

In his new regular column, Glenn Adamson reports on what makers are up to in the US

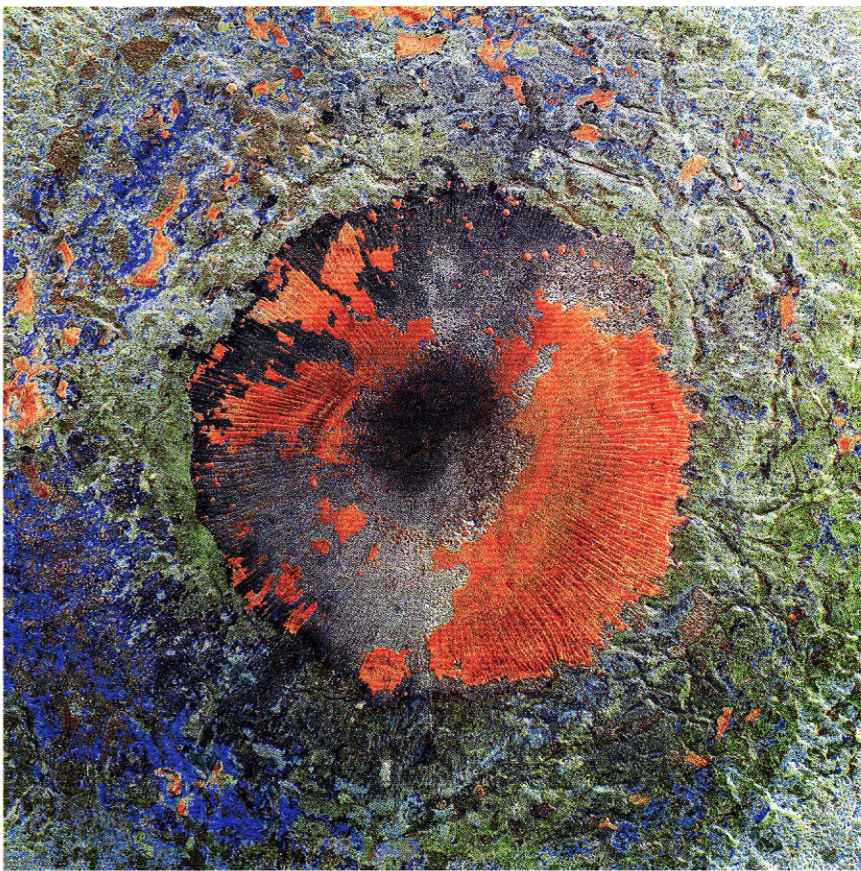
# A country at odds with itself

I'll be the first to admit it's a weird time to be starting a column about the USA. We are enduring a dark night of the national soul, riven by conflict and beset with absurdity. Yet precisely for this reason, it feels important to celebrate America right now. Sure, we have depthless wells of political stupidity, but who doesn't? And we also have inexhaustible repositories of goodness, ingenuity and open-mindedness. So, in this column, I'll be writing about American makers, particularly those who connect to the country's better nature, in the hope that it won't be entirely lost from view.

Case in point: Tom Joyce. Perhaps you know him already, as that blacksmith who won a MacArthur 'genius' grant in 2003. He was actually just getting going then, working mainly by hand. In the years since he has scaled up. Way up. When I wrote to set up the interview for this article, he replied that he'd love to speak, but had to install over 200,000 pounds of steel sculpture first. The occasion was the exhibition *Everything at Hand*, now on view at the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe.

Most of the work for the show was made over the past decade, not in Joyce's studio but at an employee-owned foundry in Illinois. This is not a place with an artist residency programme, like Kohler, Wisconsin. Joyce is the only guy making art there. He has cultivated a

Right: *Well X*, 2017, one of a new series of photographs showing the internal stresses of steel as it is forged. Below: *Divided III*, cast iron (iron filings from projects 1977-present), both works by Tom Joyce



relationship with the foundry over many years, and as a result he has unparalleled access to tools and materials. Hydraulic presses that would normally be used to shape components for ships or bridges are instead put to use in squeezing blocks of steel into sensuous abstractions, deforming them, as craft historian Ezra Shales memorably describes it, 'as gently as two tablespoons of butter tossed on a hot cast-iron skillet'.

Heat is a crucial theme for Joyce, and it's not hard to see why. While they are being worked, his sculptures glow with fierce energy, like chunks ripped from the earth's core. Once cool they are matte black, but Joyce is intent on preserving the energy of the forge in the finished works. His disk-shaped *Aureole* sculptures, for example, are subjected to many cycles of successive heating and cooling, opening deep fissures in the metal. The series began in 2008, when he observed foundry workers dealing with the cracks that occurred from just such temperature fluctuations.

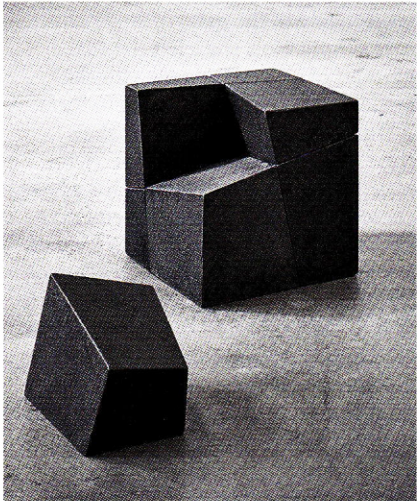
Joyce has delved into his process in other ways, too. A new series of photographs depicts the cross-sections of steel ingots. The colours have been digitally manipulated, as if using an Instagram filter, but the pattern is entirely real, a map of the metal's internal stresses as it is forged. Iron has an internal grain, just as a tree does,

except that it only develops as it hardens from its molten state. The pictures give that hidden pattern glorious pictorial life. In them, one is given the gift of seeing iron the way Joyce does, as alive with force and possibility.

A final, affecting inclusion in the exhibition is an installation of ghostly tools, floating in cloud formation. These are resin copies, made from digital scans, of all Joyce's hand tools. He hardly ever uses them any more, and doesn't really expect to - 'unless the end of the world comes and I'm making nails again', he jokes. (Like I said, it's an anxious time in America.) The translucent replicas at once summon the spirits of past smiths, and position the factory - rather than the studio - as the site of future possibility.

We hear a lot these days about the plight of American manufacturing, but not much about its remaining glories. By forging an intimate bond with industry, Joyce has succeeded where politicians and pundits have failed. He shows us the factory as something other than a bombsite of globalism, as a place where extraordinary feats still happen every day. At a time when the country is so at odds with itself, this union of seeming opposites - craft and industry, individual and institution, creativity and capital - couldn't be more pertinent. In every sense of the phrase, Joyce gets us to the heart of the matter.

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IMAGES: TOM JOYCE STUDIO