse group of younger artists who are interested in history and styles of art from the past. Under the aegis of post-modernism many feel they can excavate like cultural anthropologists, taking the symbols and myths of the past and giving them new meaning in the present.

"It's something I've done my whole life. Before the travels, I was dealing with the incongruities of this society, looking at our symbols: television, in advertising, in politics."

Since Vallance was a young boy, he has been writing letters to important national and international figures ... and getting answers. It's a way of slipping behind appearances. Before going to Iceland, Vallance wrote to President Vigdis Finnbogadottir.

A text mounted in the gallery describes his visit in the pouring rain. *"All sopping wet ... when I stepped through the door, everyone turned and gasped in amazement. President Finnbogadottir was walking down the hall holding some files, and for a moment froze in her tracks. Then she scurried off to her office."*

"Straightaway, an official came up to me and asked me what I wanted. I said, 'I have something to show the President.' I reached into my soaking overcoat and pulled out my drawing pad. At this point, they became very concerned. ... Immediately, I was ushered into the office of Halldor Reynisson, Secretary to the President. I sat down in a small leather chair facing his massive desk and opened my drawing pad, exposing drawings of wiggling, squirming serpents and Nordic gods. He looked at the drawings, then he looked at me, then he looked at the drawings again,

then he looked at me and dryly said, 'The President can see you next week.' ... I said to Mr. Reynisson, 'Next week I will not be in Iceland.' That was the end of the interview."

Vallance mailed the president a portrait he had drawn of her.

Some people know they are artists from a very early age and Vallance comes from a family with artistic proclivities. His father made models of campsites complete with small tents and tiny pots and pans. His Norwegian grandfather and his mother made folk art. By the age of 5, Vallance was drawing the reptiles and dogs that still populate his

drawings. At 10, he built an astonishingly accurate replica of the spooky mansion occupied by TV's Addams family. He sent a photo of his creation to cartoonist Charles Addams, who returned a thank-you note with a drawing of the character Wednesday.

"I think getting such a good response at an early age showed me I could do things, like write letters and get replies."

Vallance launched a veritable campaign of correspondence. In 1976, he sent a series of souvenir figurines: a Col. Sanders' statuette to the fried-chicken mogul, a donkey to Hubert Humphrey, and an elephant to Strom Thurmond. Per his request, all were autographed and returned. Between 1967 and 1974, he wrote regularly to Oscar Mayer with promotional and managerial suggestions. That penpal period resulted in a hefty collection of wiener paraphernalia, from whistles to cufflinks, and an afternoon ride with Little Oscar in the Wienermobile.

In 1978, during his senior year at Cal State Northridge, he wrote to all the U.S. senators asking them for a drawing of something they liked and a statement about art. Thirty wrote back. "William Proxmire did an abstract design, Sen. Birch Bayh drew an ice cream cone."

This was followed by one of Vallance's most ambitious endeavors, during the years he was working on a master of fine arts at Otis/Parsons: sending neckties to chiefs

of state the world over and requesting one of theirs in return. "Cultural Ties" generated articles in US and Oui magazines and all of the local newspapers.

"You read about these personalities in the newspapers and magazines, so you get a certain opinion from journalism," says Vallance. "I wanted to bring out a different side of their personality. Art is not a subject they would usually get, so their response brings out a side unavailable, and you get insights into their personalities. You learn another dimension. It helps me understand who these people are. But it's non-partisan. I want to bring out both sides, so it has more to do with humanism than politics."

Through his letters, his voyages and his exchanges, Vallance has cast himself as a cultural ambassador, the way the 16th-century Flemish painter Rubens was sent as diplomatic envoy to Spain and England. Vallance's goals are different from Rubens, and he hasn't been knighted by Charles I, but he is accepted by the contemporary equivalent of a court — representation in numerous exhibitions, positive reviews in art magazines, a spot on David Letterman, and soon, a show at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York. (He also published a memoir about Blinky called "Blinky the Friendly Hen"; it has become a collector's item.)

With a naivete of the most sophisticated kind, Vallance describes our influence on other cultures and searches out original meanings of cliches. His ideas for art — whether tracing myths from the South Pacific or uncovering the people behind the public personalities — seem humorous and off-the-wall because they collide with the expected and the quotidian, the world that we know by rote.

When Vallance went to the island of Aitutaki, he researched the legends behind Tiki, the island deity who had long since devolved to whimsical decoration. "Symbols in society have lost their power and been corrupted. Polynesian gods become a motif; heraldry in Switzerland, originally identifying soldiers in battle, are modern graphics on license plates and packaging. I'm bringing those symbols out where they have a new meaning. In studying another culture, as any anthropologist knows, you learn about your own culture, as well."

When Vallance returned from the South Pacific, he demonstrated how Western culture had altered Tiki, a potent fertility god, to use him as a novelty torch for backyard barbecues. He created tikis of his own — a surfboard tiki and one



Standing before a map of Iceland is Jeffrey Vallance, who, like many other post-modernists, has rifled through past myths and given them new meaning. A trip to the island of Aitutaki (combined, presumably, with an admiration for newscaster Connie Chung) inspired "Connie-Tiki," above. His feeling for symbols is evident in "Swiss Canton Heraldry," bottom.

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that bore the face of newscaster Connie Chung.

And then there are the projects that seem designed to just blow people away, such as his "unscientific" insect collection — most of the bugs disintegrating and labeled incorrectly — that Vallance sent to the Smithsonian Institution's Department of Entomology.

"I wanted to see how they'd react. I pictured them opening the box and all the legs and wings and bits falling apart. But the Smithsonian elaborately repackaged the remaining unmutated insects and went through quite a bit of work relabeling the errors of my collection. They sent it back in a professional entomology box so it wouldn't get damaged with a letter which diagnosed what went wrong with my packaging: 'A large grasshopper pulled loose and damaged the other insects.'" Vallance breaks into a wicked grin straight out of a Gahan Wilson cartoon.

But what about Blinky? How does that fit into the Vallance oeuvre? Through Blinky, Vallance sends us messages about our own cultural phenomena. "This questions our society, our rituals. Death itself, and our relationships to animals. We have animals of different categories, some we call pets, others are food. In other cultures, it may be the opposite. In Indochina, they eat dogs, which are our pets. I question values. There's a link between all of these things."

