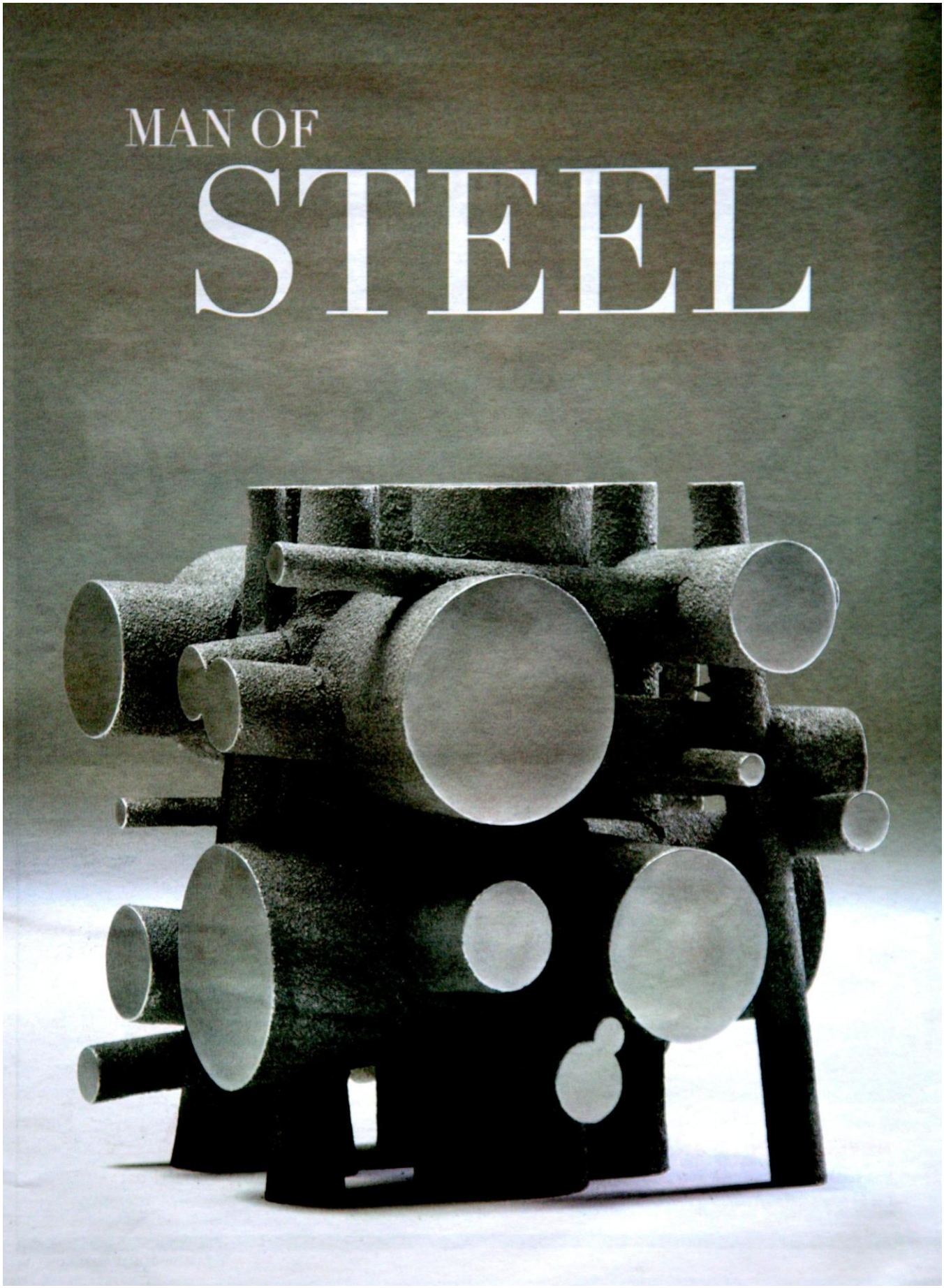
MAN OF STEEL



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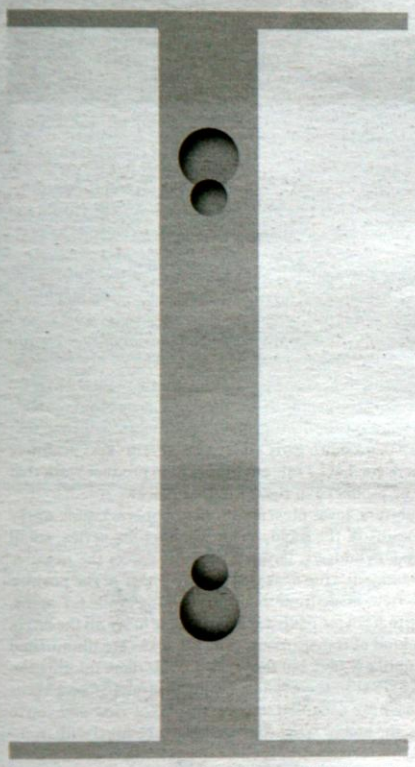
Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican

SCULPTOR TOM JOYCE



Iron connects us to Earth. It's in our blood, and it forms the matter at the heart of Earth itself. Scientists estimate that the planet's core is composed primarily of iron. It fed the unicellular bacteria that swarmed the seas during the Proterozoic era. Over millions of years, life evolved on Earth to the degree that iron could be worked to the benefit of humankind. During the Iron Age, when metalsmithing developed to include forging, iron could be manipulated into a greater range of shapes for a larger number of uses than the simple castings of earlier smithing could provide. Forged iron was stronger, too, with more tensile strength than cast metals. "The core of the Earth is iron, and there's an inner shell and outer shell turning in this dynamic movement that creates the Earth's entire geomagnetic field that keeps us orbiting around the sun," sculptor and blacksmith Tom Joyce told *Pasatiempo*. "Were it not for iron playing that critical role, we'd be in a different state, a different environment." Joyce, whose exhibition *Aftershock* opens at James Kelly Contemporary on Friday, Aug. 7, creates his works in full awareness of the properties, history, and legacy of iron, his chosen medium.

In Joyce's *Berg* series — dense, amorphous, fissured sculptures made from forged high-carbon steel, an iron alloy — he makes explicit reference to the material's primary source deep at the Earth's core. Some of the squat forms exhibit a downward movement, almost as though the sculptures are collapsing back into themselves. "A lot of my projects like the *Bergs*, they have this kind of directional focus," he said. "The thought is that it's being sucked down as if it was pointing into the center of the Earth."

For *Aftershock*, Joyce has crafted a new body of work that includes two large-scale rings called *Aureole 1* and *Aureole 2*, forged from stainless steel, cracked and fissured like the baked earth in a dried-up riverbed. Much of what Joyce has been investigating in his current work is the fatigue factor of the materials, the point in the forging process in which the molecular structure breaks down. "A lot of the work is about setting up a formal construct that's breached by something that happens naturally due to the nature of the material. With all the cracks and fissures and with all the tearing, the way it sucks back into itself, that's all the result of the inherent nature of the material. I'm trying to show something about the property of iron I think is intriguing and worth exploring further, especially the fact that something so strong develops a fracturing that shows something about its molecular structure. All of that is the result of thinking about geologic forces and expansion and contraction."

The large disks that make up the *Aureoles* developed an all-over, fractured pattern, the result of his experimentation with the limits of material stress. "This is just two, three, four heats away from falling apart completely," Joyce said of one of the rings. "It's very, very strong as it is now but, if these cracks developed even farther and met on the other side, it would just crumble. It's about 6,500 pounds of steel."

Joyce, a receipient of a 2003 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, makes his sculptures from the remains of scrap metal used for industrial applications. "Imagine that there's this massive ingot, say 30,000 pounds that's being forged into a shaft for a hydroelectric

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Above right, Tom Joyce: *Aureole I* (detail), 2015, forged stainless steel, 75 x 75 x 8 inches, 6,492 pounds; opposite page, *Core III*, 2013/2015, cast iron (steel filings from projects 1977-present), 6 x 6 x 6 inches

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Penumbra XVI (detail), 2015, charred drawing on wood fiber, 48.5 x 48.5 x 3 inches, framed

dam project; they forge the shaft out of this big ingot but it's rough on either end. The rough end is what I'm taking. It's cut off and there's often impurities in the iron. So it has this kind of character. As a discard it has a memory of what the parent was shaped like but it also holds the prior history of its making."

Joyce's design work and maquettes are done in a studio in Brussels where he works during part of each year. He maintains two small forges in his Santa Fe studio and larger pieces are made at a factory outside of Chicago. "It's a big factory. They allow me to come in whenever I want. I secure, usually, 100,000 pounds, at least, of their scrap material and then just forge it into different shapes using clay as my model. There's a tremendous pride among the people that work there. They're very skilled technicians. Because we speak the same language from the training that we've had — me as a blacksmith early on — it allows this very seamless way of working where you have a safe environment to produce work that wouldn't normally be produced in those kinds of places."

In addition to sculpture, Joyce presents a series of photographic works in *Aftershock*: CT scans of the molds made for his *Core* series, small sculptures of layered, cylindrical forms. The scans depict the negative spaces inside the molds showing a layered reverse image of the positive sculptures, also on view, made from them. "In looking at the CT scans, and this is the thing that got me really excited, I'm able to see all the layers at once so there's a kind of transparency." The CT scans are illuminated from the back, not unlike X-rays, but the scans provide more information than X-rays. "With a CT scan there's, say, 250 images, microscopic slices of the object and those are collapsed into a transparent view and you're able to see the voids, the hollow space that would later be filled with iron," he said. In addition, his recent works include several singed wood panels called *Penumbras*, "drawings" made from heated metal discs placed strategically on wood panels to create a series of charred, circular patterns.

Much of Joyce's iron sculptures are produced at temperatures as high as a white-hot 2,600 degrees. This allows for the material to be pliable, like clay, and easily manipulated. Large industrial tongs grasp the heated metal, which is twisted and hammered into the desired shape. "Fifty percent of the time, at least, people misunderstand about the very process used to end up with this shape, and often it will be talked about as either being melted into this form, or cast into this form. But the forging is really this timeless way of moving metal most efficiently and more spontaneously. Even though I know where I'm going with the shapes, there's still a kind of playfulness in the result. Setting up the conditions where it can come into its own outside of anything I might dictate is key." ◀

details

- ▼ *Tom Joyce: Aftershock*
- ▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 7; exhibit through Oct. 3
- ▼ James Kelly Contemporary, 1611 Paseo de Peralta, 505-989-1601