

The Art of Tom Joyce

Traces of Time, Place and People

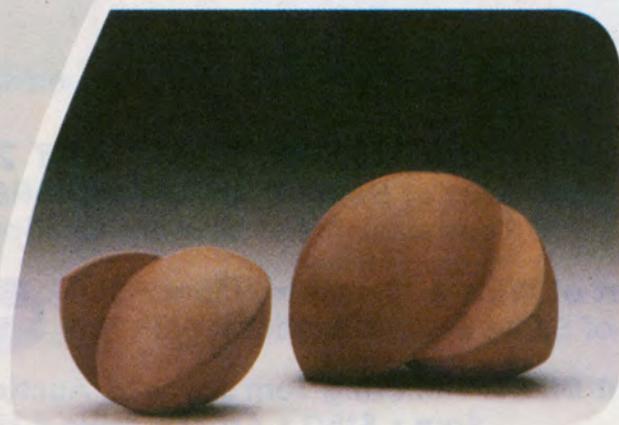
During a recent slide presentation, Tom Joyce transports his standing-room-only audience on a journey that traces the times, places and people surrounding the material he has worked with for the past three decades: Iron.

Images of planet Earth photographed from space, human blood and tissue and the North American and African continents flash across the screen. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Joyce talks about the Dogon peoples who believe that iron embodies many dualities, including male and female, blood and earth, and the potential for creation and destruction. The latter was objectified by a hoe and knife, the first implements made by ancestral Dogon blacksmiths.

A Blacksmith's Metal. Interspersed within his cultural, historical, political, and economic saga of iron is Joyce's own story. Born in 1956 in Oklahoma, he moved to the northern New Mexico farming community of El Rito as a teenager. His mother was a quilter and his father a part-time archaeologist. During his personal "field work," Joyce found near an acequia a 19th-century iron hoe blade. His curiosity about its value to the people who had patched it several times inspired him to learn more about the forge adjacent to the letterpress print shop where he worked in the summers. At age sixteen, in a remarkable leap of faith, he left school to pursue a career in blacksmithing. In 1977, he set up his own shop in Santa Fe forging gates, grills, hardware, lighting fixtures, furniture, and other architectural commissions.



New Mexico's Spanish Colonial history inspired the architectural ironwork for which Joyce became renowned. By the early 1980s, however, he was saving the scrap from his functional work and recycling it into vessels, wall pieces and sculpture that acknowledged a sense of place and honored the human history invested in the material itself. "For blacksmiths, the remembrance of our working past is critical because we use materials that have inherited meaning from tremendous histories of prior use. To utilize these metals and not take into account their multi-layered past, is to overlook one of our greatest inheritances," he says.



Sculptures of Iron. Some of Joyce's artworks are intimate, intended to be hand held, as in *Ash to Ash*, which memorializes his experience in New York, NY, on September 11, 2001. The sculpture is made of an alloy of ductile iron comprising three materials: Ash from the World Trade Center symbolizing sorrow, soil from New Mexico's Santuario de Chimayo symbolizing healing, and sand from a Tibetan Buddhist prayer mandala symbolizing peace.

More often, however, the works are larger and weightier. *Rio Grande Gates*, installed at the Albuquerque Museum in 1998, is equally sensitive to time and community. Like an archeologist, Joyce worked with a group of volunteers to salvage and document trash from the river. Metal signs, 55-gallon drums, car bodies, fencing, newspaper dispensers, shopping carts and bicycle parts were heated and folded into plates that were cut and forge-welded onto 70 panels in a quilt-like patchwork.

Developing Character. Sharing his knowledge and skills with others has always been important to Joyce. In the early 1980s, he implemented six-month to two-year apprenticeship programs for aspiring blacksmiths from around the world. During the *Rio Grande Gates* commission, he received a grant to include younger people, ages 14 to 18, in his creative process. Today, he hosts on-site classes and field trips for students from elementary school to college.



Tom Joyce (left) displays an iron sculpture in his collection as Eli Menchaca (center) and Danny Colclough look on during a December 2006 visit of students from Santa Fe High School's advanced welding class.

"People think blacksmithing requires a kind of brute force, but it is more akin to a martial art in which strength is mastered through understanding dynamics and balance," Joyce says. "It is important to introduce young people to this concept while they are still physically and mentally malleable."

While some may view the art of blacksmithing from a nostalgic past, Joyce points out that forging metal is a vital modern-day industry that continues to shape the lives of individuals and cultures. In his most recent series, *Sotto Voce*, Joyce has joined forces with blacksmiths at an industrial forge outside of Chicago. There he retrieves massive, freshly forged scrap left over from the company's contract work. Using clay models, he collaborates with a team of four who operate immense machinery to create sculptures like *Bloom*, in which ingot remnants were turned inside out by forging and folding. The work is a metaphor of Joyce's philosophy of life and art.

"In smelting terminology, *bloom* is the raw, sponge-like iron mass that forms inside an iron producing furnace," Joyce explains. "In many small-scale indigenous smelting traditions, a bloom is considered a child awaiting the development of its character whose future is determined by the blacksmith. This is why in some traditional cultures in Africa, the anvil is called mother and the hammer called father. Human creation is implied at every step of iron's manufacture. A bloom, as available material, is poised to become anything we desire. Blacksmiths have forever worked at the source of much change in the world, and I can't deny feeling this responsibility more deeply now than ever before."

-Susan Hallsten McGarry

A Decade of Distinction

Tom Joyce's resume comprises a prodigious 32 pages. It documents numerous accolades and countless exhibitions, here and abroad, as well as onsite programs for young people, lectures, articles and books. Highlights from the past ten years include: Distinguished Artist of the Year, Santa Fe Rotary Foundation for the Arts (2006). Interview included in the Oral History Program, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art (2004). John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Grant (2003). Inducted into the American Craft Council College of Fellows (2003). Honorary Award, Outstanding Contribution to the Art and Science of Blacksmithing, Artists Blacksmiths Association of North America (1996). Southwest Artist Blacksmiths Association Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Blacksmithing Profession (1996).

Joyce's sculptures and ironwork are represented in more than 30 public collections throughout the United States, including the following in New Mexico: *The Rio Grande Gates* at the Albuquerque Museum; Baptismal Font at Santa Maria de la Paz Church; Hardware and handrails in the Convento at Monastery of Christ in the Desert, Abiquiu; *Stacks*, a sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe. More than 50 objects inspired by Spanish Colonial ironwork for display and teaching use at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, and Rancho de las Golondrinas Living Museum, La Cienega.



Right
Bloom (2005), forged iron, 28 x 30 x 30 inches, collection of Robyn and John Horn.

Page 10, Top
Rio Grande Gates (1998), forged iron including salvaged materials, 81 x 141 x 10 inches, Albuquerque Museum of Art and History, NM.

Page 10, Bottom
Ash to Ash (2002), forged iron, including sand, soil and ash, left 6 x 6 x 6 inches, right 8 x 8 x 8 inches, National Metal Museum, Memphis, TN.