

Michael Berglund fully rediscovered his personal joy in the figure modeling hobby in 2020, when COVID pandemic lockdowns, Minnesota cold and stir-craziness inspired him to start looking around for things to do in his home. What he found was monster models; first the classics, then his own creations.

Michael had been slowly working on restoring and repainting his childhood Aurora monsters; he accelerated that project and started showing photos of his results in Aurora-focused Facebook groups. The response was so enthusiastic that Michael turned those photos into posters, and then into a 2021 calendar that sold out.

In spring 2020, Michael experimented with Zbrush, getting more comfortable with the most popular digital sculpture software. Already an accomplished clay sculptor, he recognized the value of digital for commercial artists. He wandered into sculpting Spring-Heel Jack as the cryptid was depicted on the cover of Issue 25 of Gold Key Comics' *Ripley's Believe it Or Not*, published in April 1971. What he came up with was a dynamic, three-dimensional representation of the colorful comic cover art by Luis Dominguez. After considering his options, Michael decided to produce the figure himself, in classic Aurora 1/8th scale, molded and cast by Dean Millermon.

"Spring-Heel Jack kind of started a lot," Michael told me. "It got a lot of people's attention."

One year later, Michael's name came up again and again in the hobby community, largely thanks to the kits he'd gotten into producing, inspired by Jack's popularity. Michael introduced hobbyists to the Heap, based on a Skywald Comics character; he created a popular series of miniature Aurora monsters; and he started a line of Aurora-inspired monster busts, GigantAurora, launching with Frankenstein and the Wolf Man.

Michael has been working on a variety of projects with George Stephenson on and off since the early days of GEOMETRIC Design and the Auroras inspired George to hire Michael for a series of *Game of Thrones*-inspired microMANIA busts for George's current company, Black Heart Enterprises.

A lifelong fan of styrene model kits, Michael was delighted to draw the attention of another hobbyist who'd seen Spring-Heel Jack. Monarch Models owner Scott McKillop got in touch and asked if Michael would be interested in helping Monarch get back up and running. Scott needed a digital sculptor who was comfortable with all the elements necessary for an appealing figure model and saw Spring-Heel Jack as proof that, "Michael could do it all, and he had the Aurora vibe with scale, pose, base. I reached out to him by e-mail in December 2020, and the rest is history."

During the pandemic, Michael and his wife, Paula, figured out they enjoy not being required to show up at the same location for a job day after day. It's not that Michael minded working; in fact, he can't sit still for long, he's got to be doing something.

When the pandemic began, he was employed by a brewery, doing graphic design jobs that really, he could accomplish from anywhere.

Paula and Michael weighed the pros and cons, searched their souls, and agreed to have a go at what Michael describes as "working differently."

"The story of our decision to live more nomadically really to me seems that a few important things aligned," Paula wrote in an e-mail. "Empty nesting was around the corner, and we wouldn't need the big house anymore. Michael had been working remotely and decided it was time



Samples of Michael's Aurora photo illustrations:
Top: The Forgotten Prisoner
Bottom: Frankenstein
Opposite: The Creature

Michael Berglund

AFM PROFILE BY TODD POWELL





GigantAurora Monster Busts

to switch gears/clients so he could continue to do so. We always loved camping, and this would be more like glamping, therefore easier and more comfortable, and we were very tired of Minnesota messy slushy cold long winters. We are also very adaptive to new surroundings, and adventurous. It also made sense given that we are approaching a 'retirement age' traditionally and affords us a more creative option to enjoy our sixties actively."

The Berglunds decided they would travel, work remotely and experience cold weather as little as possible.

The brewery wasn't interested. "I said OK, then, I guess this is it." Michael resigned and started putting together a client list, pleasantly surprised to find work.

For the most part, he planned to do graphic design jobs, but Michael's connections to the hobby community and hobby business were growing, and he didn't want to give them up. After all, thanks to digital sculpture, he could also create his monsters from anywhere in the world. However, the lifestyle the Berglunds wanted would require him to give up his workshop and tools, so he needed to find a collaborator; someone who could help market the kits he had, as well as those that would follow. Someone who could keep some inventory on hand, make new kits when necessary, and ship what sells to buyers.

My company is Escape Hatch Hobbies, and most of my business revolves around Aurora-complementary projects, including replacement parts and figures, all offered through a colorful, wacky website managed by Harry Malone, known as "Spock" to members of the long-standing Clubhouse modeling community. Michael had noticed these things.

I got the following as part of a message from Michael in September 2021: "In a lot of ways seems like we are birds of a feather with a common Aurora obsession, paired with utilizing the new tech of 3D printing to explore new ways

of doing things.... wondering if Escape Hatch might want to carry/distribute/partner with (fill in the blank) with some other way of doing it on my GigantAurora busts."

I was all over that, happy to see the collaboration expand to encompass all of the kits Michael already had on the market and the ever-growing lineup he's created since, including more GigantAuroras and mini-busts, a line of monsters called the Ferocious Females, Creature from the Haunted Sea, a near-to-his heart piece called Hey Mom!! Look!! and more, including a variety of replacements, add-ons and offshoots for the Fly and Moon Suit, the first



Viserion from Game of Thrones
Black Heart Enterprises



Reign of Fire Dragon
Black Heart Enterprises

Have trailer will travel!



Axel



On the road with Michael and Paula Berglund



two model kits Michael helped put on the market with what Scott refers to as “Monarch 2.0.”

We can’t get into all the details of Michael’s busy life, so let’s boil it down.

- Born in 1962 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Moved to Minnesota with his parents as a teenager and now has dual citizenship in the United States and Canada.
- Met Paula during college about 1983. They were married in 1988. They now have three adult kids: Sam, Katy and Nick.
- Co-founded MNFX, a special effects company in Minneapolis.
- As part of MNFX, Michael worked on a variety of projects with George Stephenson starting in the early days of GEOMETRIC Design. Read more about that in last month’s *AFM*.
- Michael sold his stake in MNFX in 2012 and resigned his graphic design position with the brewery in 2021.

The Berglunds’ nomadic lifestyle informally began in late 2021. They departed Minnesota to spend a warmer winter

in Arizona, where both of their mothers had winter homes. When they returned after a season away, their accountant pointed out houses left empty during the winter months “tend to break.” Asked if they intended to keep this up, Michael said, “I hope so.” The accountant told the Berglunds about clients who’d sold their houses, sparing themselves a variety of hassles and expenses.

“That got our wheels spinning,” said Michael.

They began selling, giving away, purging or storing their stuff and sold the house. Nowadays, the Berglunds occasionally rent accommodations for a few months at a

time, but “home” is primarily a 26-foot travel trailer they share with their miniature Australian Shepherd, Axel. They pull this rig around the country with what Michael refers to as a “big-ass truck” and largely alternate their time between Minnesota, where they have friends over to share a fire pit, and the Southwest, particularly Arizona, where Michael’s mother still has a winter residence.

They made it to Louisville, Ky., in June 2023 to work the Escape Hatch table at WonderFest. We were placed next to Monarch’s Scott McKillop, who frequently asked about how Michael’s Ferocious Females and Sleestak figures were selling, wondering how he might use the information to shape future styrene projects. For the record, Escape Hatch’s bestsellers at the show were the 1/8th scale Sleestak from *Land of the Lost* and the Ferocious Females Wasp Woman.

Mexico has become a draw for the Berglunds. In 2023 they spent a month on the Baja peninsula, eventually driving all the way to Cabo San Lucas and back, and they spent January of this year in Cozumel, where their

adventures included scuba diving around, under and inside a World War II minesweeper ship sunk off the coast. In his Facebook post sharing photos, Michael referred to this as “one of those pinch-me-is-it-real days.” In April of this year, the Berglunds plan a road trip with their rig, camping in Mazatlan to view the total solar eclipse.

“That is one of the most freedom-based activities that I could ever have dreamed of doing a couple of years ago,” Michael said, and he knows some might look at the chances he and his wife are taking and say, “That’s nuts.”

“Yes, it is kind of nuts,” he said. “But I can work! I have

Monarch Models' Moon Suit



Escape Hatch Hobbies
The Creature from the Haunted Sea



Michael Berglund Sculptures
The Heap



Escape Hatch Return of the Fly
replacement head



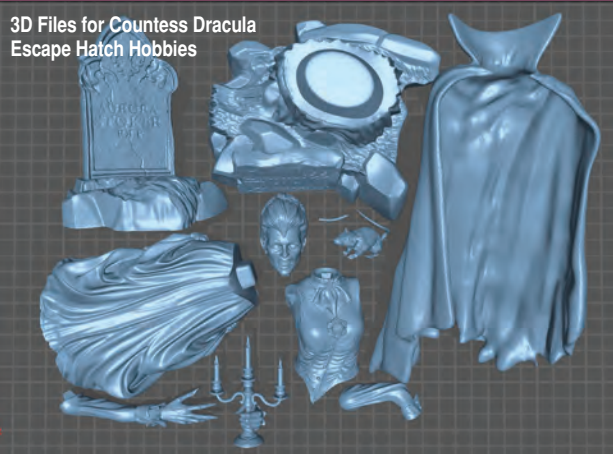
Hey Mom!! Look!!
Escape Hatch Hobbies



Model Club TV
Kong



3D Files for Countess Dracula
Escape Hatch Hobbies



Godzilla
Tiny Terrors

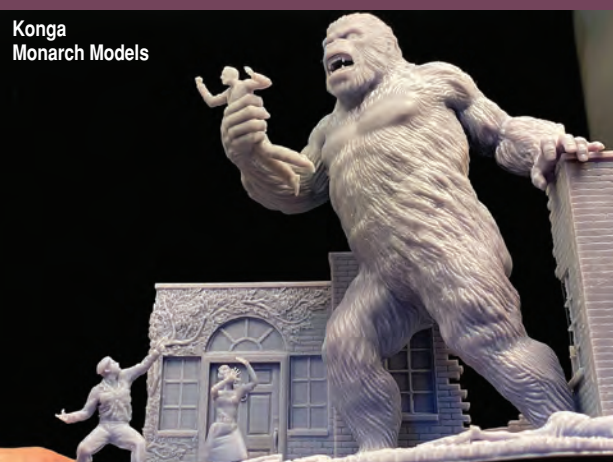


Octaman
Monster Model Review



Sleetak
Escape Hatch
Hobbies

Konga
Monarch Models



a Starlink Internet system. I have a robust solar power system installed on our camper. Theoretically, if it's sunny outside, and not too awfully hot because the solar power won't do air conditioning, I could be off grid for a week or whenever we would run out of water."

He does graphic design jobs in his trailer, 3D sculpting, even 3D scanning, generally working in the camper's dining area because they do most of their cooking and eating outdoors. "For this time of my life, it allows me to be creative and wherever I want to be. Up on a mountain or on a beach or wherever the weather is amenable."

Naturally, such a lifestyle has its challenges.

"Theoretically, it's supposed to not be expensive," Michael said. "We don't have a mortgage and we don't have property tax, and we don't have utilities. And so, theoretically, every month we should be able to come in under expenses.

"That said, we kind of stink at it." Meaning, sometimes they let themselves enjoy the attractions of the places they visit, including restaurants and pricier campgrounds that are easier to access than cheaper options. It also doesn't help that "the big-ass truck is thirsty all the time." Michael estimated about forty percent of what they spent for their month in Baja California went to gasoline.

"I do like life on the road; I like the freedom and flexibility," Paula said. "It certainly requires an adjustment period, though. While we are not really 'on the road' all the time, we don't have a home base, and sometimes that's what I miss having. ... It's not the simplistic lifestyle some may think it would be, and as much as we thought it may be, there are still the realities of insurances, where to see doctors, dealing with finances, planning, etc., and it's actually a little trickier, so it's not without its stressors."

The approach they take, Paula said, involves constant planning, generally in three-month segments. Where will they be in three months? In six? "I'd say all of these basic life necessities are my full-time job to make sure we don't miss anything, forget anything, plan properly."

In the hobby world, Michael has earned a reputation for "digitally remastering" pieces to prepare them for the market; meaning he scans original pieces and turns those scans into digital sculptures, which can then be resized or otherwise manipulated to serve the producer's needs. Digital scanning is not a simple, plug-and-play process; creating a quality digital sculpture from a scan requires expensive equipment, software, training and artistry. Michael does this very well, always with the blessing and cooperation of the original sculptors, whose work he credits and attempts to complement.

Michael has performed this service for a growing variety of kit producers, including Rob Mattison of *Monster Model Review*, a friend and fellow Minnesotan who went to Michael to get his Octaman kit, originally sculpted by Jeff Johnson, back on the market.

Self-described *Model Club TV* "talent" Scott Johansen took a Matt Manit-sculpted King Kong to Michael, who turned it into digital pieces that Scott now offers at a smaller size and as a bust, printed on demand. Scott also put Michael to work on a new version of the late Mike Parks' Tiny Terrors Godzilla, which is now offered in a slightly larger size ... with Mike himself stuck to the monster's foot! Scott refers to it as the "Not So" Tiny Terror.

Tom Seiler turned to Michael to digitally remaster a Jeff Yagher sculpture of Bruce Dern's character in the film *Silent Running* so

that he could resize it to better match his kit's drone figures.

"I can be my own artist sometimes," Michael said. "Or I can bring my own thing to the party; but I don't mind being a service bureau and helping people out with stuff that already exists or belongs to other people in which I can participate. I'm just fine with that."

The first job Michael did for Monarch was sculpt a figure of Konga, which the company hopes to put on the market soon. After seeing how well Michael did with the giant ape, Scott McKillop asked him to help with two other projects; first the Fly, then the Moon Suit, both of which had been in the works

Ferocious Females Wolf Woman
Escape Hatch
Hobbies



Ferocious Females Countess Dracula
Escape Hatch
Hobbies



Ferocious Females Wasp Woman
Escape Hatch
Hobbies



Ferocious Females The Devil Witch
Escape Hatch
Hobbies



The Fly
Monarch Models



Spring-Heel Jack
Sculpted and painted by Michael Berglund



for years. Michael was delighted to help and got to work pulling together “a mess” of threads that included digital and physical pieces, and the Fly finally reached hobbyists in early 2023.

The Moon Suit followed about one year later. For that kit, Michael worked with digital sculpture files of the figure provided by Walter Pezzali, who had already produced smaller versions of the astronaut under his Futuristic Robots banner.

“Michael is as gracious and professional as he is talented,” said Monarch’s Scott McKillop. “If a potential client asked me for Michael’s shortcomings, I would be genuinely bereft to supply an accurate response. I can only guess at the future of Monarch, but I can see the future of Michael and it is brilliant.”

Michael’s association with Monarch has benefited Escape Hatch, in part because the company’s bread-and-butter projects have long been replacement parts and add-ons for styrene model kits. Michael got an enormous head start on such projects for Monarch’s Fly and introduced more than half a dozen of them very soon after the plastic kit went on the market. The biggest sellers of those to date are a set of highly detailed *Return of the Fly* replacement parts and an add-on figure titled Helene’s Horror, depicting the Fly’s wife reacting after his monstrous head is uncovered. For the Moon Suit, Michael used Walter’s parts to create several parts sets, with replacement arms and legs and some additional equipment.

The collaboration with Escape Hatch allows Michael to take more chances with his subject matter, in part because many of the projects are offered entirely as 3D-printed kits, as opposed to those that are traditionally molded and cast. Prices for materials such as mold rubber and casting resin have risen drastically in recent years, and so producers are naturally cautious about their projects, none of which come with guarantees they’ll recoup the costs. By going digital, Escape Hatch eliminates the expense of molds, not to mention the space they require and the limited life.

This approach allowed Michael to move forward with the Aurora-inspired , introduced at WonderFest 2023. His goal with this lineup was to create full-on monsters who are not girlfriends, companions or “sexy.” He launched the series with two original figures, the Wolf Woman and Countess Dracula, and two figures based on existing media, the Wasp Woman (an Escape Hatch bestseller) and John Bell’s Devil Witch, inspired by a story in the same issue of *Ripley’s Believe It or Not* that got Michael moving on Spring-Heel Jack.

Next up for Ferocious Females, Michael is stitching together a unique take on the Frankenstein Monster and a figure based on *Terror from the Year 5,000*, suggested by Kurt Piepenburg, who recently painted one of the prototypes for Michael’s hilariously memorable Creature from the Haunted Sea kit.

The GigantAurora series of monster busts continues, with Dracula entering the market most recently. Escape Hatch hopes to release the last two, Dr. Jekyll as Mr. Hyde and King Kong, this year. Miniature versions of all of the busts are also available.

Another sculpture that has been in progress for months is called Saturday Morning, one of Michael’s more personal projects. It depicts a 1970s “monster kid” surrounded by, and wearing, his toys. Michael has been debating a variety of possibilities for the kit and has boiled it down to a tight, highly detailed presentation that’s going to make hobbyists shout, “I had one of those!”

In terms of the hobby community, Michael has a strong reputation, friends and creative freedom. He’s ready to help out with projects, sees opportunities when they arise, and does what he says he’s going to do.

“It’s a very happy place to be,” he said.

The Berglunds’ adventure will continue in 2024. After returning from viewing the eclipse in Mazatlan, they’re looking at spending some time in South Dakota. Michael will work with his friends at the Black Hills Institute

of Geological Research, which digs up and prepares fossils. He expects to help restore a sauropod skeleton.

Michael knows the decisions he and Paula have made aren’t for everybody but sees how his own life has led to where they are and he’s grateful.

“It’s all intentional, but it’s all random at the same time,” he said. “Because you kind of lean in a direction. *Lean in a direction*. I didn’t know that I’d be able to be in a trailer with solar power and Internet and sculpt a monster. I didn’t plan for that; you can’t plan, but you can lean in certain directions and then life kind of takes its course. And then when little opportunities come up, you find you’re ready to take advantage of them.” 🐼

Todd Powell owns Escape Hatch Hobbies, www.escapehatchhobbies.com.



Saturday Morning
3D File Rendering



Ferocious Females Terror from the Year 5,000
Escape Hatch Hobbies



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