

Tom Joyce

The Iron Iceberg

BY KATHLEEN WHITNEY

When the Twin Towers fell, Tom Joyce was in New York for an exhibition of his work at the Museum of Arts and Design. Several months later, a friend sent him a vial of ash from the site. On the one-year anniversary of 9/11 while on a John Michael Kohler Art/Industry Residency in Wisconsin, Joyce decided to blend the ash into a cast iron alloy that included sand from a mandala made by Tibetan monks in Santa Fe and blessed soil from a shrine in Chimayo, New Mexico. Using this symbolic fusion of tragedy and faith, Joyce designed and cast a *vesica piscis*, a 3,000-year-old fish-shaped symbol. Common to both Christians and Muslims, the *vesica piscis* also represents the mystical Pythagorean union of the divine with the world of matter and creation. Its shape is made by the intersection of two circles of the same radius, joined so that the center of each circle lies on the circumference of the other. Joyce adapted a three-dimensional tetrahedron from the fish symbol and concealed it within the geometry of the form. His *9/11 Memorial* is small enough to be held between open palms, the human warmth condensing moisture as it meets the coolness of the metal. The sand

becomes meaningful here: Tibetan Buddhists believe that when mandala sand comes into contact with moisture it releases a prayer.

Opposite: *Bloom*, 2005. Forged iron, 28 x 30 x 30 in. Right: *Bifed II*, 2005. Forged iron, 58 x 15 x 13 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST





Bloom III,
2005
forged iron
28 x 30 x 30"
COLLECTION
OF ROBYN AND
JOHN HORN



Left: *Stacked*, 2007. Forged iron, 74 x 34 x 32 in.
Above: *Ootid*, 2005. Forged iron, 21.5 x 20 x 21 in.

“boulders” made of salvaged industrial scrap, has many participants. Its conceptual underpinnings are stated in the e-mail

sent to potential donors: “People are invited to collaborate on this international war memorial by contributing soil samples gathered from battlefields around the world. In the spirit of global collaboration, citizens in every region of the world are encouraged to participate...to acknowledge that no one is unscathed by acts of war.” The soil is concealed within a rectangular chamber in the outer surface of each solid boulder. A plaque covering the chamber identifies where, when, and between whom the battles were waged. Joyce asks participants to send a tablespoon of soil along with any written or oral history describing the site. Several archaeologists have sent him soil samples from locations that have seen multiple battles, prehistoric and historic.

The solidity and weight of the *Memorial* are surprising. The object seems too small to be so heavy. The work was broken out of the resin-bonded sand mold as soon as the solidifying skin had formed on its surface. As the outside cooled, the hidden tetrahedron (where the *vesica* intersects) shrank and tore apart. This smooth, flawless form, minimal and Brancusi-esque, conceals a fractured interior invisible to the viewer. The symbolic dichotomies of this concealment, sensed but unseen, are fundamental to much of Joyce’s recent work.

In response to regional and global conflicts, past and present, Joyce began an ongoing project focused on the perennial customs of warfare. *Iron Cairn*, a reliquary memorial constructed from forged iron

The title, *Iron Cairn*, embodies meaning and intention: a cairn is a usually rounded heap of stones, used to mark trails, gravesites, or battlefields. Joyce’s project carries all of these functions. Each boulder represents past facts starkly resurrected, a genealogy of holocausts or localized hostilities. This subtle conjunction of past history and contemporary reality gives the project considerable emotional impact. Joyce has completed 100 or so boulders, each one different in terms of size and shape. He plans to continue making them until they can’t be seen within the confines of a room. Such superfluity will demonstrate a simple truth—that much of the earth’s surface has at one time been a battlefield. Joyce also intends to archive the project in a book that will include interviews, essays, and histories of each battlefield, as well as photo-documentation of the project.

On March 20, 2008, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan became the first recipient of the MacArthur Award for International Justice. In recognition of his humanitarian achievements, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation gave Annan an iron bowl forged by Joyce. Annan’s bowl is the first of seven intended for future award recipients. Joyce’s process embodies the award’s meaning and significance. The bowls are made from a length of material determined by the global average of human height, a measurement that symbolizes the individual’s responsibility for just action. Each bowl includes seven folds representing the continents, and each is forged differently to reflect the



Above and detail: *Cypher*, 2005–06. Forged iron, 16 x 56 x 7.5 in.

individuality of the recipients. Though all seven folds begin straight, one above the other to create a random weave, when heated to 2,200 degrees and forged flat, the layers merge. The previously straight lines become soft and curved, picking up impressions of and influencing their neighbors. No mechanical fasteners connect the folds: they are an interlocked stable form, a symbol of community and global alliance.

A series of Joyce's benches has recently been installed in front of the newly relocated Museum of Arts and Design, placed along a tree-lined, pedestrian area on Columbus Circle. The benches consist of a low cluster of seven *Two to One* sculptures forged from two solid iron cubes blind-riveted together before being squeezed under a 3,000-ton press. The cubes were skewed just enough to slide past each other without shearing the rivets and shooting apart. Combined, they weigh 35,000 pounds and range in height from 15 to 36 inches.

Since 2005, Joyce has been making his work at the Scot Forge in Spring Grove, Illinois. All of his recent sculpture has been made from iron and steel left over from the 240 million pounds of metal that the factory forges each month. Joyce selects the scrap and heats it to 2,300 degrees in an immense, gas-fired furnace. At this white-hot temperature, iron is manipulated like clay under hundreds of tons of hydraulic pressure delivered by towering presses, squeezed between flat, square dies several feet across. Thick, oxidized scale tumbles from the bulging sides of an iron ingot as the force displaces its volume sideways. The ingot is turned 90 degrees and squeezed again. The process is repeated as long as sufficient heat remains and until the desired shape is reached. Joyce works with four other men, the forge master, press operator, manipulator operator (using what resembles motor-driven tongs), and a helper. Their individual tasks must be carefully coordinated. This massive facility has given Joyce access to almost unlimited quantities of iron; in the past three years, he has used over 75 tons, more than he had used in his previous 31 years as a blacksmith.

The skin of Joyce's recent work conceals an enormous, incomprehensible weight equal to that of a truck, car, or small trailer. The 24 pieces that he exhibited together in 2005 necessitated bracing a gallery's floor. It is important to him that the forged sculptures are solid; he feels that their weight can be sensed through proximity. He often notes weight along with medium and dimensions on exhibition lists so that viewers don't assume that the sculptures are made from clay.



Bloom, made at Scot Forge, is a metaphorical response to the confidentiality agreement that Joyce signed to conceal the origins of his metal. Its nine parts are made from remnants of Scot's industrial contracts. The ingots were turned inside out by forging and folding so that their original recognizable skin is now hidden



on the inside, displaced by fresh material kneaded toward the outside. The process yields a sensually rounded top face, something like a loaf of bread. Packed together vertically into a square format, the units resemble tightly compressed lips. Their silence contains the secrets held within the limits of the agreement.

Baudelaire asserted that sculpture is necessarily primitive and close to nature, incapable of becoming civilized. This is particularly true of iron sculpture, which is made from one of the planet's most basic substances. Iron is not one of sculpture's noble metals: it can be alloyed, but unlike bronze and steel, it cannot be refined. It's hard to think of a sculptural material at a greater remove from the techno-heaven of the 21st century. Iron also marks a particular phase in civilizations, a turning point in the relationship between humans and their environment. In modern Western history, iron and steel were the ur-stuff of industrial Europe and America. Iron was the shower of gold, the godhead of capitalist fortunes and territorial aspirations. It formed armaments, locomotives, blast furnaces, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Eiffel Tower. The West was won on iron rails. Iron weapons

dominated battlefields around the world for millennia. In the ocean, iron-hulled ships were the precursors of nuclear submarines.

Even in the technological present, iron and ironworking remain dominant factors in the age-old arenas of extractive industries, manufacturing, and warfare.

Joyce's work extends this complex past. The inside of his shop and the surrounding land are stacked high with iron. As he points out, iron has always been recycled from some previous incarnation—car parts, train rails, wagon wheels, metal shopping carts, and milk crates. He is particularly interested in where his work lands within this great cycle of reuse. His work is inspired by his view of iron as a vehicle moving swiftly forward in time bearing its multi-millennial freight of economic and social meanings.

From a viewer's perspective, every object is its own appearance. But appearance is like the tip of an iceberg: beneath it lie the ideas that generated it, as well as the materials and processes that brought it into being. In sculpture, particularly, everything that makes it what it is disappears into the finished object. Joyce's *Berg*, a disembodied fragment calved off something massively larger and colder than itself, illustrates this process. The three-ton remnant of an industrial product was shaped hot into a square bar and almost cut through on each of its faces, resulting in five nearly severed sections hanging together by a thin web of connection. The weakened block of steel was then twisted 120 degrees, stood on end, and squeezed between the press dies until it almost collapsed. This extremely physical process is absorbed into the finished object. The whole point of a finish is to obscure and conceal, as much as possible, the evidence of the hand. It's like the distinction between the raw and the cooked, the source concealed beneath the veneer. In the bulk of Joyce's work, the intellectual realities that rearrange his materials float beneath the waterline of overpowering physicality. At the same time, he leaves enough of a mark for the work to retain evidence of his relationship to it. The iron's beautiful, naked skin conceals considerable expertise and labor.¹ Joyce's skill is completely experiential, relying on the marriage of that strange blurry locus called "art" with a physical, intellectual, and emotional involvement with tools and material.

Two to One I and IV, 2005. Forged iron, 2 elements, 15.5 x 20.5 x 19.5 in.; 19.5 x 24.5 x 23.5 in.



Berg V, 2005. Forged iron, 36 x 41 x 36 in.

Working with iron poses daunting physical challenges. It demands hours of hot, dangerous, repetitive labor, using an astonishing array of long-handled tools. Although iron can be worked when it's cold, only heat gives it malleability. Joyce works within the context of a history dating back millennia. He largely employs the same techniques ironworkers have used for ages: heating, fusing, folding, and forging iron with metal hammers. The process elicits a seductive, alchemical beauty, as the heated iron releases showers of sparks and oxidizes into dark surface crusts. Light and color flash and disappear into the metal. During the process, the physical state of the iron changes repeatedly until the form is saturated with all of the labor and ideas behind its creation. Joyce's forms reward viewers with a heightened awareness of the body language and surface qualities of each object. Much of his work retains the velvety, rusted surface that is iron's most familiar characteristic. Rust symbolizes time. It is the product of a glacially slow burn, the alchemical marriage of iron and air. A habitat for processes and ideas, Joyce's sculpture functions as a vehicle for conviction, innocence, and humanistic concern, particularly compelling values at this political moment. The idiosyncratic nature of his work is made possible by a number of factors: distance from a major metropolitan center, lack of exposure to the limitations of formal art training, use of a craft-based technique, and a strong sense of placement within that craft's history.²

Joyce's place within his community derives from his practice as a blacksmith. His trade has given him access to an involvement that would be difficult if not impossible

for artists in other disciplines. For the past 30 years, Joyce has shared his knowledge and experience of ironworking with students through high school and college level internships, formal apprenticeships, and currently, free classes for New Mexico youth. He has completed several commissions that involved community participation through donations of iron.

Most contemporary art exists within fixed boundaries delineated by art school language and training. This language, such as it is, offers a limited and highly codified vocabulary within which everything "refers," "references," or "contextualizes." The context of this language ensures that no object can embody a fixed stance or meaning—everything is ambiguous, mercurial, lacking in commitment. Joyce's work is distinguished from much contemporary sculpture because the craft necessary to make it is a major presence that acts as an embodying force of meaning and material. The residue of intense physical labor, what the work is and what it says are inseparable. The meaning of Joyce's work is designed to extend its value and connotation far outside the art world, offering an opportunity for passionate response and a pretext for the exchange of information.

Joyce is a significant figure in part because of his social and political convictions. His commitment to working at a scale that encompasses both local and planet-wide community makes him unusual. Because his work is grounded in process and labor, it has retained a kind of innocence and deep purpose, which allows it to occupy a space that is more than aesthetic—it's generous, intelligent, and deeply committed to the present.

Notes

¹ In 1998, Joyce curated "Life Force at the Anvil, The Blacksmith's Art from Africa" at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. He wrote the carefully researched catalogue that accompanied the exhibition.

² In 2003, Joyce was inducted into the American Craft Council's College of Fellows and also awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. In 2004, the Smithsonian Institution's Oral History Program interviewed Joyce for the Archives of American Art. On May 30th, 2007, PBS aired a documentary film including Joyce as part of the *Craft in America* series.

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