



Echoes of the Ocean: Maskull Lasserre at the Vancouver Biennale

by Anna Kovler

Standing on the western edge of the North American continent, by the boats docked at a Vancouver Marina, Maskull Lasserre's enormous steel sculpture takes a shape that most viewers might hardly recognize. This monumental single-horn anvil, 25 feet long, and about 800 times larger than a normal anvil is perplexing and mysterious. Did it fall from the sky onto a Loony Tunes character? Or is it waiting for its blacksmith of gigantic proportions? Getting closer reveals the anvil to be an amplifier, outfitted with a recording of the sound of the ocean, which can be heard through musical "F" holes (like the ones on a violin,) cut into the sculpture's side.

A tool whose flat top supports an object as it's struck by metalworkers, the anvil was once commonplace but now elicits more cartoon associations than industrial ones. Indispensable for centuries, anvils were used to form all kinds of metal objects including chain, saws, and wheels for carriages. "Blacksmiths and their tools," reflects Lasserre, "were the Fords and Toyotas of civilization, because they were putting the shoes on horses that moved goods and carried the mail. That was transportation, and for a time they were highly valued for that contribution." With mechanized production supplying most of our goods now, anvils are used primarily for custom metal work.

Anvils are uncommon musical instruments, but this is not the first time an anvil has been used acoustically. Ringo Starr played one in the song Maxwell's Silver Hammer, and composer Richard Wagner used 18 tuned anvils in a cycle of operas in 1869. With fourteen years of classical violin training, Lasserre is frequently drawn to musical instruments as sculptural material. His version of the anvil as instrument ties it to the

more delicate violin while recalling Vancouver's industrial history in a string of associations that remains porous and open-ended.

Added to its ambiguous meaning, the sculpture has a mystifying effect on those who stand near it. "People think the sound is air passing through the column," Lasserre notes, "kids say it's breathing. Many layers of interpretation emerge beyond just the sound of the ocean."

Lumbering and poetic, Lasserre's acoustic anvil stands in a landscape that has changed around its ancient, genius design. A stand-in for all the remarkable tools civilization used to arrive at the current moment, the tool/instrument both celebrates and questions technological progress, giving the impression that our tools are often impressive, but also asking at what cost, and to whom. Equal parts lullaby and monster, Lasserre's sculpture provokes without judging, offering up questions without prescribing all the answers.

Acoustic Anvil: A Small Weight to Forge the Sea is installed in Vancouver's Leg-In-Boot Square until July 2020 as part of the Vancouver Biennale. His sculptures are currently on view at Arsenal Contemporary Toronto until October 18, 2018.



Maskull Lasserre, *Acoustic Anvil (A Small Weight to Forge the Sea)* and False Creek, Vancouver, BC, 2018. Steel, electronics, solar panels. 25 x 13 x 9 feet. Image courtesy of Maskull Lasserre.



Maskull Lasserre, *Acoustic Anvil (A Small Weight to Forge the Sea)* in Leg in Boot Square, Vancouver, BC, 2018. Steel, electronics, solar panels. 25 x 13 x 9 feet. Image courtesy of Maskull Lasserre.



Maskull Lasserre, detail – view through the sound hole of *Acoustic Anvil (A Small Weight to Forge the Sea)*, 2018. Steel, electronics, solar panels. 25 x 13 x 9 feet. Image courtesy of Maskull Lasserre.



Maskull Lasserre working on *Acoustic Anvil*. Photo courtesy of Roaming the Planet and Maskull Lasserre, 2018.