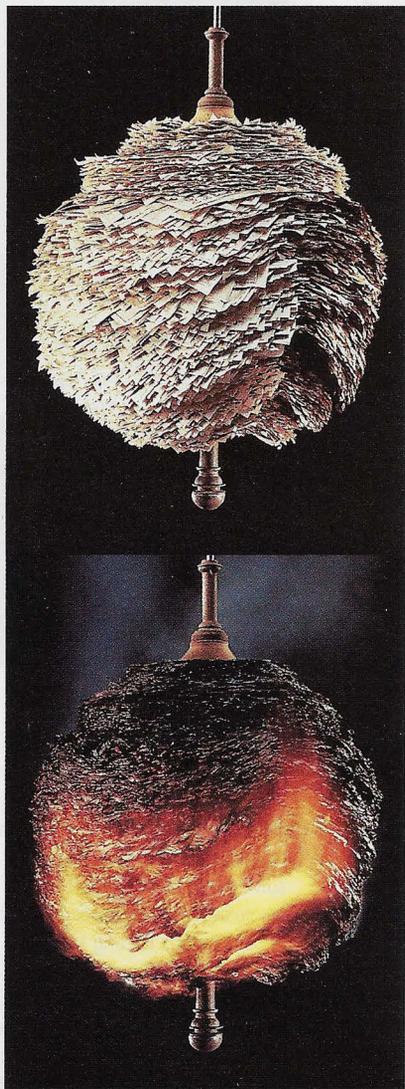


## Tom Joyce: Genuine Work

by Kathleen Whitney



**Above: *Pyrophyte*, 1995. Newspaper, cast iron, and cable, 48 x 32 x 32 in. Views of the work unburnt and fully ignited.**

According to John Cage, “the object is a fact, not a symbol.” Because of their facticity, objects become inductors for associations with ideas or actual symbols. It is this grounding in “fact” that gives the objects of metalsmith Tom Joyce a particular conceptual stability as they move with no apparent conflict between function and aesthetics.

Joyce is preoccupied with the creation of objects that can act as vehicles for apprehending experience. His attention to fabrication and overall design is a way of placing a kind of “marker” in the consciousness of the viewer. The technique of blacksmithing, with its use of iron bar, is particularly apropos to this endeavor since the contemporary iron bar is composed of recycled metals, discarded remnants from the industrial present and recent past.

Two commissions completed within the past five years illustrate how Joyce goes about embodying histories and relationships through his use of materials. To create the iron rim of the bronze baptismal font for Santa Maria de la Paz in Santa Fe, he asked parishioners to donate pieces of metal or entire objects that had personal meaning or represented an important memory. Among the contributions he received were garden fencing from a grandmother’s garden plot; an old key found by a woman on a pilgrimage to Nazareth (20 years before she decided to enter a convent); hardware that represented the last remains of a house destroyed in a fire; a Nash Metropolitan car jack from the last car the parish priest owned before entering the seminary. Joyce combined these and numerous other fragments to create a multi-layered historical matrix: children are baptized within the melded accoutrements of their ancestral and community roots. An archive at the church documents the sources of donated metal and includes videotaped interviews with the donors.

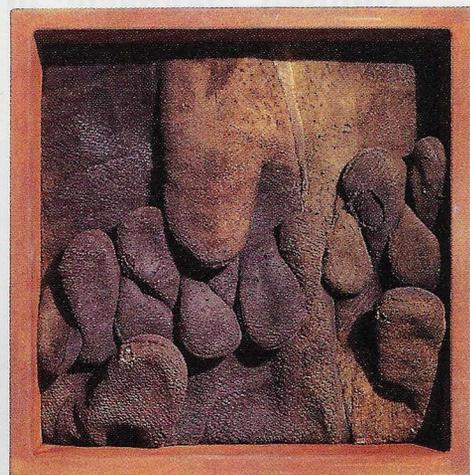
Commissioned to design gates for the sculpture garden at the Albuquerque Museum, Joyce, with volunteers from Albuquerque and Santa Fe,

gathered his materials from the banks of the Rio Grande. The iron refuse they collected included box springs, car parts, barbed wire, 55-gallon drums, car bodies, shopping carts, metal signs, bottle caps, nails, and bicycle parts. As the objects were retrieved, they were catalogued for an archive in the manner of archeological specimens. After cleaning and photographing, they were forged into plate-sized billets and fixed into 70 panels riveted together in a patchwork of detritus. During this project, Joyce established a mentoring program to offer young adults the opportunity to learn metalworking skills while collaborating with him.

Joyce’s “Self Portrait Series” uses fragments of his work clothes, leather apron, work shirt, gloves, and boots. Underscoring the dangers of this process, all of the pieces are scorched, pock-marked, and riddled with burns. They are secured by an enclosing, compressing iron frame, which holds them in tension, not unlike an embroidery hoop. These works embody clues to the risks blacksmithing poses, such as the fact that it is done at temperatures exceeding 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. The “Self Portrait Series” reveals Joyce’s relationship to his work; he perceives himself as an adjunct to it, part of a history and a technique that supersedes and directs him. The technique dictates its forms and involves a distinct level of arduous, genuine labor, sharpening, pounding, folding, joining. Ultimately the technique makes the object.

Fire and iron represent transformation to Joyce. For the past six years he has been engaged with a series constructed around an imagined biological form he calls a “pyrophyte.” Joyce defines this term as “a seed requiring fire scarification in order to germinate.” Like all living things, fire requires oxygen; just as the human body requires iron to oxygenate the blood, Joyce elides a substance generally thought of as inorganic with the seed and the natural world. His “pyrophytes” rely on discarded books and newspapers in

Clockwise from right: *Bridge*, 1994. Wood, books, and iron, 60 x 57 x 16 in. *Self-Portrait* (detail), 1998. Mild steel and mixed media, 7-part wall piece, 10 x 100 x 4 in. *Ten Fold*, 1998. Forged iron, 5 x 14 x 11 in.



combination with a variety of other materials: forged iron, heavy wooden beams, and chain. Every piece is formed or scarred in some way by fire.

*Pyrophyte*, which sways pendulum-like at the end of a length of cable, is a dense mass of extremely compressed newspaper, held in tight compression by means of an iron rod. Joyce relates this work to a physical sensation: feeling the chest so tightly compressed that it's impossible to breathe. In the case of *Pyrophyte*, extreme physical compression so totally removed air from the core that the newspaper couldn't burn; the text at the center is still legible between the ashen edges.

In related pieces, Joyce tightly compresses books within heavy steel and wood frames, which are then grooved, seared, and substituted by means of fire. The wood and metal binding the books together are formally elegant, creating a symbol of enormous potency. *Bridge* can be seen as a visual demonstration of the term "censorship": two massive wood beams, suspended by chain supports, hold together the volumes of an encyclopedia through nothing more than compression; the books are so tightly squeezed that they are unremovable and thus unreadable.

Joyce's burnt, compressed, and suspended texts are iconographically complex and layered; to him, books and reading represent a form of direct experience and symbolize the way in which the body itself retains information. The pyrophytes illustrate the way experience is literally transformed into the body's own physical substance within the brain. The book is used as a metaphor for direct experience. Joyce perceives our culture's overdependence on information technologies as inherently dangerous, something more likely to accelerate cultural loss rather than prevent it.

Tom Joyce's fascination with the historical roots and social significance of blacksmithing has led him to develop objects that erase distinctions between the functional and the aesthetic. His work can be seen as a series of answers to problematic questions raised during the course of this century: how does one "be" an artist? What is the nature of the art task? What functions do the art object

and the artist fulfill? The work Joyce has produced in response to these questions may represent a new paradigm for the art job of the future.

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