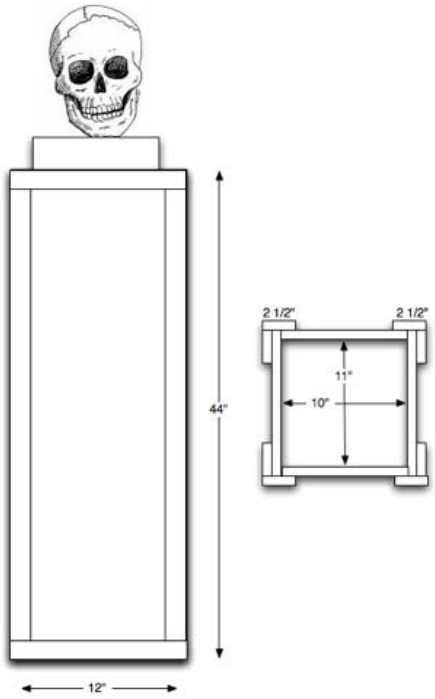
The Story of Shriek Manor

http://web.mac.com/tikimac/iWeb/Shriek_Manor/Haunted_Bust.html

The Haunted Bust

In 2006 we bought one of those Gemmy talking busts from Target with the idea of eventually creating an animated “ghost host” for the front yard. I admit it was kind of lame with the red blinking eyes, bad phrases and cheesy speaker, but we figured we could turn it into something much better.



Our plan was to construct a faux granite column for the bust to rest on, rewire the head (disabling the built-in sound and those annoying red LEDs used for the eyes).

The column was going to contain not only the electronics but speakers which meant the sound had to be perfect. To do this, we decided to use a VERY THIN covering material for the “walls” so the sound did not become too muffled.

FRAMING BEGINS

Using a bunch of furring strips I purchased at Home Depot (they only come in only one size), we set out to construct a 44” tall and 12” wide column to serve as the bust’s base and also house all of its electronics and sound equipment.

The strips were nice because they were lighter than 2x4’s and yet fairly durable for those windy fall days in Colorado. Unfortunately, though, they were also very warped, forcing us to hunt for the best pieces we could, make some creative cuts, and, basically, throw out any expectations of the column being perfectly straight. But hey, that’s okay, after all, its an old column that’s been outside for years, right?

The 1” pink foam at the top was eventually trimmed to serve as the top base of the column. A small hole (1/2” was placed in the center of the foam to allow wires from the bust to run down inside.

The next step was to surround three sides of the column with some thin, black fabric. The fabric was used to allow us to faux-finish a “skin” on the column while allowing a speaker to be concealed and still produce some reasonable good sound, free of muffling. To make life easier, all of the fabric was power-stapled in the back and into the foam piece at the top. Another 1/2” piece of pink foam (not pictured here), with a similar hole drilled in the middle, was glued on top of the fabric and the 1” pink foam it was stapled to, to provide a nice, smooth platform for the bust to rest on.

AN INITIAL COAT AND TRIM

The “skin” and bust were given the spray-on granite treatment (Plasti-Kote Fleck Stone “Manhattan Mist”) a little early to see how well they would handle the faux granite spray paint. As you can see, it worked out pretty well!

After the paint dried, I attached some recycled wood “trim pieces” to the three sides of the frame and caulked all the gaps between the wood and the skin. The size of and type of trim used here doesn’t really matter here. We just wanted to give the column a clean, more ornate look.

THE PLAQUE

To create the wall plaque, I printed a nice, curvy-shaped background and a fancy letter “S” (for Shriek Manor, of course!) onto card-stock paper and cut out the shapes. I then used 3M Spray adhesive to lightly glue them to pieces of foam. This allowed the paper to serve as a guide for my hot-wire foam cutter. The other advantage of using the card stock is that its strong enough to remove cleanly when I was done (unlike standard printer paper that easily ripped in the process!)

When everything was cut out, I removed the paper, glued the two pieces together and then painted them with a base coat.

The mini skull was a last minute addition. It’s just a piece of Sculpey that I formed with a ball-point pen and a paper-clip! Not bad for 5 minutes worth of effort...

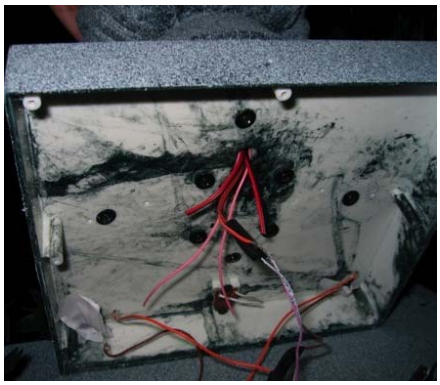
Almost there!

(on the outside, anyway!)

So here’s the column assembled with most of the outside finished (minus a little bit of work necessary to “age” everything).

The next step was to add an interior shelf between the plaque and the top of the column. The shelf allowed a speaker to be mounted close-enough to the bust at the top that people should think its “voice” is actually coming out of the mouth.

So how did the speaker sound when it was placed behind the faux “granite”? It sounded perfect!



DOIN' THE ELECTRICAL BUST

Opening the Gemmy bust revealed quite a few wires. Using the picture on the left as reference, the wires were:

1. A Pair of white wires in the front (bottom of picture) used for the manual "trigger" button. (I cut these since I'm not using it)

2. Two pairs of brown and orange wires from the front (bottom) corners. These are the green and blue LEDs used to light up the face when its moving.

3. Two pairs of red and black wires coming from the head itself. These are used by the two red LED eyes. (Cut in this image. I don't like the LED eyes!)

4. One red and orange set of wires coming from the middle/head. These are hooked to the motor that drives the mouth.

5. A pair of pink wires coming from the middle/head. This is for the motion sensor (I cut these as well in the image above, as I'm not using them)

Besides the wire snipping mentioned above, we made two changes to the bust. The first was to rig up the existing lights in the base so they would stay on all the time. This was accomplished by pairing the two sets of orange and brown wires in the corners (covered by paper!?!) and running them through the hole in the styrofoam base (that the bust sits on) to an adjustable power adapter. I kept the voltage at 3v. Don't even THINK about going higher unless you attach a resistor!

The second change was to take the red and orange wire coming out of the middle of the bust (mouth motor), pass it down the same hole as above and hook it up to a controller that can take audio and convert it the appropriate motor voltages. Now in my case, I rigged my own circuit based on Jim Kadel's original model, but you can certainly use a pre-built "Motor Mouth" from Haunt Master, if you're not fond of soldering.

FINISHING UP

It almost hurts to take something so nice and muck it up with black paint, but, seriously, how often do you find pristine objects at a haunted house? <grin>

Using some black spray paint, we tried to create some age and wear and tear on the “too-pristine” column.

We also dry-brushed some black paint around areas where we thought dirt might “collect” or “run off” from years of rain and snow.

As you can see from its demo movie (ignore the audio, its what we use for testing), it seemed to turn out alright. As with many of our projects, they always look much better at night! ;)