



## Capital City Arts Initiative

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Relaunch, an exhibition by artist Mark Brandvik, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from October 2, 2020 – January 28, 2021. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.*

### **Relaunch Redux** **Rockets are never just rockets**

“There’s certain images that, for whatever reason, they’re just locked in there. And then of course you build on it, you build on your memories the way you build on a painting.”

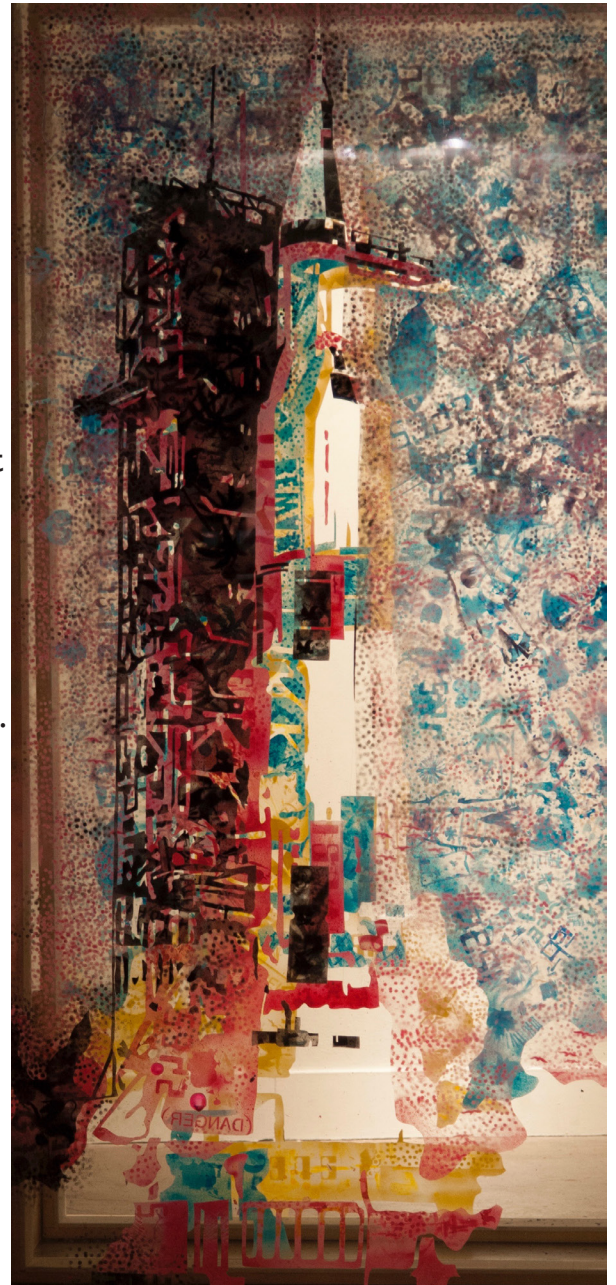
Mark Brandvik is talking about rockets. Over Zoom, the Las Vegas artist recounts the first time he saw Apollo 11, which launched the year before he was born. It was a rebroadcast of the takeoff on “a little TV in North Las Vegas” when he was a kid. Or perhaps it was a Newsweek cover, or maybe it could have been “any other source.” He cannot remember, but what is certain are the many, many hours that Brandvik has spent revisiting those moments.

During his 25+ year career, Brandvik has made small rockets (launching them amid clouds of cotton smoke in galleries, closets, and fireplaces) and he has made large rockets (projecting them onto billboards 10-stories high and painting them onto person-sized pieces of plexiglass).

I am looking at one now. On the other side of my Zoom window, a miniature rocket sits on a table behind the artist. As someone who is late to the game with Brandvik’s work, I find myself unconsciously leaning in, trying to get a better look at *everything*.

The rocket is a model Saturn V shuttle - the launch vehicle for twelve Apollo missions and the inspiration behind Brandvik’s many rocket-themed exhibitions. Standing next to items like Post-its, paintbrushes, and stencils, and without the artist’s usual dioramas or screens to skew its size, the object seems small. I could hold it in my hand.

It is flanked on all sides by a veritable gallery of Brandvik’s work.



*Image courtesy of the artist; 5-4-3-2-1; plexiglass acrylic, ink, wood, and metal; 90”x50”x50”; 2014.*





A large two-dimensional silhouette of a 1969 Ford Mustang Mach 1 leans against the wall. It is a model that Brandvik has always loved and almost bought at different points in his life. Flat and white, the car looks to be stripped of its parts, its blank mass casting a thin, dark shadow around the edges, rendering it featureless but instantly recognizable. A muscular contour that feels like controlled energy.

On the back wall, a quiet painting of the wavy-roofed Neon Museum in Las Vegas hangs like a memorial to atomic era flamboyance, softened by a palette of muted greens, beiges, and blues. Both a real place and a composite memory, the Google architecture-style structure is an amalgam of all the space age office buildings, restaurants, and casinos that populate Brandvik's childhood.

Sitting on a table, a toy Tonka Winnebago and an impression rubbing of a gravestone stand in for Brandvik's mom, dad, and brother - all passed, all quietly buried in his work, coming back briefly, I imagine, when these objects are looked at or held.

Here, I find myself a bit struck by the level of engagement Brandvik has with his memories. It is a lot. To be fair, it is his entire career. But Brandvik plays down the pain points as he makes the case for revisiting any memory you want.

"When you remember an event," he says, "You are not remembering the first time you experienced it, you're remembering the last time you recalled it....It's a survival strategy. Maybe we need to clean up things. Maybe we don't want to know exactly what happened. We're quite good at sort of smoothing the edges."

By subjecting images to continuous recall, Brandvik softens memories for himself while sharpening concepts for his viewers.

For his latest project, Brandvik has returned to one of his favorite images. Yes...it is a rocket.

A simple way to describe this particular rocket (originally titled "5-4-3-2-1") is that it is a large, stacked portrait of Apollo 11 - first displayed on the 45th anniversary of its launch at the





former P3 Studio in Las Vegas. Stood-up like doors and see-through like windows, Brandvik's three-dimensional painting consists of four vertically-sandwiched panels of plexiglass - each layered with monochromatic CMYK colorblocks and composite shapes that gallery-goers helped to stencil in. The colorful, dreamy likeness of Apollo 11 that took shape over the course of the original five-week exhibition was meant to be "aspirational" (I am told by Brandvik) and evocative of "the spirit of human capital required to conceive and launch ideas" (I read in an Art Production Fund press release).

Soon to be re-staged at Courthouse Gallery in Carson City, there's not a simple way to describe Brandvik's newest iteration of "5-4-3-2-1", updated title: *Relaunch*. Though the assembly will be nearly identical - a multi-layered image of a rocket surrounded by various atomic age ephemera - the space between the two exhibitions could complicate things, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Though a six year gap doesn't require reorienting oneself to an artwork, this gap might. This exhibition opens a year too late for the 50th anniversary of the shuttle's launch, ruling out a strictly patriotic or fan-based interpretation of the piece. This, combined with the fact that there will be no community involvement in the creation of the work, makes *Relaunch* at least 20% less feelgood than its predecessor. Again, this is not a bad thing.

Add to the equation a pandemic, a toxic political landscape, and a billionaire space race that is literally ruining the sky, and you have an underlying level of stress that was not present six years ago. In 2020, the naive optimism of atomic age innovation that Brandvik's subject depicts and the hope - and change-flavored era in which it was created seems like a lifetime away, its spirit replaced by a craven, 24-hour news cycle - occasionally punctuated with reports on space that rarely evoke greatness, but always trade in whatever goodness we still harbor for NASA from childhood.



In this context, *Relaunch* becomes a doubled artifact. A time capsule of an exhibition that was once a tribute. Now released from its commemorative function, Brandvik's rocket is free to interrogate the values it symbolizes (freedom, power, wonderment...penises, of course) - ideologies that Brandvik insists we already know because "we grow up in it if we grow up here."

Rockets are never just rockets. This is the trick of Americana: deploying icons to hold our collective nationalism and personal experience in one container, blending them into a mixture we can't easily separate. In drawing on these popular images - what Brandvik refers to as "signifiers for ideology" - we end up with something either approximating propaganda or approaching art.

If "5-4-3-2-1" ever resembled the former, then *Relaunch* is on track for the latter, trading a triumphant event for a reflective one and inducting Brandvik's installation into the very long art tradition of recasting initial conceits. Though this read of Brandvik's piece is admittedly premature (I am writing this ahead of the installation) and relies on compounding circumstances beyond Brandvik's original intent and control - I think it is fair to say that this artist has always been interested in putting distance between us and our icons.

Even if we emerge still attached to our muscle cars, 1950s architecture, and rockets, there will at least be dissonance there, too, casting doubt on the consensus between our true beliefs and national narratives, making space for the more interesting work of getting back to whatever it is we are trying to return to. Childhood, people, a feeling. Illusions worth chasing. Edges worth smoothing.

Josie Glassberg  
Reno, Nevada  
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Artist Mark Brandvik

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