

TOM JOYCE: SOTTO VOCE

EVO GALLERY
725 CANYON ROAD, SANTA FE

An essential trait of an artist is that he be born an experimenter, with an awakened instinct for adventure—thus does he continually disclose new aspects and qualities in familiar media. Likewise, the underlying ideas themselves will have their different “feels,” their qualitative aspects, impacting on the work just as much as anything else. They are important components in reckoning the effect of Tom Joyce’s most recent forged-metal pieces, ironworks whose abstract qualities of design, though immediately captivating in their own right, have an intense vitality that reflects a deeper, fuller meaning as well. That his work over the years has been consistently interesting, robust, and invigorating is no surprise, given that Joyce has been honing his intimate relationship with fire and iron since he was thirteen, when he began fashioning tools for farmers under the tutelage of a blacksmith in his hometown, El Rito. A low-key, though nonetheless iconic presence in Santa Fe, the artist has throughout his career further nurtured his instinctive sculptural sensibility through an ongoing and literal dialogue with the indigenous blacksmithing cultures of Africa, where the role of the blacksmith has had considerable implications within the community since 500 AD. Thoughtful consideration of metallurgical processes, their impact on mankind, and warfare has affected Joyce’s conception of himself as a blacksmith/artist and his self-imposed keen sense of responsibility. His work is the sum total of his environment—both psychic and physical—and of a thoughtful breadth of ideas, which include a unique intellectual constellation of learned assumptions based on the history of the blacksmith’s role since man first learned to smelt and forge iron. And whether we are aware of it or not, all of this influences the effects of his compositions on the viewer.

This enigmatic, seemingly mild-mannered sculptor, who just happens to embrace the most volatile and inherently most violent of all mediums—fire and iron—as his choice of creative expression, is currently showing sumptuous ironworks and drawings that he made during a recent two-and-a-half-month stay at Scot Forge, located just outside of Chicago. In the context of working in this mighty industrial facility, no doubt the artist grew brand new extravagant wings in assuming the role of a mastermind designer, empowered to direct an extraordinarily capable and willing team in the creation of artworks that fully exploits the unprecedented opportunities afforded by the harnessing of monumental and multiple industrial tools. Imagine large, mechanically operated hammers, a hydraulic press weighing 1,250 tons—this is fabrication on a grand scale.

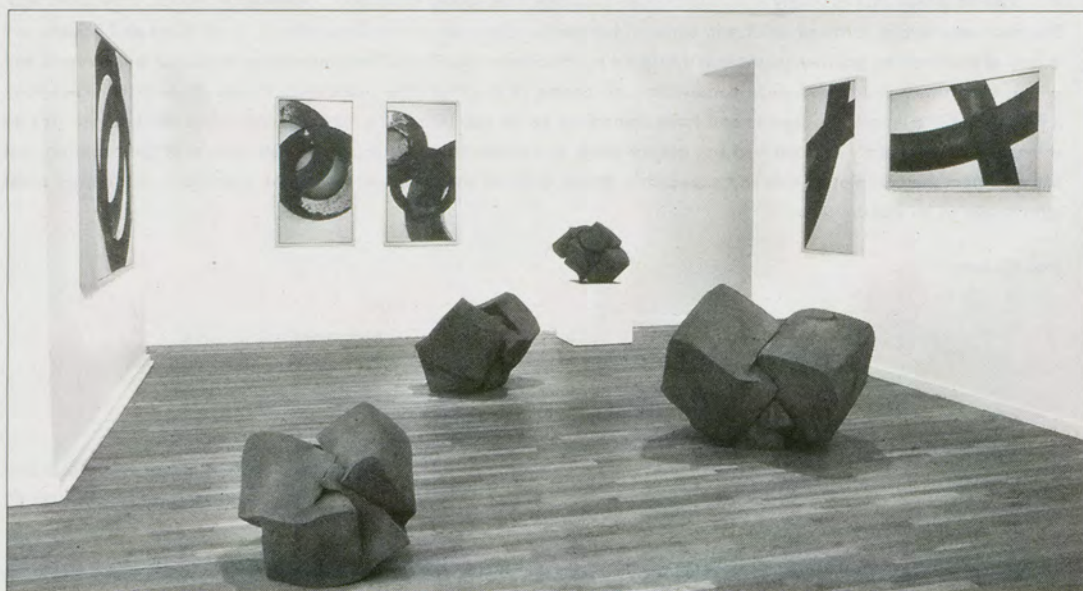
Berg, weighing 4,500 pounds, was forged from a “scrap” of an original iron ingot that the forge used for an industrial purpose, perhaps as an armament for war. The sculpture has a startling, lovely look of roiled confoundment to it, and once you get past the sheer surprise of iron taking on the guise of artfully crumpled-up paper, you might be even more intrigued to learn that Joyce’s artful twisting and squeezing of this unyielding

element is, at least in part, intended as a kind of symbolic gesture of disarmament. That is, iron, throughout history, is an element first and foremost associated with weaponry and warfare. Scraps of iron are endlessly recycled in this one-pointed endeavor, but all the various “bits” in this show happened to get waylaid, for once unobliged to be associated with warfare, and ended up being forged and hammered in the gentle hands of an artist.

Joyce describes the making of *Bloom* as if its composite iron remnants were shaped and kneaded as a baker might fold dough in preparation for making bread. In smelting terminology, “bloom is the raw, sponge-like iron mass before further refinement into bar or plate,” says Joyce. “A bloom... is poised to become anything we desire.” For this reason, traditional African blacksmiths have considered the smelting of iron a procreative process, wherein the near-molten bloom of iron is labeled a fetus, the anvil the mother, and the hammer the father. But before you know any of this, you are seized by the sculpture’s tactile, plastic sensuality, the rhythmic intervals of progression and recession, achieved through the turning inside out by forging and folding, all of which constitutes a journey for the viewer. We are glad for the artist’s passion for iron, that it causes him to exploit his material to the maximum, to expose its sometimes unexpected, inherent beauty, one that is monumental and whimsical at the same time.

Cypher is composed of an iron tablet that received the impressions of iron test fragments that the artist retrieved daily from the scrap pile at Scot Forge. “These tests [i.e., the iron fragments] are made on every product they forge,” says Joyce, “[then] stored and catalogued, as if in a library, for the life of an object.” The impressions are meant to convey the idea of a coded message, or an “indecipherable text,” one whose markings bear witness to the blacksmith’s participation in massive global industrial output. The artist seems keen to acknowledge the ongoing role his profession has played in that mighty expenditure of intention, for better or worse, perhaps to temper his enthusiasm and appreciation for all the grand capabilities that such an environment afforded him in expanding his vision and creative endeavors.

RINCHEN LHAMO



Installation view

Foreground: Tom Joyce, *Berg*, forged iron, 36" h x 41" w x 36" d, 2005

Background: Tom Joyce, *Penumbra*, charred drawings on board, 48" x 24" and 48" x 48"