

TOM JOYCE: A NATURAL RECIPROCITY ALWAYS IN MOVEMENT

text by Ellen Berkovitch

Lighting Centerpiece, Phoenix Museum of History
forged iron, mica
90 x 192 x 108"
Photograph by Kate Joyce

IN 1998 SANTA FE BLACKSMITH TOM JOYCE PARTICIPATED IN EIGHT GROUP EXHIBITIONS and two solo shows; completed a majestic lighting centerpiece for the Phoenix History Museum; designed and made a seventy-panel entry gate for the Albuquerque Museum's Sculpture Courtyard; and curated an exhibition of forged metal work from south of the Sahara in Africa. He lectured at the Artist-Blacksmith's Association Conference and seven other venues. He presented demonstrations at half a dozen formal studio tours and many informal ones. Additionally he fulfilled numerous private commissions.

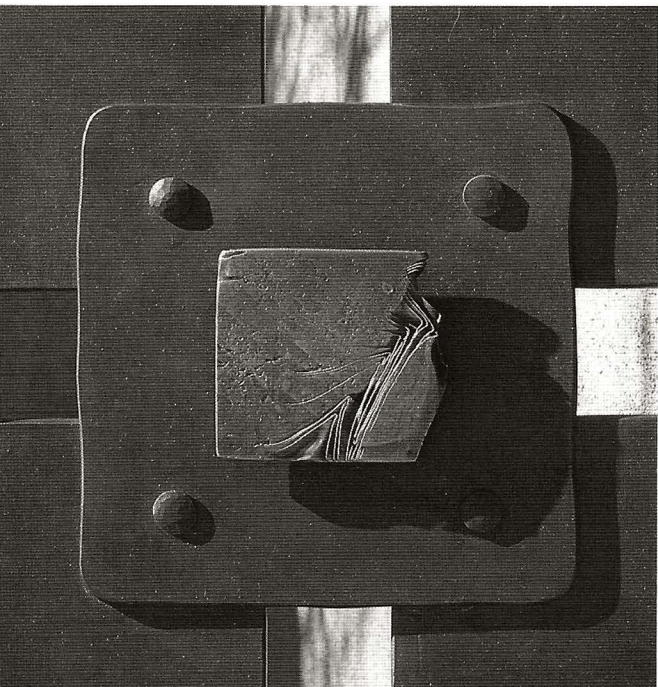
Impressed by such prodigy, one is tempted to make an equation between the energy manifest in Joyce's work, and the self-replenishing stream of ideas that guides it. One wants to know: Where do the ideas come from? How have praxis and philosophy entwined in this blacksmith, whose education, given at the top of a 15-page resume reads "Life Experience?" Joyce is forty-one, and he left formal education at the age of sixteen.

Joyce is a self-taught student and eloquent transmitter of African societies' complex histories with iron. Forged metal objects from various regions and makers in Africa commonly embody "meaning that stimulates a memory of (their) prior use," Joyce wrote in the catalog essay for *Life Force at the Anvil: The Blacksmith's Art from Africa*. Curated by the artist at the University of North Carolina at Asheville last summer, the exhibition will travel to the National Ornamental Metal Museum in Memphis from February 7 - April 18, 1999. Joyce points out that the role of iron in Africa is implicated from the genesis with the shape of the continent. Farmers and miners altered Africa's topography by clearing it and ploughing it and hoeing it for their sustenance. The blacksmith in Africa has functioned in a critical role: both midwife to the birthing process that is the smelting of iron, and inventor of adaptations changing raw material into forged useful tools. Few contemporary metalsmiths encounter, as the blacksmith does, the paradox of a 3,000-year old living history (the Hittites began using iron in 1500 B.C.E.), combined with the extinction of their primary material, virgin iron. This contradiction instigates in Joyce a sense of mission, both to extend the knowledge of

smithing history and to invoke a dialogue about it, even as he sets out daily for his shop down the driveway from his house.

When Joyce was 14, he arrived in El Rito, New Mexico. The rural northern village enjoyed an agricultural economy, and it attracted solar pioneers like Peter Van Dresser, who built the first solar house west of the Mississippi with a roof made of beer cans. In El Rito Joyce met friends such as Jim De Korne, an inventor and frequent contributor to *Mother Earth News*, and Peter Wells, a printer who had taught himself smithing techniques by which to fix his presses and who rented Joyce his first studio for twenty-seven dollars a month. He also met older farmers "who were very special as a bridge to a community I wasn't born into."

In El Rito, an agricultural implement may have been forged by a local smith, purchased locally, or acquired by mail order from a catalog. Joyce encountered a late-19th-century, mass-manufactured grubbing hoe that had been patched seven times. That the tool had been repaired so often constituted its visible history, speaking to the object's valuation by its user, to the user's critical need for it, and to the fact that not everything in industrial society is discarded. Joyce learned his skills at the anvil, first by fixing farmers' tools. This preceded by some years his learning that, in certain African cultures, it is believed that a life force resides inside iron objects and is activated by the hammer. With remarkable integrity to traditions in which the blacksmith stands literally at the center of village life, Joyce's current practice celebrates the embodied





opposite page
Rio Grande Gates, Albuquerque
Museum of Art (detail)
Photograph by Nick Merrick

left
Rio Grande Gates, Albuquerque
Museum of Art, 1998
forged iron, salvaged materials
81 x 141 x 10"
Photograph by Nick Merrick

above
Rio Grande Gates, Albuquerque
Museum of Art, in progress
forged iron, salvaged materials
81 x 141 x 10"
Photograph by Kate Joyce

history of use that the iron object in particular and the material of iron in general may represent.

Addressing a group of college students touring his studio, Joyce selects random items from his personal collection that inspire a presentation on everything from the economy of use, to design history, to the user's hand. A grain sickle was short in part because of ergonomics – to permit the user's hand to keep grain in a bundle as he/she was cutting – and in part because a minimal use of iron was all that was required to make a functional tool. An axe was necessarily heavy to fell large timbers; but an extravagant use of iron made the tool cumbersome to use.

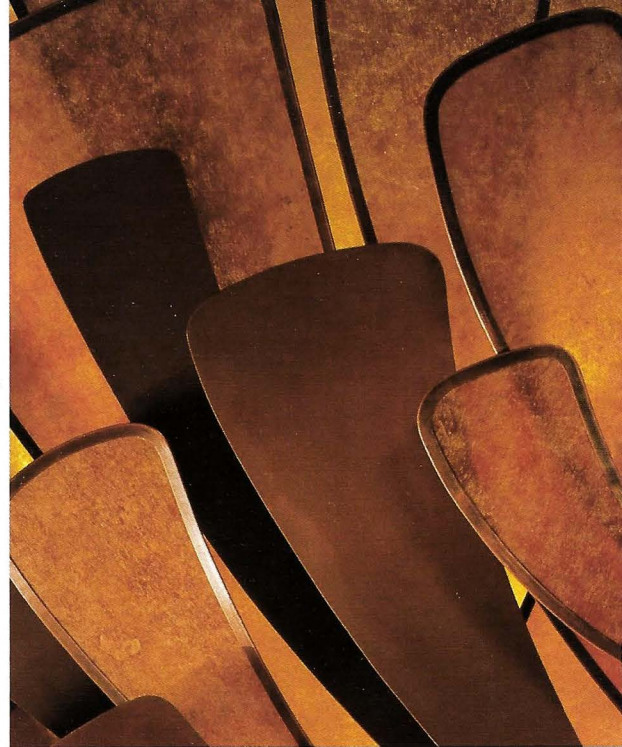
Learning how a smith resolves a design issue has been critical for Joyce. Beginning about twenty years ago, Joyce designed a curriculum that encompassed the historical and regional study of iron objects from places like New Mexico, Mexico, and Spain. He would look to these objects as models for a lively practical investigation into the aesthetics of making. For instance, in the 12th to 13th centuries in Europe, with its attendant high Gothic ornamentation, tool steel was precious and rare. This meant that few tools, rather than many, were used to craft intricately designed objects. Joyce achieved his ornate brazier with a similar minimalism of tools: he forged one chisel for different radii.

Delivering the Society of North American Goldsmiths' 1997 keynote address, Joyce suggested that one's personal inquiry takes root at a particular site. For Joyce that site is the intersection between need and use. When he realized, as he accepted more architectural commissions, that his work centered exclusively on private home-building clients, he began innovating creative approaches to use the scrap from those projects. In 1984, Joyce was invited by Czech blacksmith Alfred Habermann to assist in a Renaissance restoration project near Prague. A scarcity of materials even in the midst of enormous industrial output, which was diverted to military use in the Soviet Union, meant that Habermann's scrap bucket consisted of only a handful of pieces, yet even the smallest of these would be forged into rivets. This experience cemented Joyce's commitment to creative re-use.

Joyce's folded vessels resulted from his architectural scrap. They express in their seamed and layered compositions experiments in proportional geometry. *Fibonacci Bowl*, named after the 12th century Italian mathematician, was designed based on the geometry of the golden section – the ratio on which Greek Temples were laid out and built. The proportionality of Joyce's other vessels ally to a natural order of numbers, like the spiral pattern of rows of seeds in a sunflower. Yet, the bowl folded to the formula was lifeless without the force of fire and hammer. The unfolding, then, of the object became metaphoric for the replicating impulse of nature.

For the historian of iron, the Tesuque, New Mexico flea market is a living treasure trove. Joyce's acquisitions of iron objects (so many at one point that he hid the booty in the shop bathroom shower) have facilitated both his historic and ethnographic knowledge, and his interest in curatorial projects. Joyce lent about a third of the objects to *Life Force at the Anvil*.

In reading Joyce's notes in *Life Force at the Anvil* one comes to see how smithing permeates into even the furthest corners of his experience. Camping in Iceland several summers ago





above
Lighting Centerpiece, Phoenix
Museum of History, 1998
forged iron, mica
90 x 192 x 108"
Photograph by Nick Merrick

above left
Lighting Centerpiece, detail
Phoenix Museum of History
Photograph by Nick Merrick

with his wife Julie and daughters Kate and Irene, Joyce and his family came upon a stunning discovery. They had pitched their tent among hillocks and dunes where the sea grasses had eroded away, leaving barren footprints marked with encrustations of hollow iron tubes. The geologically occurring iron had been created from the plants' contact with mineral-rich seawater. The Joyces' *discovery* was one the Vikings had come upon centuries before, and used as their primary source of smelting iron. The find for Joyce was rendered more significant because rolled mild steel bar used in blacksmithing today is a composite material with an ever diminishing content of virgin iron. Hence all iron-containing objects – shopping carts or kitchen knives, for instance – are by extension metaphors for sustainability and duration.

On a day that some college students visited the studio, they encountered a working session under way. Three truckloads full of objects, collected from an abandoned homeless encampment along the banks of the Rio Grande near Bernalillo: diverse industrial refuse – old sign boards, engine parts, refrigerator cooling coil, barb wire, chain link, high chairs, box strapping, mattress springs – was neatly piled on the shop floor, awaiting compression in the hydraulic

press and a sustained process of forging, boraxing, hammering, and shaping. Out of this process Joyce seeks patterns by which to sculpt, panel by individual panel, a gate.

The gate, finished five weeks later, combines an impression of armor and diacritical gloss. Seventy relief panels jut subtly from a matrix of panels with apertures big enough for fingers to reach through. The miniaturization and compaction that Joyce has achieved are metaphoric of his belief that the ground of blacksmithing is affiliated with all previous ground. Significantly, the flotsam selected from the river is literal materialization of the human community both invited in and excluded by the museum gate.

Concurrently, Joyce wrote and won a grant to train students identified as being at risk of quitting school in smithing methods. Ninety percent of the sum is directed to compensating students for their labor while they learn. A critical goal of the project – re-imbuing the

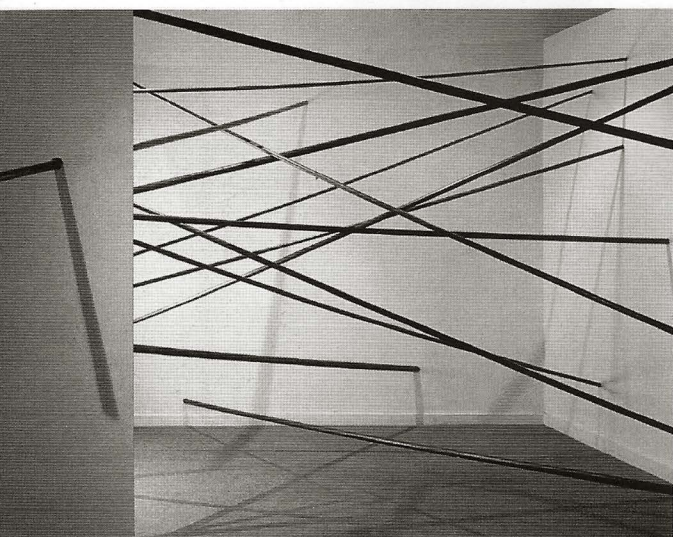
knowledge of the students' own history through hands-on practice – reflects Joyce's commitment to community.

Of the many meaningful projects that Joyce has created, none mean more to him personally than the crafting of the baptismal font for the Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community of Santa Fe. Conscious of the basin's ritual significance as locus of memory, Joyce has said that the font represents the next generation's immersion in the life stories of their forebears. He invited parishioners to donate iron objects that held special personal significance. With an archivist on hand to record the stories in writing, Joyce received the memories in material form: a key a nun found on the day she decided to pledge, a garden fence from a grandparents' plot, tire chains, wagon parts, and a Penitente nail from a *Morada* that burned down.

Physical reinstatement – the method of actually attaching a project's belonging to a community and congregation by acceptance of their gifts – is signature Joyce.

Yet equally revealing is a project he based not on reinstatement but on dispersal. When, at his SNAG talk, Joyce showed slides of cellular structures of the human body and enlargements under a microscope of the granulitic forms of metal, he was certainly recalling his *Pyrophyte* sculptures. *Pyrophyte* was coined by Joyce to describe the process in nature by which a seed germinates from fire.

Joyce's dances with fire are an ongoing routine: selecting a glove that won't singe a finger, snuffing a spark that is making a burning smell in the shop, segmenting the pattern in a metal



above
Pierced Room Installation
mild steel
240 x 240 x 240"
Photograph by Nick Merrick

right
Room Divider
forged iron
60 x 220 x 16"
Photograph by Nick Merrick



section heated to 2000 degrees. There is no better place to witness this choreography than in *Pyroglyphs*, a video of Joyce sculpting, made by Steina Vasulka, an international video artist originally from Iceland who resides and works in Santa Fe. Vasulka's previous video work favored elemental imagery such as the pounding surf or the screaming air brakes of a semi. In Joyce's shop she found a new manifestation of the Norse God's lair, ringing with the percussive insistence of air hammers: the offering of hand to fire in the creative venture.

Joyce, who has closely attended to the role of the book as both a perpetuator and diminisher of human memory (before books, memory was retained through oral tradition) found piles of abandoned books near the Santa Fe dump. He worked instinctually to make out of these books a body of sculpture emblematic of knowledge's use and disuse. In a microchip society the book approaches obsolescence. The sculptures anticipate in their transformations the changing meanings of the modern and the contemporary. In the resultant sculptures the volumes have often totally disintegrated in contact with heat, until all that remained was a gaseous resin, a phantom. Impressed on a tablet or platen is a light char and the impress of still visible words imprinted onto the plate. Another work, hanging as a pendulum near the studio doors contains 700 pounds of compressed newspaper – a powerful totem.

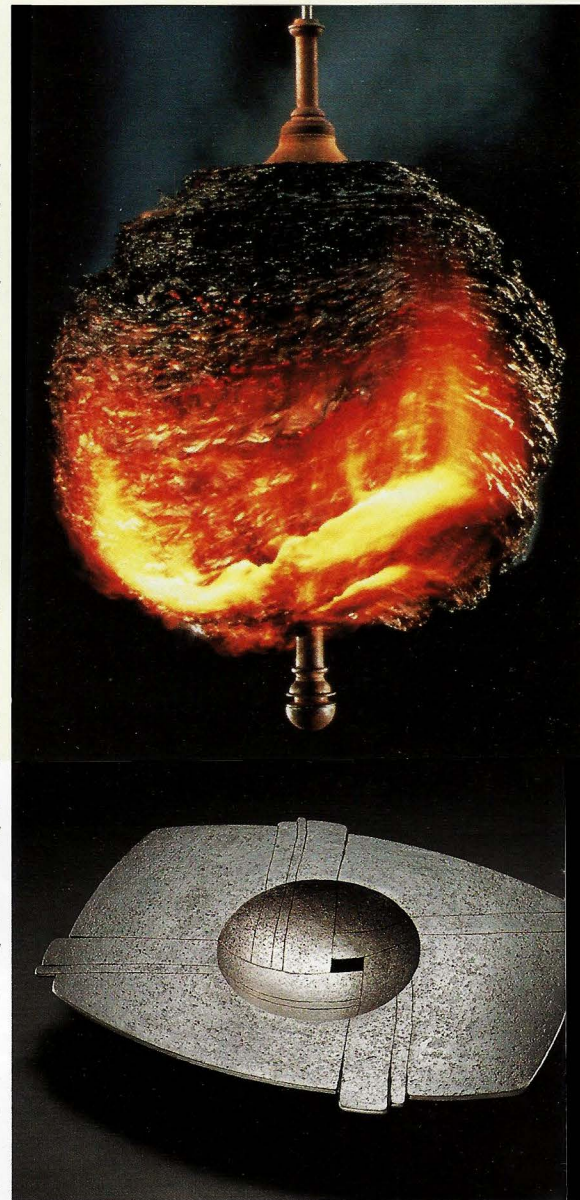
In Joyce's work one has to visualize the past and future encroaching upon one another by means of consistent consciousness. Every item coming into his hands – whether mild steel bar, or an iron-rich object – preserves a history. This history in turn reminds one that to work with metal is to reactivate its embedded meaning.

The weighty lighting centerpiece that now hangs in the Phoenix History Museum incorporates mica in its vaulting, aspiring wings. The wings are a visual referent to plow points, and the mica a material that conveys the idea of the fire by which the phoenix symbolically rises from ash. Joyce suggests that the light expresses a turbulent glowing cloud. Its position inside the history museum institutes a prolonged awareness that in Phoenix, as in blacksmithing, every civilized refinement finds its history in fire.

When Joyce makes something or stands beside what he's made, he expresses a benevolence between people and objects. In Joyce's hands, objects express the act of embracing. ■

To order catalogs of *Life Force at the Anvil: The Blacksmith's Art from Africa* or to make a contribution, contact Tom Joyce, P.O. Box 5311, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502; or call Ligia Bouton at 505-982-0485. Ninety percent of the proceeds from the exhibition catalog will be used to fund the International Metalsmithing Scholarship for research in forged metal arts around the world. Special care will be taken to promote exchanges in places whose blacksmithing traditions have not been well studied.

Ellen Berkovitch is a writer who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.





opposite page top

Pyrophyte

fully ignited newspaper, cast iron, cable
48 x 32 x 32"

Photograph by Nick Merrick

opposite page bottom

Rectangular pieced plate bowl, 1998

forged iron

3 1/4 x 23 1/4 x 18"

Photograph by Nick Merrick

above left

Baptismal Font, Santa Maria de la Paz, 1994

forged iron, bronze, granite

42 x 72 x 40"

Photograph by Nick Merrick

above right

Baptismal Font, Santa Maria de la Paz (detail)

Photograph by Nick Merrick