A JURY-RIG HERITAGE

A THESIS

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By

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CHAPTER I

A JURY-RIG HERITAGE

Plasticity, elasticity, fluidity of form and line, potential energy,—these are formal characteristics that I try to *visually* capture and enhance in both found and fabricated segments of my sculpture.

In earlier investigations of form I used a lathe to model wooden utilitarian objects. With time, I discovered I had a natural empathy for the process with which one could compose organic shaped forms so directly. This interest in plastic and organic form ultimately developed into an involvement with clay and the potter's wheel. Continued interaction with clay revealed to me an expressive plastic quality which by nature was very pliant and had great visual potential. I would think of it as I might think of skin and how malleable and durable it was. With the wheel, I threw volumetric, organic forms which were then altered by using
gravity to help re-define the shape of the forms. When finished, these first works still retained a sense of plasticity which implied motion.

Since those discoveries I have continued to explore these characteristics in clay and other materials. This concern has led to forms combining elements made of clay, steel, and rubber. Steel is used for its strength and ductility (enhanced by heat.) Rubber is used because of its obvious elastic qualities and cultural associations.

Conceptually, I am intrigued by absurdity, mischievousness, and surreal implications which I try to capture and engage in my work. I start with a word, a phrase, or a verbal/visual pun, a contradiction, exaggeration, or juxtaposition that amuses me. It may be simple or obscure, yet contain universal implications beyond the particular sculpture.

Fluke (figure #1) is constructed from steel rod and solid cast rubber. It measures approximately ten feet in length. This piece is referential to many things. I generally use the term "fluke" when I think of something that's out of context, not expected to happen, an unlikely accident.
Webster states: fluke (flook) n. 2. The head of an arrow or harpoon; a lobe of a whale's tail. 3, (Slang) an accidental stroke; a lucky chance.

This piece, a linear fish-like form which is suspended from the ceiling, alludes to the stereotypical "snapshot" image of the proud fisherman standing beside a hanging trophy fish, often the result of a fluke or lucky chance encounter (man and fish). Fluke also has all the sinister elegance of a harpoon with the rubber point being an element of visual contradiction. This contradiction is accentuated by the positioning of the tip which is slightly bending against the floor.

I have always appreciated the impact of these little, little accents such as the rubber tip in Fluke; likewise, I see the valve stem on a tire intertube as that little accent which draws your attention to the function and power of that object. "A small hole in a shirt"; It intrigues me to think that a small hole will, with time, be the fate of the entire shirt. It is a visual element that although small, contains so much potential power. A point, a needle point! The edge of a knife blade— I see the edge of a knife blade as being the smallest part of the blade, but providing the primary function of the blade; It makes things happen .
I am intrigued by the potential energy of *Bombs* or *Nuclear Warheads*, the simplicity of form and size of these items in relationship to the damage they can do; the bullet of a .357 magnum pistol with a maximum load of six grains of powder which can travel through the rear of a large automobile and crack the engine block under the front hood. These images that imply contradictions in size/energy relationships are often seminal to my work.

It’s like the "Red Button." I vividly recall seeing, as a child, a television cartoon episode of Bugs Bunny where Bugs is confronted by a fully automated house owned by Elmer Fudd. Throughout the cartoon Bugs experiments with all of the workings of the house except one particular item which is an electrical box with a red button. Bugs is constantly reminded "Do not push" the red button, but of course he eventually does and everything in the house goes berserk. In all of my work I try to include a "Red Button," one or two small critical accents that give the piece more visual power, little things that play a big role, that trigger or refer to larger formal/conceptual concerns to the extent that the piece would be weak without them.
In Safe Hook (figure #2) a visual tension develops from the interaction between a sharp steel point, a stretched spring, and a taut lambskin condom. The steel spring acts as an armature which affects the contour of the lambskin stretched taut around it. The tension of this piece is concentrated at the steel point attempting to break through the constraints of the lambskin cover. In Safe Hook I address the question of the effectiveness of an item which society has given great responsibility to in recent years, the Condom, by formally focusing on the persistent power of that steel point (sperm, AIDS, etc.).

Mr. Fix-it (figure #3) is an inflated form constructed of white rubber, black electrical tape, and a valve stem. This piece lies fifteen feet long, with the largest end three feet in diameter, which then tapers to six inches at the other end. The volume of this form of inflated rubber is accented by the small pointed end wrapped with the tape. A little valve accents the work. I want the viewer to contemplate the responsibility of each element in relationship to the entire piece.

Both Mr. Fix-it and Safe Hook contain obvious sexual overtones related to form, choice of materials and personal image associations developed from my life experiences.
I have often "hunted" worms for bait in order to fish. The ground would be moist, the sky dark, and in the night my brother and I would spot worms usually stretched twice their length and barely connected by their hole in the ground. These extremely flexible living things are also formally phallic and sexual. Indeed they were often caught "in the act," but were quick to escape back in the earth. On a dry hot summer day the fishing could be good, but the worms deep. My brother's wife Pamela would make a bucket of soapy water, pour it on the hard ground, then wait patiently while the worms would rise out of their home due to suffocation. The worms in this case were both agile and very helpless (an interesting contradiction.)

This kind of polarity, (visual/utility, contradiction/juxtaposition) stems from two interests. One is the ongoing interest I have with function and non-function. Works often suggest they may have a usable function but also contain elements which contradict that possibility, a kind of "Semi-Function." They visually discuss potential utility but simultaneously visually deny it. I consider the serious side of an issue (conceptually), and at the same time include its humor or irony.
I always find myself contemplating both sides of all the elements when initiating a work. Mike Haskins, one of my best friends, always said, "The only thing you know for sure is you never know for sure!" Likewise, in my work I attempt to address both the concrete and the unresolved.

The second interest (which has influenced the first) is a trait of "Jury-Rigging" inherited from my father. Using whatever materials are at hand to satisfy the function, to "Make-Do." For him, visual aspects are of little, or at best secondary, concern. He intends to make his objects work physically. My concerns are obviously more visual, but this attitude while working is very common to both our thoughts. In Mr. Fix-it, the rough and direct wrapping of the black tape over the inflated vulcanized white rubber form produces a "bandaged" feeling of "make-do" immediacy, like a tourniquet to a wounded limb. Jury rigging at its best.

My father is probably the greatest influence in a lot of things I do. I have always looked at Harold as a "Jack of all Trades," and in some ways I seem to be following his footsteps in my life and work. He's made cottage cheese and built airplane engines; he's built, shot, and reloaded guns and ammunition; he's overhauled cars and built the first
house that I lived in. He's a hell of a craftsman and loves to dabble with things. He is a bona fide "piddler." One Halloween he made a life size pumpkin-man that sat out on the front porch, smoked a pipe, and talked to all of the treaters. He once made a lamp with a hand as a base and a bandaged thumb, which was presented to me after I sliced my thumb. A good friend of ours had just finished nursing school and dad presented to her a lamp made of a green light that had a bedpan for a base. "So that she could go anytime!" He is, along with my mom, presently making Appalachian toys and wooden reliefs, and he continues to make his own novelty items.

For my part, I continue to make functional objects (now in clay) and my sculpture might be thought of as, perhaps, my novelty items.

I look forward to continuing my father's odd, but certainly enjoyable attitude which has been handed down to me. It is a gift of entertainment. We both enjoy entertaining others in some way. We enjoy talking, to amuse and to be amused, and we entertain because we appreciate entertainment in return. We're compelled to make objects that entertain us both during and after the making.
This is my Heritage. It seems normal and natural. It maintains my sanity and helps give order to the rest of my life.
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