

The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine  
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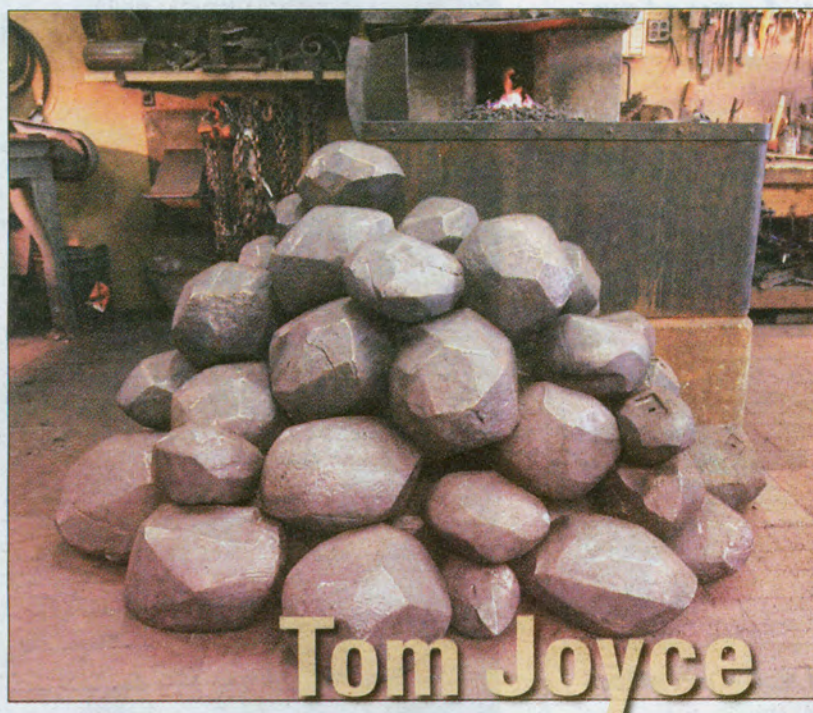
# Pasatiempo

**Tom Joyce**

**Forging ahead, looking to the past**

Right: Each forged "stone" in Joyce's *Cairn* contains soil from a different battlefield. Every continent will be represented in this work in progress.

Center, red-hot *Berg*, an iron sculpture weighing several tons, is shown in the forging process.



Artisan White/The New Mexican

# Tom Joyce

## Forging ahead,

Elizabeth Cook-Romero | The New Mexican

**On a warm autumn afternoon**, blacksmith Tom Joyce's huge studio door was wide open, causing the building to resemble a barn. Rows of iron sculpture sit outside, recent arrivals from the Scot Forge in Illinois. Their surfaces are rough and gray, and occasionally the sun glinted off a sharp edge where the metal had become burnished in transport. Most of the artworks are 3 to 4 feet high and about as wide — no bigger than an average contemporary painting — yet each weighs several tons.

Inside the studio, brown mud walls absorbed the light coming through the door. Two forges radiated waves of heat and the orange glow of hot coals. The sound of heat-softened metal hammered on an anvil echoed off the walls as students Benito Steen and Henry McDonald worked on their projects. Blacksmiths in training manufacture their own tools, and earlier in the day Steen and McDonald had made measuring devices called "wheel" travelers, Joyce said. He retrieved two antique tools from among hundreds of iron objects that covered every wall, shelf, and windowsill and explained how a wheel, even a lumpy one, can measure the length of curves more easily and accurately than a tape measure. Joyce held up a lopsided wheel traveler and said it was probably made by a blacksmith in Velarde, N.M., in the 18th century. In spite of its lack of symmetry, it was as accurate as a new, perfectly round tool.

Joyce has forged iron for more than 45 years. His sculpture and functional architectural details are in the collections of The Detroit Institute of Arts; the de Young Museum in San Francisco; the Museum

of Fine Arts in Boston; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. He received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

On Friday, Oct. 13, the Santa Fe Rotary Foundation of the Arts hosts an awards dinner to honor Joyce as the Distinguished Artist of the Year. Art critic and author Lucy Lippard presents the award, and one of Joyce's works will be auctioned off to benefit children's art programs in New Mexico.

Joyce was 14 years old when he began forging iron at a blacksmith shop in El Rito, N.M. Most iron in production comes from scrap, Joyce said, and in El Rito he forged metal from obsolete farm equipment and tools.

Hand-forged objects, unlike items made by melting and casting metal, often carry hints about how the iron was used in the past. Joyce pointed out the alligator-skin texture on the handle of a wrench and explained that the iron had once been a horseshoe rasp. And the long indentations on the base of an 18th-century anvil in his collection are nail holes made when the iron had covered a wagon wheel. The holes had become elongated during forging, but they hadn't been entirely erased.

The artist began to think about how old a particular chunk of iron was and how it had been used in El Rito as he heated and hammered iron that showed traces of past lives. "In New Mexico, blacksmiths always had to be resourceful because iron wasn't readily available. Iron was sometimes valued more than silver. It could mean the difference between survival and death," he said.





Kate Joyce



Amiran White/The New Mexican

Tom Joyce: Santa Fe Rotary Foundation of the Arts' 2006 selection for Distinguished Artist of the Year

Today even on large-scale industrial projects, the bulk of iron used is recycled. "China is buying most of the scrap now, and the price is really going up. But we're not running out anytime soon — think of the rust belt and all the cars."

Joyce forged the baptismal font at the Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community church in Santa Fe from garden fencing, old keys, a car jack, and other items donated by parishioners. And at Scot Forge he chooses iron cut from larger pieces that are about to be made into machine parts. He said he likes knowing what project the iron came from, but because the forge does defense work, he is often reluctant to talk about what he knows.

In his scrap pile, Joyce has nose cones from decommissioned nuclear weapons given to him by Russia and the U.S. Department of Energy. Russia responded to his request first, Joyce said, but not to be outdone, the DOE gave him gold-plated nose cones designed to protect the electronics inside from destruction during a first strike.

When he speaks or lectures about his own work, Joyce also includes his thoughts about the darker side of the history of metals. He says that since the Bronze Age, the quest for metals has spurred conquest and colonialism. On Oct. 30, the Santa Fe Art Institute presents a lecture by Joyce about his own work and the effects the mining of metals has had on the planet.

It's no accident that the nations with the greatest mineral wealth often suffer the worst political and

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Kate Joyce

Joyce making one element of *Cairn* at Scot Forge in Illinois

economic instability, Joyce said. "It's about maintaining a workforce. It's about not giving people an education." People who are working long hours struggling to support their families, are unlikely to rebel.

Understanding the connection between metals and repression caused Joyce to change the way he worked, he said. In 1990 he had apprentices that came from all over the world to work with him for two years at a stretch. He had seven employees, including his shop manager, and enough architectural commissions to keep them all busy. But he began to question his success.

"I wanted to think about using iron as though it were something precious. I was thinking about how I can make each project matter — how to make something that is needed in the community." Joyce said he began to accept fewer commissions. "There were lots of trophy projects. I only had two people working with me by the mid-'90s. By 2000 I was working by myself."

Sculpture — rather than architectural details like fences, light fixtures, and door handles — increasingly occupied Joyce's time, yet, he said, he was not tempted to construct hollow metal forms that would be lighter and easier to handle.

Julio González (1876-1942), the pioneer of modernism credited with inventing an open sculptural style called drawing in space, was a blacksmith, Joyce explained. And throughout his career González forged solid metal. "David Smith started working with hollow shapes," Joyce said, referring to the Abstract Expressionist sculptor (1906-1965). "I don't want to make hollow sculpture. I cannot mimic the shapes I make with sheet metal."

In his studio forge and in the giant industrial forge he uses in Illinois, the heat and pressure shift the molecular structure of the metal. "It mimics what is happening within the earth, in the shifting plates of the mantle."

Three gray iron works sat on a huge worktable. Two were curved on top and looked like worn rocks that could hold small pools after a rain. The third resembled a miniature pit mine with three levels, but Joyce said it was inspired by the stepped foundation stones in Tibetan Buddhist temples.

"I've thought about burnishing the edges to make them bright and installing it in a dark space with one light." He also thought about applying the gold from the decommissioned nose cones.

These most recent works are still unresolved. They grew out of his *Cypher* series, in which he used decommissioned machine parts to press shapes into sheets of folded iron. With the *Cypher* series, he wanted to evoke ancient books and cuneiform writing.

Unfinished and gray, two of the new works look a lot like stone garden ornaments, dry and empty until the next thunderstorm. The third brought to mind memories of abandoned quarries filled by spring rains. "It's not about holding water. It's about holding the memory of iron. It's a reservoir, but it's a reservoir of itself." ◀

## details

- ▼ Tom Joyce, Santa Fe Rotary Foundation for the Arts Distinguished Artist of the Year 2006; dinner & auction

5:30-11 p.m. Friday, Oct. 13

Scottish Rite Temple, 463 Paseo de Peralta

\$150; 984-1133

- ▼ Tom Joyce, lecture

6 p.m. Oct. 30

Santa Fe Art Institute, 1600 St. Michael's Drive

\$5, \$2.5 students, seniors & SFAI members;  
424-5050