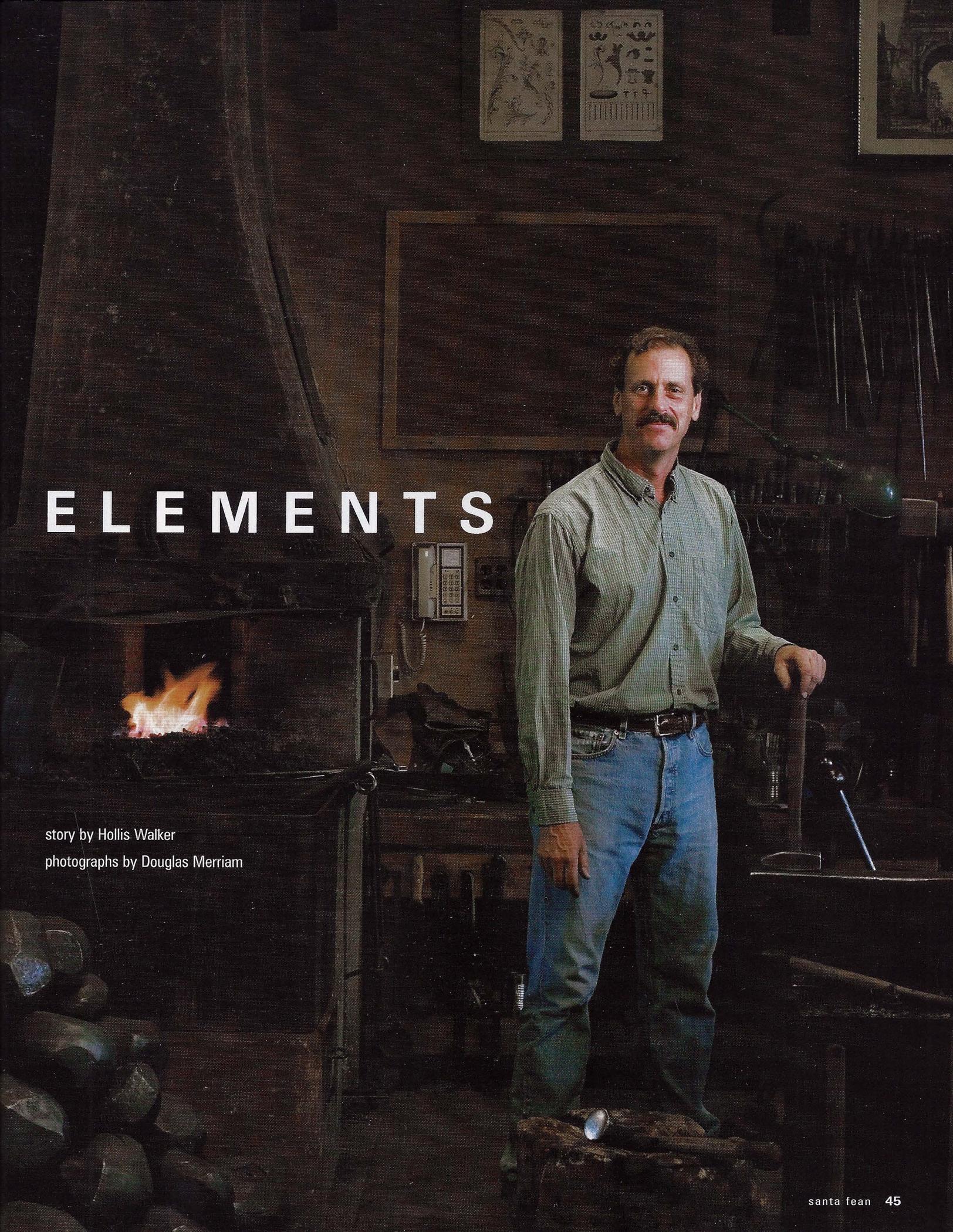




Master blacksmith Tom Joyce  
forges life and art with timeless beauty

# ESSENTIAL

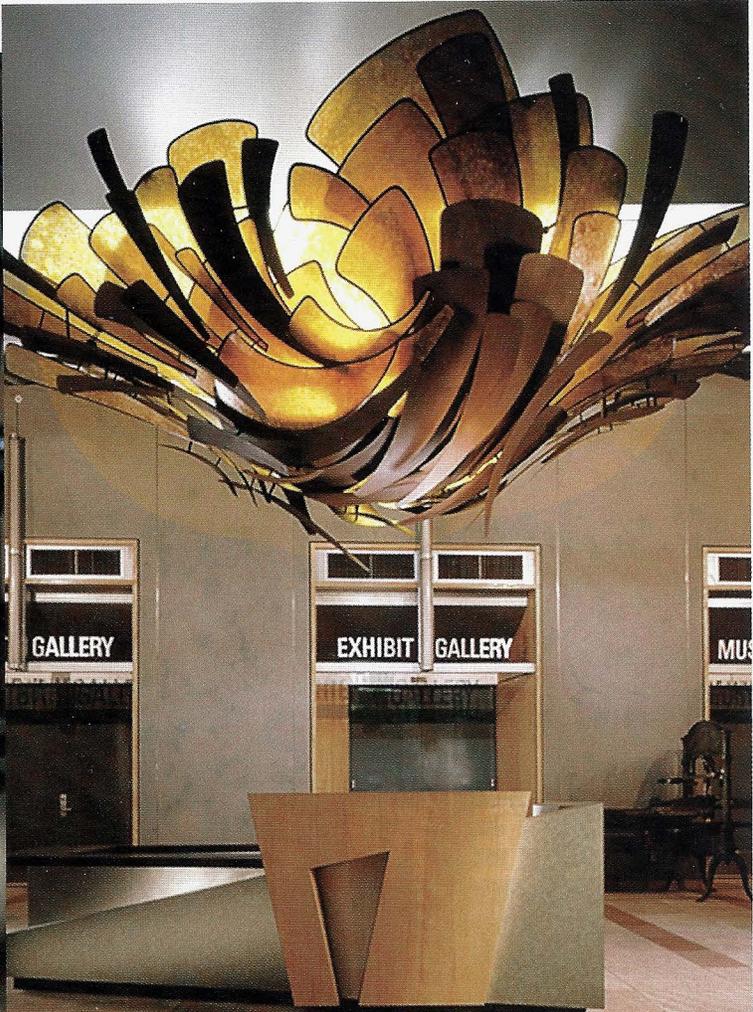
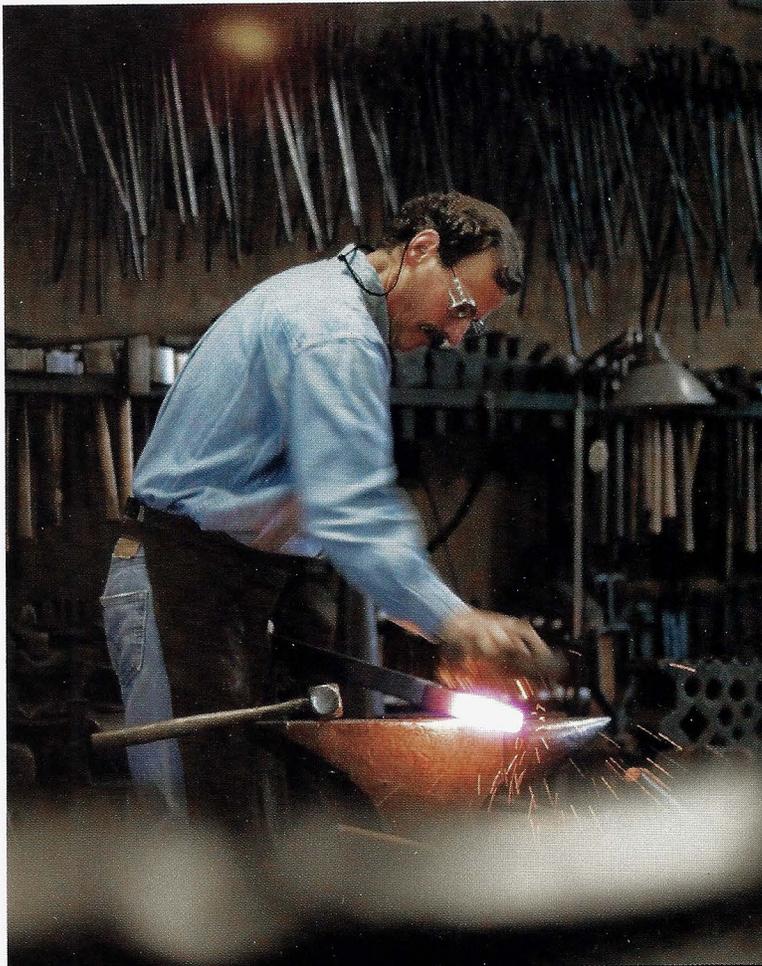
Artist at work: MacArthur Award  
winner Tom Joyce in his studio  
near Santa Fe.

A man with a mustache, wearing a light-colored striped button-down shirt and blue jeans, stands in a dark, rustic workshop. He is positioned next to a large wood-burning stove with a fire burning inside. The workshop is filled with tools, a workbench, and framed botanical illustrations on the wall. The overall atmosphere is warm and industrial.

# ELEMENTS

story by Hollis Walker

photographs by Douglas Merriam



**"THE TRADITION OF GATHERING TOGETHER MATERIALS, SMELTING THEM INTO SOMETHING NEW, IS ONGOING."**

Clockwise from top left: Tom at work; the Phoenix Museum of History's 20-foot-high light made with amber-colored sheets of mica edged in copper; Fibonacci Bowl based on principles of the 12th century mathematician; Albuquerque Museum of Art gates forged with items from a cleanup along the Rio Grande. Opposite: the baptismal font at Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community church.



**T**he view from the many windows of blacksmith and sculptor Tom Joyce's shop encompasses the piñon-spotted Cerrillos foothills, the Sandias looming in the background, the endless bright blue sky.

But the view inside is no less dramatic. Coals glow red in the forge. Well-worn handmade hammers and tongs hang in orderly rows on a wall. Ancient African ironwork, Spanish Colonial hand-forged tools, and Joyce's own iron sculptures commingle in dramatic, artful displays in the light-filled space.

On my first visit to his shop, two years ago, Joyce responded to my questions with the patience of a professor, his explanations made in the lyrical language of a wordsmith. In fact, his relationship to his elemental medium is that of a poet to words. He is in awe of iron, has studied its atomic structure, its geologic narrative, its practical use by humans on every continent. Except for meteoritic iron, there is no "pure" form of this metal on our planet; iron must be extracted from ore, and every object made with it has a dense and complicated history, he tells me now—as he did then—wonder fresh in his voice, as if he had come to that realization just yesterday.

"The tradition of gathering together materials, smelting them into something new, is ongoing," he says. "The bars of iron on my stock rack have been recycled by industry many times over and no doubt have inherited molecules from objects made hundreds if not thousands of years ago. In a way, it's as rich as the human gene pool."

It's easy to see why Joyce won the coveted MacArthur "genius" award—a \$500,000 no-strings-attached stipend given to him in 2003—why his work has been exhibited in the Smithsonian Institution, and why he will be honored this month as the Distinguished Artist of the Year by the Downtown Rotary Club. He is a great artist, true, but he is also a great thinker—one so engaged by his topic that he cannot help but share his excitement. Conversation about his work can bounce madly around like pinballs in an arcade machine, but pulsating at its core, steady as the fire in the forge, is the heat of history.

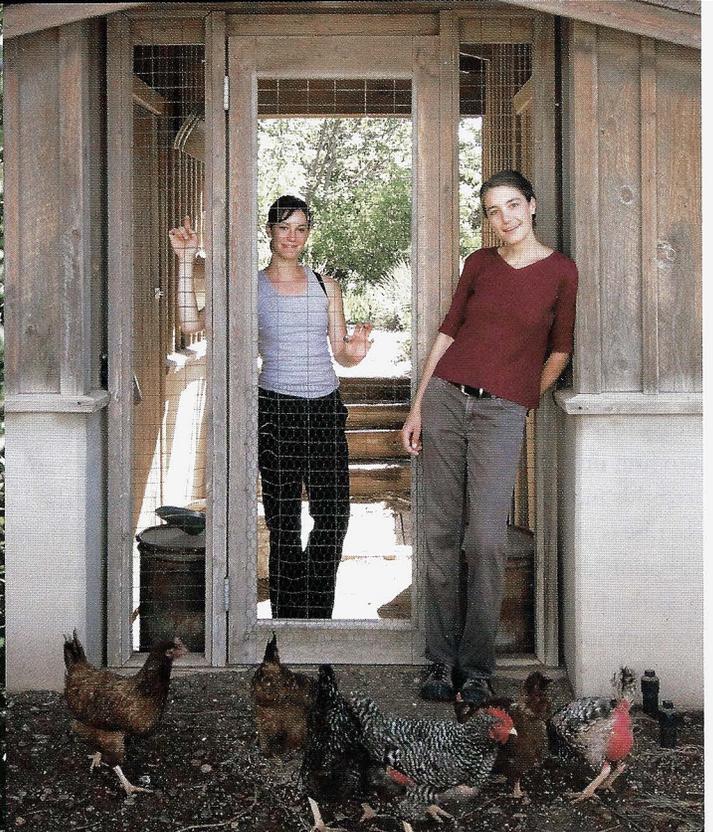
Joyce consciously integrates the past into all of his work. For the sculpture-garden entrance gates at the Albuquerque Museum of Art, he led a cleanup of the banks of the Rio Grande, engaging youth to gather bits and pieces of rusty metal—from mattress springs to car parts—that he then incorporated into the gates in grids of conflated history. For the baptismal font at Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community church in Santa Fe, he asked parishioners to donate pieces of iron that held significant meaning to them; each gift was heated, folded, and forged into a wide band that encircles the hemispherical bronze font. Santa Maria's children are now bathed in the





**"MEMORIES OF ALL OUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY ARE FOUND IN THE PATINA OF THE HOUSE ITSELF."**

Clockwise from top left: the Joyce's master bedroom; Tom in the garden; daughters Irene and Kate in the doorway of the rain-harvesting chicken coop; even the wildlife gets custom treatment, including this Joyce-forged birdbath. Opposite: adobe bricks drying in the yard under the watchful eye of the family dog, Qualia.



ancestry of their community as they begin their spiritual lives in the church. When a friend sent him ashes from the World Trade Center site after 9/11, Joyce cast them into an editioned memorial sculpture based on the *vesica piscis*, a fishlike geometric symbol common to Christian and Islamic cultures.

In the last few years, the MacArthur grant has allowed Joyce to focus on large-scale sculpture. His latest body of work was created at an industrial forge outside Chicago and finished in back of his Santa Fe shop. Joyce was given access to the factory's scrap material—everything from weaponry to heavy construction equipment rejects—just minutes after it was wrested from the manufacturing process. Massive chunks of molten metal were drawn down, folded inside out, cut, twisted, and squeezed into large blocky forms that bear witness to their previous use. It's a historical *pas de deux*. As Joyce points out, virtually all of today's iron is recycled, and now he has purposefully reused it yet again—as art.

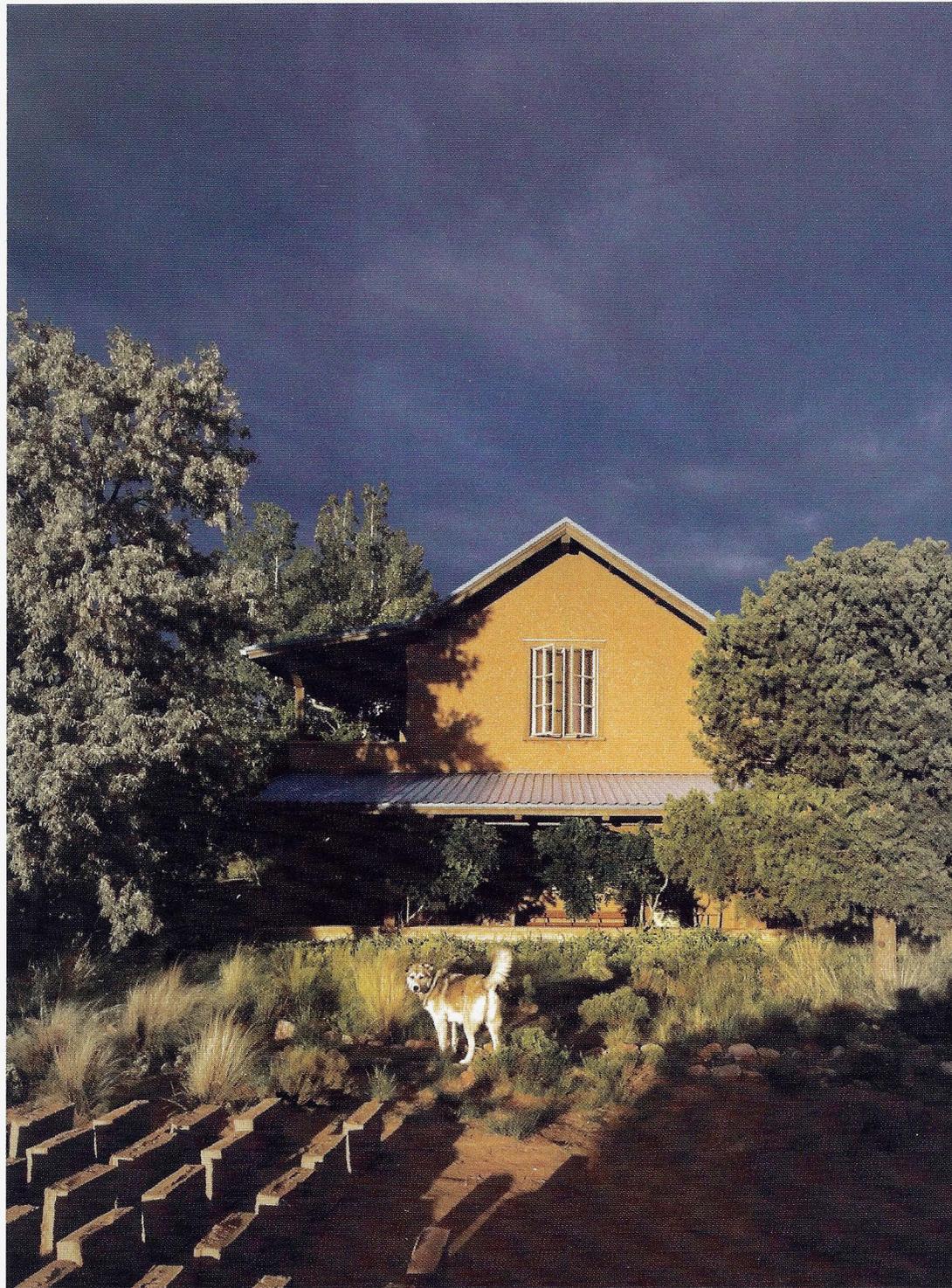
Joyce's earliest work saluted history, too, though in a purely functional framework. He grew up in Oklahoma and New Mexico. At age 14, he began training with blacksmith Peter Wells in El Rito, northeast of Abiquiú, and by age 16 he had dropped out of high school to pursue the trade full-time, repair-

ing farm tools and forging objects for everyday use. Eventually he moved to Santa Fe, taking up residence in a chicken shed on a property his mother rented on West Alameda and setting up his smithy there in 1977. Soon, his more complex architectural work was in high demand, and his bowls and other design objects began selling in local galleries.

His personal life bloomed, too. He met and married Julie, a dancer who relocated from Montana to Santa Fe in 1978. The new couple at first lived in the former chicken coop where their daughter, Kate, was born in 1979. They then turned a garage into an 800-square-foot house that witnessed the arrival of their second daughter, Irene, in 1983. But by 1986, the space issue, for family and smithy, had reached critical mass. That year, the couple found the five acres south of the city on which they now live. The first order of business was building Joyce's shop, which he designed himself. "I had been dreaming about a shop where I could raise my hammer without hitting the ceiling," he says.

The resulting space is a 2,400-square-foot rectangular adobe building with 14-foot ceilings, skylights, windows, and an office. A giant furnace, numerous drill presses, and other large machines take up one end of the shop; iron bars, Joyce's primary medium, are stored on racks at the opposite end, where massive doors allow for easy access.

Huge tables on rollers provide working areas for sketching, assembling, and finishing works. CONTINUED ON PAGE 80



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 49 and a forge takes center stage along one long wall. Tacked everywhere are sketches of past projects and antique signs (“WE HAMMER IRON AND STEEL FOR A LIVING”) that celebrate Joyce’s and his profession’s histories. Infused with its own ancient and contemporary symbolism, the shop functions as the womb of his creativity. “I’m in the shop every day,” he says. “This space shelters the fuel and inspiration for the work.”

When the studio was completed, Tom and Julie began working on the house. Applying his design skills, he drew interior layouts and elevations, using overlays each time he and Julie changed their minds about specifics, finding inspiration in the work of friends, including Jerry West and Charlie Southard. “It was a flip book, in a way. I hadn’t had any training in architectural drawing,” he says. But the illustrations look as if a professional made them, down to Joyce’s neat, all-caps notations. A local architect reviewed the plans to make sure they met engineering standards.

It took two years to complete the house, a two-story, pitched-roof, L-shaped passive-solar adobe with a 40-foot-long solarium along the south side. The Joyces hired subcontractors and friends with expertise to handle some tasks, but the couple put in 40 to 60 hours a week laying adobe bricks; chamfering and staining beams, doors, and windows; constructing *bancos*, built-in bookshelves, stone end tables, and flagstone floors; and mud-plastering outside walls. The exterior mud is protected with a base skirt of large river rocks the Joyces gathered.

The kitchen and living areas are on the ground level, along with an east suite that includes a sitting area, bathroom, and two bedrooms. Upstairs on the east side is a guest bedroom. The master bedroom and bath are opposite. Now that the Joyces’ daughters have left home, one room has been converted into a sketching studio, and another houses Joyce’s ethnographic art library and extensive collection of African ironwork.

Despite its 3,200 square feet, the house feels intimate and comfortable. Thousands of books line shelves. And all the architectural accoutrements—banisters, door handles and hinges, mica and iron sconces, the living-room fireplace grate and tools—were created by Joyce, who melded the antique feel of hand-forged work with his own contemporary aesthetic. Hinges undulate like wide ribbons and connect with the door only where they are fastened to the wood. A stair banister ends in energetic, playful curlicues. “I was thinking of turbulence in water,”

Joyce explains. Doorknobs were created by stretching strips of steel like extruding clay, then looping and knotting them into a sphere, like “cinnamon rolls gone awry,” he says.

The plant-filled solarium provides indirect sun that makes daytime lighting almost unnecessary. The passive-solar effect creates a convective loop that provides 80 percent of the house’s heating, with radiant-floor back-up. “It’s just a matter of opening the house up during the day and closing it at night,” Joyce says. A southwest-facing portal allows the family to sit outside and enjoy the mountain vistas. Once the house was complete, the Joyces put in their vegetable garden, fruit trees, and even a well-designed chicken coop. They water the garden from a 10,000-gallon cistern that collects rain from the house—and the henhouse.

Their home, including its orderly surroundings—the garden, native plantings, sculptures by Joyce and artist friends, Joyce’s shop—is the crucible of their rich lives. While Julie stopped dancing in her

### honoring Tom Joyce this month

Tom Joyce will be presented with the Downtown Rotary Club’s Distinguished Artist of the Year Award at a gala starting at 6 PM on October 13 at the Scottish Rite Temple, 463 Paseo de Peralta. The event includes dinner and silent and live auctions and benefits the club’s Foundation for the Arts, which in the past decade has contributed \$250,000 to arts programs for Santa Fe youth. Joyce joins an august body of past winners, including painter Agnes Martin, sculptor Allan Houser, architect William Lumpkins, photographer Barbara Van Cleve, straw-inlay artist Eliseo Rodriguez, and others. Tickets are \$150. For information, call Brian McPartion, 505-982-6256.—*H.W.*

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mid-thirties, she’s now occupied in professional and volunteer positions assisting the developmentally disabled. She’s always shared the administrative workload of Joyce’s business affairs. Kate is a Santa Fe-based freelance photographer. Irene spent the last two years as a professional dancer with the Göteborg (Sweden) Opera Ballet, following four years as part of the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. She’s currently back home for an extended visit.

“Memories of all our friends and family are found in the patina of the house itself,” Joyce says, his feelings about their home extending to his larger philosophy of life.

“I’ve been thinking about iron’s role in geology,” I remember Joyce musing at our first meeting, two years ago. “The earth’s iron deposits were laid down 3.5 billion years ago, during a process that helped produce the first oxygen for our atmosphere. To this day, we are reminded of this, given that iron helps oxygenate our blood.” He adds: “This process of cycling through has always played a fundamental role in how I think about the world. If I’m making even a piece of door hardware, that access across a threshold, that moment when the present becomes past—to not think about those connections would be a great pity.” **Sf**