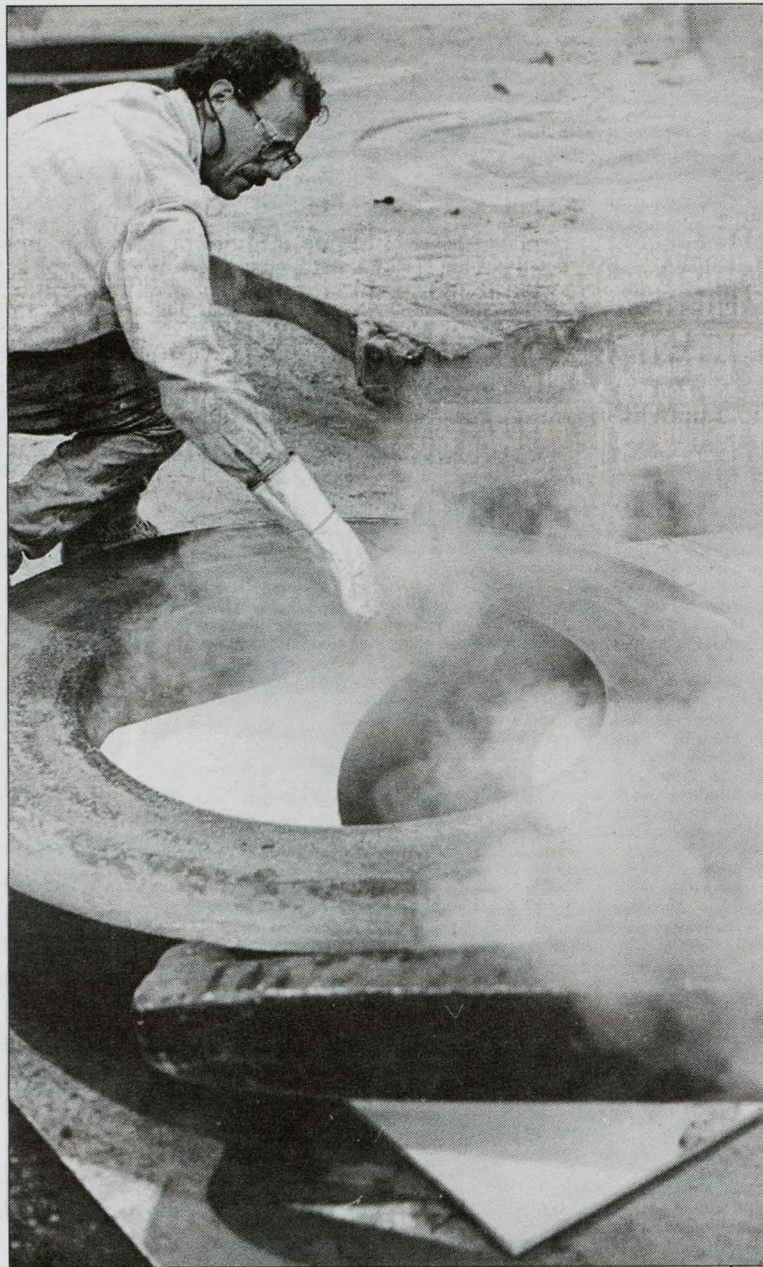


# Forging

## the language of iron

Elizabeth Cook-Romero | The New Mexican



Tom Joyce working on the charred drawing *Penumbra*

Kate Joyce

*In Africa, iron was looked at as a symbol of fertility, looked at as blood. Iron represented wealth that could be reshaped into needed objects. It was the most honored gift between a groom and a bride's family.*

**Next to the desk** at which sculptor Tom Joyce answers correspondence, there is a long window, its sill close to the ground. On summer mornings, the hundreds of forged-iron objects on the sill become black silhouettes framed by sunlight from the garden outside. The window ledge is where Joyce keeps the long, narrow objects in his vast collection — hooks and arrows on long shafts — and other mysterious shapes crafted for purposes only Joyce knows about. Other iron objects line shelves, hang on walls, and sit on tables. Some African wood carvings are mixed in.

There are too many items in Joyce's varied collection for a visitor's mind to absorb quickly. It takes time to notice the giant wooden bellows hanging from the ceiling, a row of iron betel-nut cutters from India and Pakistan, bracelets, gates, bits of fencing, door handles, and weights shaped like people and animals.

"They are my teachers, all the artifacts from Asia, Africa, Spanish America," Joyce said during a recent visit to his studio. "I didn't go through a traditional apprenticeship. I quit high school at 16." In spite of his lack of formal training, Joyce has received a long list of awards for his blacksmithing, including a 2003 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

As Joyce talked about the integrity inherent in the iron objects he has collected, he expressed an almost religious awe. The largest part of his collection dates from Spanish Colonial America, when blacksmiths created designs that made the most of the scarce metal. "Iron was looked at as a precious commodity this far north, so it was used sparingly," he said. "It was honored."

The second-largest part of Joyce's collection is African. "In Africa, iron was looked at as a symbol of fertility, looked at as blood," he said. Iron represented wealth that could be reshaped into needed objects. "It was the most honored gift between a groom and a bride's family."

Since the first smelted objects were made more than 5,000 years ago, blacksmiths have passed forging technology from generation to generation. (Forging strengthens and alters the shape of metal by realigning the grain structure under the pressure of hammering, pressing, or rolling.) Forging, Joyce said, has made possible beneficial technological advances as well as war and oppression. Blacksmiths are used even today to push technology to new levels: they enable large-scale

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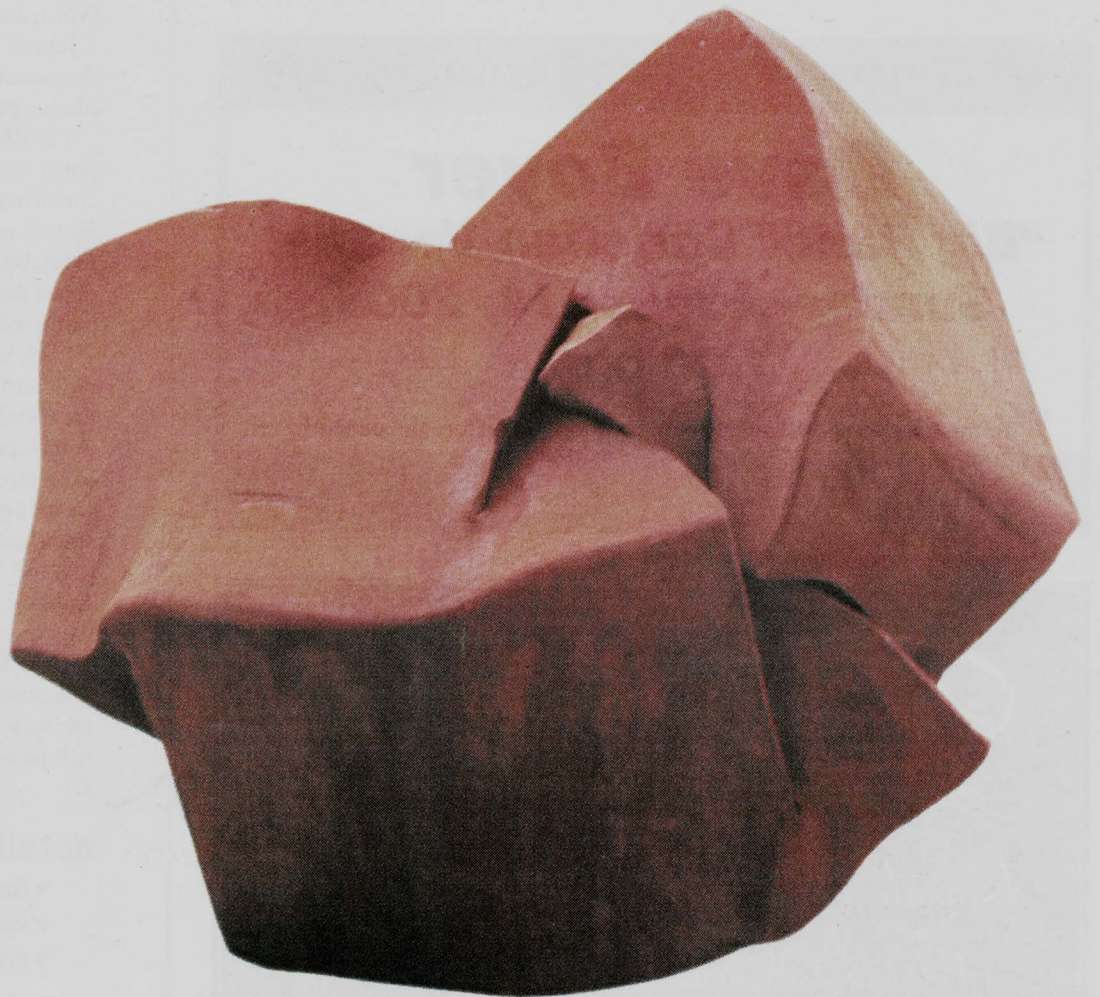


Tom Joyce: *Cypher*, forged iron, 2005, 16 x 54 x 7 inches

Left, *Penumbra 7*, charred drawing on board, 2005, 48 x 24 inches

Below, *Berg*, forged iron, 2005, 36 x 41 x 36 inches

Photos courtesy Evo Gallery



projects such as the manufacture of giant shafts for paper mills or the anchoring of oil-drilling rigs to the deep ocean floor, he said. That large corporations use hardened metals to gain control of the global economy and government contractors use blacksmiths to make weapons clearly does not sit well with Joyce. "Blacksmiths will always be at the source of conflict, designing the latest advancements for warfare," he said.

Joyce's newest body of sculpture grew from his sense of responsibility about how forging is used today. Most of the work in *Sotto Voce: Sculpture and Drawings* at EVO Gallery was manufactured at Scot Forge in Spring Grove, Ill. There Joyce worked for two and a half months with a team of four that included a blacksmith and his apprentice. The giant machines they used to fabricate Joyce's sculpture have been used to make parts for weapons and giant construction projects that threaten to destroy and tame every wilderness on our planet, the sculptor said. He said he tried to keep the works created at Scot Forge playful and soft in hopes that people will be drawn to them. But he also hopes that after experiencing initial delight, viewers will then ask why he made them.

The works in the *Cypher* series look like giant iron books. The "writing" echoes that of Mesopotamian scribes, who developed cuneiform script around 3200 B.C. The ancient scribes wrote by pressing styluses into wet clay tablets. Joyce "wrote" by pressing pieces of obsolete test metals into heated iron. Scot Forge keeps test metals on file for as long as they make a particular machine or structure, Joyce said. Engineers use the test pieces to understand failures or to project carrying capacities. Joyce used discarded test metals to suggest a language that is understood by few yet influences the lives of every living creature. Much like the lead books German artist Anselm Kiefer creates, Joyce's *Cypher* series brings to mind the opening verse of the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Joyce's *Bloom* series suggests divided mountains. The places where the mountains appear to have been cut into a grid create claustrophobic passageways that could be terrifying to walk through.

The *Bloom* sculpture contains a lot of iron, and that is part of the point. As long as the sculpture exists, the mass of iron used in its construction is removed from production, Joyce said. It's a futile gesture in a world filled with scrap iron. Some new iron is smelted today, but it is always mixed with old, Joyce explained. Every iron object manufactured today probably contains some metal used in a battle somewhere.

Each sculpture in the *Berg* series was constructed from one massive bar of scrap iron — cut in four places deep enough to allow the metal to crumple but not deep enough to sever it. Using the Scot Forge's powerful machines, Joyce then twisted and squeezed each bar almost to the breaking point. *Berg* was made from a 4,500 pound scrap ingot leftover from a defense contract. Its formerly straight sides have twisted and collapsed into gently ruffled ridges that bring to mind the growth of giant sponges and coral. The ingot seems to embrace itself in the places where it has folded under the pressure of twisting and pressing.

"Iron has no choice about what it is made into," Joyce said. "Blacksmiths make a choice about how this material is used. By taking it out of circulation, the iron doesn't pause, but I hope we will pause." ◀

## details

- ▼ *Sotto Voce: Sculpture and Drawings*, new work by Tom Joyce
- ▼ Reception 5-7 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 13; through Sept. 10
- ▼ EVO Gallery, 725 Canyon Road, 982-4610