

# Brothers in Art

## Generic Art Solutions Makes Art Appropriate for Our Time

Story by Debra Kronowitz

Photos courtesy of Generic Art Solutions

↓ *The Raft*

2010

Archival Print

45" x 30"

Edition of 11 with 3 AP's

→ *Marat*

2009

Archival Print

30" x 41"

Edition of 6

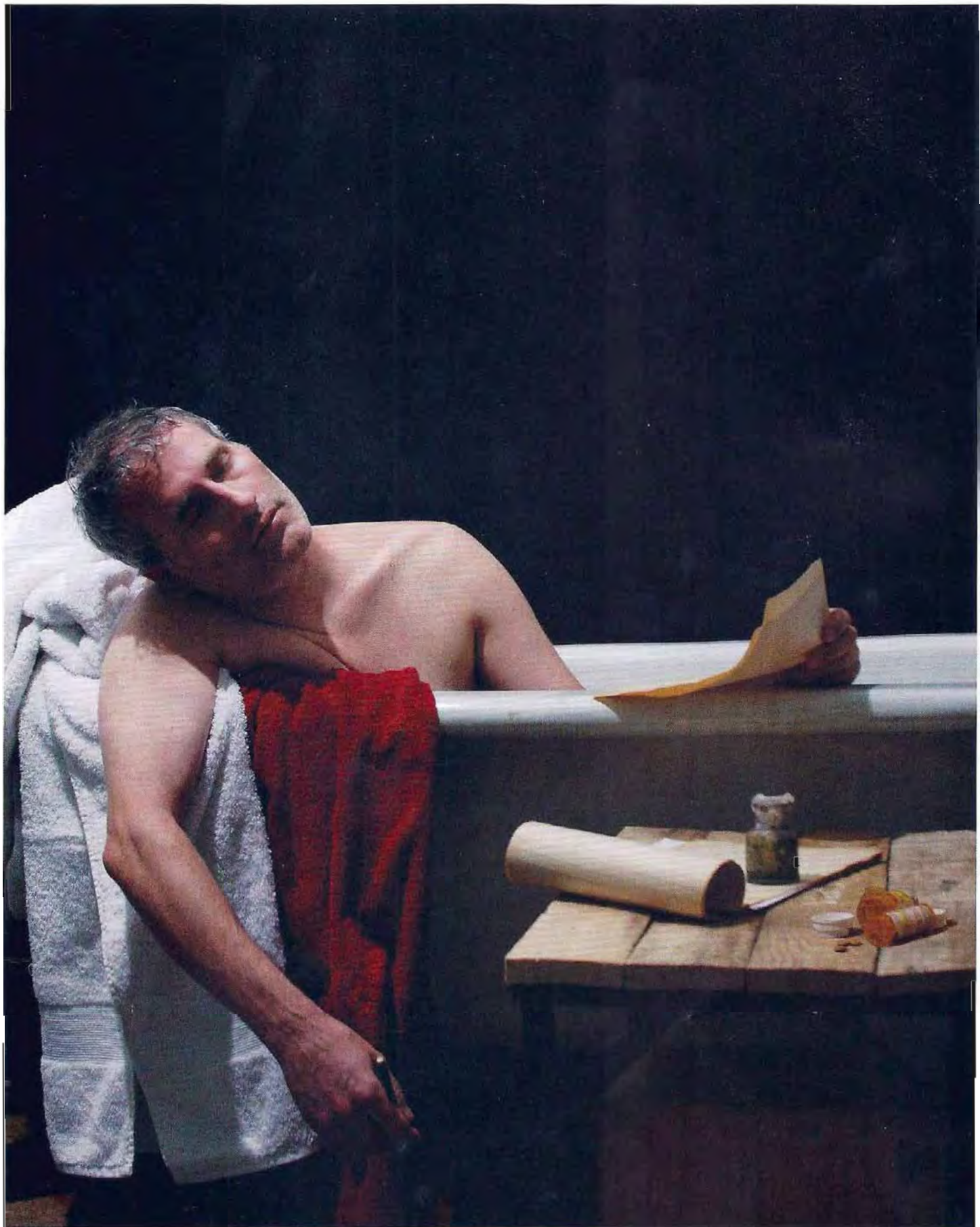
The collaborative team Generic Art Solutions (G.A.S) came after two years' worth of discussions between New Orleans-based performance and multi-media artists Matt Vis and Tony Campbell. Their work has a strong conceptual bent, often with political and social undertones. Their name came about because they believed their own names should be replaced by a single title, like a team name, but they wanted it to live in the realm of product advertisement.

"I thought it would be a good idea to be the Mr. Goodwrench of the art world, and Tony suggested Generic Art Solutions (G.A.S.). I expressed my reservation that 'generic' products in the U.S. were devoid of style, and that the quality of such products were questionable. Tony maintained that in England — where he was born and raised — 'generic' referred to a streamlined version of popular products that defined contemporary styling. We came to agree that multiple interpretations of this title would be a good thing, as it found application in the entire range of styles of all products; Generic Art Solutions was born," explained Vis.

Both artists had formal training in a number of mediums, though neither felt drawn to a single one. They both believe that each medium has its own advantages. Recognizing that they both have their own specific qualities as well, they agreed to employ them strategically whenever they deemed most advantageously.

G.A.S is not limited in style, media or message. Their ideas lead their aesthetics, and they strive to make art appropriate for modern living through photography, video and performance art. They look at what's happening in the world and how it affects









people. What makes them unique is that they play every character in their work - be it photography, video or performance art. "In our photography, there is a big Photoshop job that goes on afterwards," said Campbell.

"In this team effort, we treat each other as equals; and our presentation reinforces that concept. Whether we are in the studio or in public, we dress alike — often in workmen's uniforms — and equip ourselves with the same tools. We feel strength in this unity, a type of artistic solidarity, and we refer to ourselves as 'Brothers in Art.' We share a conceptual affinity for Joseph Beuys' idea that everyone is an artist," said Vis.

The work blends art history and humor to comment on present-day concerns, such as illegal immigration, capital punishment and man-made disasters. Their goal is not to merely replicate past works, but to foster dialogue between the past and the present.

Their photographs are based on paintings from masters like Diego Velasquez, Edouard Manet, Leonardo da Vinci, Theodore Gericault and Caravaggio. For example, Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, which depicts lives needlessly lost at sea under the restored French monarchy, is fused with the modern-day tragedy of the 11 men who died during the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion on April 20, 2010, in *The Raft*. The photograph looks very similar to the 19th century original peopled by modern oil rig workers — themselves again, thanks to their use of Photoshop. *The Raft* captures the typical sense of reality and the frustrating sentiment in Louisiana that its history of corruption and man-made disasters has a tendency to repeat itself.

"We feel that we are living in history-making times. In creating our various works, we plunder art history in order to shed light on today. In doing this, we have found that human nature hasn't really changed throughout the ages. Casting ourselves in every role, we explore through art the issues of identity and the recurring themes of humanity," said Campbell.

Other work employing alternative media include *Double Agents*, a silk-screen on stainless-steel with Vis and Campbell as M4-wielding paramilitaries rather like Blackwater mercenaries, or escapees from a James Bond thriller.

The duo use performance as a tool, but not in the traditional sense, for their video and performance art. They say there is no stage or audience separation. Well-known as *Art Cops* (officially *International Art Police*), Officers Campbell and Vis write tickets to artists and gallerists in an attempt to uphold the general rules of art. The *International Art Police*

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was conceived in New York in 1998; since then Vis and Campbell have completed successful tours in New York, London, Belfast, Dublin and Venice.

Fans of the art duo will remember when they impersonated workmen assigned to place oversized air fresheners around the French Quarter during *Mardi Gras*, or when they dressed as drunken bronze sculptures urinating in a fountain on the street during the Contemporary Arts Center's *Art for Art's Sake*.

"Our street performances are an on-the-fly, unscripted intercourse. We've found that in this raw forum we can genuinely question where art begins and real life ends," said Campbell.

G.A.S.'s video art is based on what they have termed "living sculptures." In a video diptych entitled *Caesar and Caligula*, they portray marble busts of the Roman emperors who died violent deaths. Look closely and the images are actually endless loop videos on LCD monitors where they appear almost, but not totally, motionless. These are real-time digital observations of stationary subjects where the viewer becomes aware of the activity of viewing; a generally uneventful, if not enlightening activity that is interrupted when the subject blinks.

In the video *Spill*, Campbell plays a lured diner served by waiter Vis. Time and time again, the quietly dignified diner awaits service from a waiter who is either woefully unprepared to perform his duties, or devilishly sinister in his privately chaotic intentions. The performance is a comment on careless corporations and the messes they make in pursuit of profits — damage for which they appear increasingly confident that they will never really have to pay in full.

In contrast to these video works, their photographic series *Motel Suite* operates as a set of voyeuristic movie stills in which not much is happening — it's just two heavily armed guys in a motel doing mundane things like eating potato chips, brushing their teeth and cleaning their guns. Like mercenaries at rest, they appear to be getting ready for a hit, but the viewer doesn't know who or why, reflecting the ambiguous anonymity of so much modern violence — yet it is precisely that ambiguity that gives this otherwise deadpan series its intrigue.

No matter what medium, G.A.S. is making people stop and think. "History repeats itself. We're adding contemporary backing to these familiar artworks," they said. ■

**Generic Art Solutions will be exhibiting at the Jonathan Ferrara Gallery from Aug. 4-27. Through photography, video, performance and silkscreen painting, *Anarcadia* will explore the principles of social idealism and the conditions of idyllic projectionism.**

← *Quad Bond*  
2010  
Silkscreen on Canvas  
48" x 60"  
Edition of 7

↖ *Pieta*  
2009  
Archival Print  
36" x 36"  
Edition of 6