

# Pasatiempo

THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN'S WEEKLY ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE — JULY 14, 1995

## FIRE POWER

goodness, gracious  
great balls of ...

**F**ive hundred pounds of newspaper — stacked, punched through the center, spiraled into the shape of a ball and hanging from the ceiling — is so dense that almost all the oxygen is pressed from between the sheets.

If you try to set it on fire, only the outside edges of the newspapers will burn. Hanging, condensed so tightly, the ball seems almost weightless, like a huge, charred feather duster. But were it to swing, the ponderous mass would move the air with surprising power; its weight would be felt as an enormous presence.

In the early morning of the Information Age, when text is increasingly being compressed and transmitted electronically, this is how a blacksmith responds.

Tom Joyce created the burned ball of newspapers — and an assortment of other sculptural works involving books, balance, binding and fire — from a gut-level impulse, not thinking much until later about the metaphorical implications of the work.

He didn't intend it to be shown in a gallery. He just did it, moving from one piece to the next in an exploration of materials, forms and processes that drew on his background both as a blacksmith and a printer. "Originally, I was doing this work without a concrete reason for needing to do it — It came with a potency that required me to move it out of my mind, it was there so vividly," the soft-spoken blacksmith said as he stood in his cavernous shop, smoke from a recent project curling through a shaft of light from a high window.

"For 20 years, my work has been predominantly based on a genuine need, and there was a rational thought process to implement ideas. But with these, it was so intuitive, the entire process was like falling water, it happened so fluidly."

At one point, Barbara and Ed Okun were in Joyce's shop, saw the pieces he was working on and convinced him to show them in their gallery, where they are exhibited today through Aug. 7.

An artist's reception for Joyce's

first show of sculpture is set for 5 to 7 p.m. today at Okun Gallery, 301 N. Guadalupe.

Also, as part of the show, video artist Steina Vasulka's 15-minute video-audio creation, *Pyroglyphs*, will be shown. It was first shown in Santa Fe last winter at the Center for Contemporary Arts. In it, the sounds and sights of blacksmithing are abstracted and choreographed in elemental impressions of fire, smoke and sound.

Among Joyce's sculptural works are a row of books held in place simply by being wedged between two sections of enormous wooden beams. There are encyclopaedias wedged between wood and then bound in a circular iron band that rocks on the floor like a giant top.

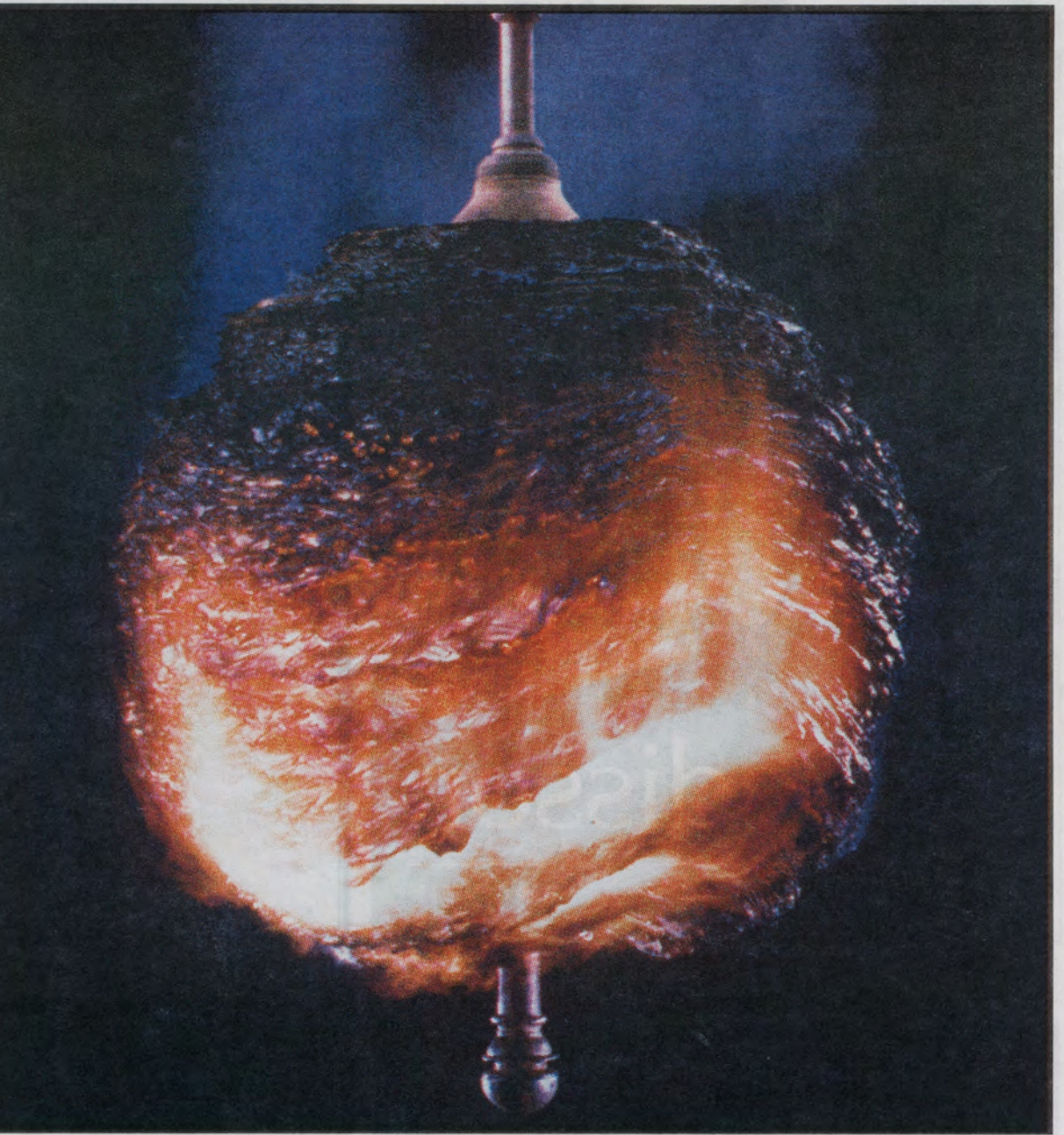
There are books (trash novels rescued from the dump for the most part) that have been vaporized between hot metal plates, leaving a gaseous impression on the steel. And there are vertical stacks of books, in patterns of (charred)



black and white, wedged between steel beams.

Fire is a blacksmith's medium, but fire also is a symbol of transformation and purification, and stands for truth and knowledge in some Christian iconography, Joyce said.

And although the concept of book burning and censorship is an obvious association, only the books that are vaporized are lost, Joyce pointed out. In the other pieces — as with the newspapers



By GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY  
Above, Pyrophyte-Charred, newspaper; left, Pyrophyte-Initial Burn, newspaper  
/Photographs by Nick Merrick

— the books are pressed so tightly together that only the edges burn.

"When a culture is in a time of transformation, it's not unlike a seed, where within a tiny kernel is encapsulated an entire tree," he said. "There's a range of plants that actually require fire to germinate. Fire and flames are ambivalent — they can be creative or destructive."

The genesis of Joyce's foray into sculpture came in part through a project he did several years ago with German artist Helmut Lohr, in which Lohr asked various artists to bind, in any way they wanted, books he had manipulated.

The project started Joyce thinking about literacy and the ways information historically has been stored and shared. When written text became prevalent, the enormous capacity for memory, cultivated by the oral tradition, was no longer needed.

In Medieval Europe, books

were the domain of the Catholic church, and the common, illiterate people were given visual symbols — in church statuary and stained glass windows — as a way of learning about religious history and hierarchy.

Now, Joyce said, the written text appears to be in danger of being eclipsed by electronic storage and transmission, again raising questions about control of information and the balance of power in society.

Not long after Lohr's show, Joyce began collecting cast-off books, not sure at first what he would do with them. He woke up in the mornings with vivid sculptural images in his mind, and drew them in tiny sketches, which he used to make the first pieces.

Later, as he was well into creating these works, he began thinking more about concepts associated with the materials and processes.

His 12-year-old daughter and a friend of hers, who helped sort

and stack newspapers for the newspaper ball, started thinking too, Joyce said.

They were amazed at how so many of the articles seemed to say the same things, and they were amazed, and then fed up, with the amount of advertising they pulled out.

### DETAILS

WHO/WHAT:  
Tom Joyce/  
Sculpture

WHEN:  
Opening reception  
5-7 p.m. today

WHERE:  
Okun Gallery,  
301 N. Guadalupe

INFO:  
Through Aug. 7