

Art in America

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View of Tom Joyce's "Penumbra" paintings and "Berg" sculptures, all 2005; at Evo.

SANTA FE

Tom Joyce at Evo

Although Santa Fe-based sculptor Tom Joyce recently won a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, it was his reputation as a longtime blacksmith that gained him admission to Scot Forge, an Illinois firm that consumes 250 million pounds of metal a month, turning out work for various industries, especially defense. Joyce diverted some of its products from circulation and melted down scrap to produce several new bodies of sculpture.

This show was about concealing and revealing. Joyce wanted to recall his material's multilayered past even as he obliterated that identity. He did so by folding the metal to bury the original skin and expose grains, cracks and imperfections. Joyce had only minutes to manipulate tons of heated iron before it became too cool to work. Using mechanized pincers he pushed it to its limits of malleability. Some of the work sheared apart in the process.

Six sculptural groups, all machine-forged, over-filled the gallery, making it feel small; they ranged from objects that could be held in the hands to floor pieces measuring 36 by 41 by 36 inches and weighing over two tons. Ten works hung on the walls. The "Penumbra" series (most 24 by 48 by 3 inches) was made by pressing red-hot machine parts onto plasterboard to char the surface. Joyce intended thereby to give viewers a sense of the forge's scale and

intensity. But the well-composed "drawings" (his term) are too polite—because framed—and formally too conventional to convey the desired effect.

Four abstract sculptures called "Berg" (think "tip of") formed the show's core. With each, Joyce sliced a square iron bar, twisted it, and squeezed it between dies almost to the breaking point. Each resulting work resembled two massive, distressed cubes—pulled apart, then shoved together—covered with rusty, velvet patinas. The process formed deep crevices and forced small extrusions, answering negative space with positive. The "Berg" works pit gravity against levitation, their abstract masses evoking architectural scale and recalling Frank Gehry's bulging metallic buildings.

"Bloom" is a smelting term for a spongy iron mass prior to refinement. In two works by that name (30 by 30 by 28 inches), Joyce packed nine vertical units into a square footprint, the tops pushing up in various contours that suggest Art Deco skyscrapers, mountain peaks and bread loaves; their internal articulations also evoke erotic body folds and creases.

Iron inspires in Joyce a deep sense of connection: buried in the earth, it is an element that also flows through our bloodstream. His subtle use of cast-off war materials is ethically responsible, yet without verbal supplements—an artist's statement, reviews—we can't know the invisible history of the particular pieces of iron he uses. Joyce's solution, elegant but partial, was to make hiding part of the work's esthetic.

—Arden Reed