

# TOM JOYCE

INTERVIEWED BY LOWERY STOKES SIMS

**STOKES SIMS:** The suite of sculptures, *Two to One*, that you created for MAD has been installed and has been received well by the public. It has taken a number of years to arrive at this point. Tell us about how the commission came about and how you approached its resolution.

**JOYCE:** Former chief curator David McFadden, during a visit to my Santa Fe studio in 2007, saw a pair of sculptures titled, *Two to One*, and suggested commissioning a cluster of them for the new location of MAD that would open in 2008. We discussed placing seven sculptures in a meandering pattern on the sidewalk beneath the shade of newly planted trees on the Broadway side of the Museum. Because the sculptures appear soft and clay-like to touch, we felt they would be inviting to pedestrians while en route. We also wanted to create a condition where walkers could slow down, sit awhile and contemplate the latest additions to the neighborhood, both the Museum and this public art installation.

It took several years to secure funding and several more to move the proposal through the NYC Department of Transportation's engineering review and the NYC Design Commission before permits were issued to permanently place this constellation of 20,000 pounds of stainless steel on top of the subway tunnels beneath the site.

*How should we calibrate our reception of this work both as sculpture and as seating?*

Though the sculptures can indeed function as benches, I wanted these pieces, positioned at the base of the Museum of Arts and Design, to inhabit multiple worlds, dissolving the often perceived polarity between design and art practices. In my world, there is no separation between these two activities—nor in growing a garden, preparing a meal, taking a walk or writing a letter—intention is all that distinguishes an object's role in both public and private life. Whether the intention succeeds is another matter entirely.

Kathleen Whitney also referred to ideas of "concealment" and "revelation" in your work as you create artful encounters of elements as different as metal, sand, soil, etc., particularly in the memorial projects you have created. Are these terms applicable to the material composition of *Two to One* in such a way that it would enhance our understanding of the individual elements?

There are two conceptual points of reference I consider important when I choose to make sculpture from iron. First, to reflect the necessity of iron in our blood, the oxygenating residue that recalls the symbiotic relationship between the very first life form, a blue-green algae called cyanobacteria, that over 2 billion years ago began feeding on iron sulfide in the sea and produced oxygen as a byproduct, allowing for life as we know it to thrive. And secondly, that all of the 14 chunks of iron that make up the seven pairs in this cluster are forged from industrially manufactured remnants, retrieved directly by me from "parent" material as "offspring" of a mechanical component now operating somewhere in the world. Collectively, these fragments represent an astonishing story and yet are all but invisible to the eyes of those who encounter them.

These sculptures are part of a continuing body of work, forged in collaboration with industrial blacksmiths that allow a privileged access to a lineage of making of which I am inextricably a part of.

*As you know the installation of *Two to One* coincides with the inauguration of NYC Makers: The MAD Biennial, which celebrates dedicated, skilled makers. You call yourself a sculptor trained as a blacksmith and continue to affirm your affinity with that profession. What does that mean to you within the context of a contemporary culture of making?*

As a sculptor, initially trained in my youth as a blacksmith, I feel an acute sense of responsibility for the role blacksmiths continue to play in our world, both positive and negative.

In the factory where I forge these pieces, 250,000,000 pounds of iron, copper, aluminum, titanium and other unique alloys are forged each month, representing a staggering array of different items designed and developed for specific, often highly classified uses around the world. Whether it is chamber forgings for rocket propulsion systems, main shafts for ore mining crushers, turbine blades for nuclear power plants, drill heads for offshore drilling rigs, rudders for aircraft carriers, worm gears for hydroelectric dams or wheels for the Mars Rover (to mention but a few examples), each carries with it the potential for probing and investigation in my work.

What interests me about iron is the fact that it is rarely ever retired and perpetually finds new purpose because of its versatility—as a result, iron inherits over time a complex form of DNA-like properties accrued from its prior use.

*What is the current project you are working on studio-wise?*

Beyond a steady stream of new sculptures and drawings underway in the studio, I'm currently finishing a body of cast iron sculptures made during a recent four-month residency sponsored by the John Michael Kohler Art/Industry program in Wisconsin.

I've just finished designing a group of six forged iron sculptures for the Santa Fe Botanical Garden that incorporates 36 individual elements, scaled geometrically proportional to a microscopic view of pollen grains taken from New Mexico's three subsistence crops: squash, corn and beans. And next month, I will begin work on a cast iron and stainless steel sculpture to be installed in July 2015, in front of the new Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina. ■





Two to One is a gift from Mr. Barrett Toan and Ms. Paula O'Brien, in Memory of Winthrop A. Toan.  
All photos by Eric Scott except for top left, which is courtesy of Tom Joyce