

# Navigating treacherous waters between craft and art

## ABOUT ART

MALIN WILSON



Tom Joyce has always been able to take cold, hard, gray steel, heat it in a forge and shape it on his anvil into graceful, subtle architectural objects. The current exhibition at the **Okun Gallery** marks a transition for this acknowledged master of the craft. Clearly Joyce has shifted orientation from making the useful and beautiful functional work he exhibited in the 1989 Alcove show at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Joyce has thrown himself into the more nebulous territory of art. What does this mean? That's difficult to pin down amid the clamor of chaos, complexity and diversity. It seems impossible to find a place in an ever-changing scenario without any agreed upon norms. Often, in recent times the only way to know something is art is that it has been selected by a curator or a knowledgeable dealer.

It has always seemed to me that art has different ambitions and intentions than craft: that art makes an argument, and really good art often sways and persuades us.

So, why would a master of the decorative arts who has been acclaimed around the world and has commissions backed up for years at his Santa Fe workshop (where five assistants realize his designs) jump into the confusing arena of art? Looking at the evidence — 17 pieces of his work at the Okun Gallery — it seems this talented man wants to play in his own way. The results struck me as mixed, with two very different strains of work on display — a sort of Zen-“Houdini” open fluid style, and intense, concentrated, constructed puzzle pieces.

In the “Random Folded Bowls” and nine smooshed squares of a “Wall Piece,” Zen calligraphic flair meets molten metal. These works look like deflated shapes and have exuberance, spontaneity and freshness. Then there was the other aesthetic: “Inlaid Square Bowl” was distinctly contemplative, combining a heavy dose of formalism, quite a bit of jazz nuance, and an aerial photographic perspective. A wide band of satiny metal the color of pewter, with delicately curved edges and deliciously lipped corners, frames a central panel of individually textured, silvery rectangular pieces that could only be agricultural fields as seen from an airplane. There was also an untitled wall piece in three sections that was an assemblage of metal strips that struck me as one of those key pieces that an artist should keep for him or herself — a personal Rosetta stone.

Watching Joyce's navigation of the treacherous move from craft to art promises to be worth the effort.

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COURTESY NICK  
MERRICK

Tom Joyce's  
Pieced  
Plates/Bowl is  
among 17  
pieces of his  
work displayed  
at Okun  
Gallery.

