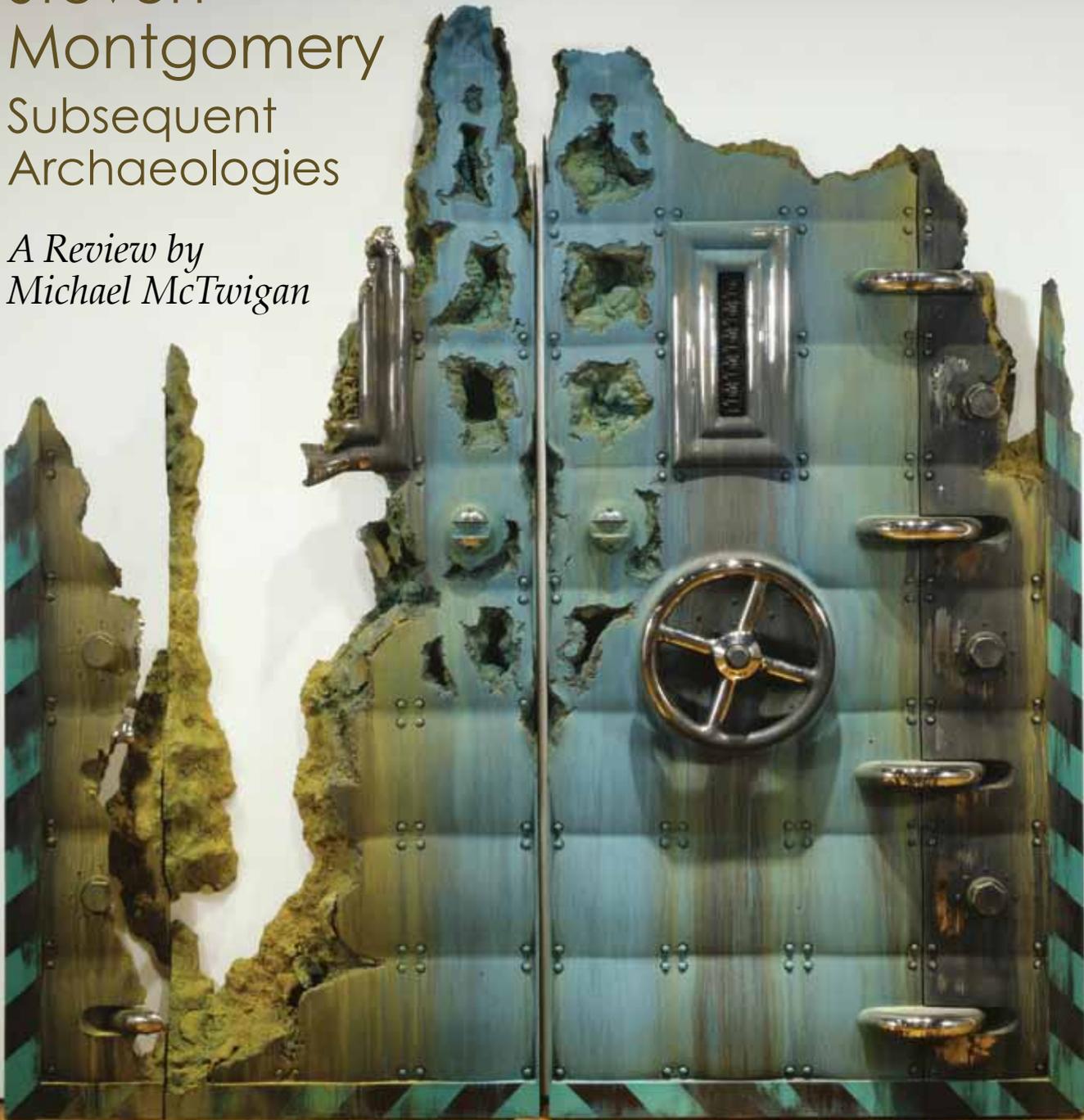


Steven Montgomery Subsequent Archaeologies

*A Review by
Michael McTwigan*



HUMAN BEINGS ARE TOOL MAKERS, AND HAVE BEEN from the invention of the axe, the knife, the spear. Charting human evolution – from hunting and gathering to agriculture to the machine age of reproduction – tools represent human ingenuity and our power over nature.

The daily struggle to hunt, gather, or grow what sustains life has been the subject of art at least since

ancient Egypt, when artists portrayed the fundamentals of human existence: the fruits, vegetables, fish and fowl that sustain us; the jugs, glasses, plates and bowls with which we eat. What began as emblems of prosperity, in time became symbols of brevity. By the 17th century, many still-life painters warn us of the fleeting nature of our bounty: Food rots or spoils, flowers drop their petals, jugs and bowls eventually break and return to earth.

The iconic, *trompe l'oeil* artefacts fashioned by Steven Montgomery are like props for a stage set, or a still-life tableau. Like a still life, Montgomery's stage is empty of humans, as if the play were over. What remain are the tools that define our differences from other creatures. Rather than celebrating the ingenuity of human invention, however, through his decrepit artefacts, Montgomery questions the value of our Industrial Age.

Coming upon Montgomery's *Re-Entrance #2*, I could not help but recall the 'traveller from an antique land' in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias", who relates his encounter in the desert with "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone". Like Montgomery's tongue-in-cheek homage to an imposing steel vault, Shelley reveals the hollowness of the ancient king's boast:

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair."*

But Ozymandias' purported achievements lie in rubble, just as Montgomery's *Re-Entrance* is the crumbling remains of a vault that once contained great treasure.

Montgomery has fixed on the iconic totems of modern life: the nuts and bolts, gears, engines and other building blocks of the Machine Age. While his 'artefacts' appear to be real objects from a real time and place, they are in fact painstakingly fashioned of clay. And like 17th century *trompe l'oeil* still lifes, Montgomery's are 'hyper real'. Surfaces are richer, colour more vibrant, than their everyday counterparts – if there were counterparts. Many of the artist's totems of the Machine are symbolic objects whose purpose is not readily apparent, constructed in fanciful, even illogical configurations.

Montgomery's iconic simulacra would be at home in the post-apocalyptic world portrayed in the film "Blade Runner" – a world in which little seems to work anymore, where the clever technology humans have devised to support life now threatens to destroy us.

Michael McTwigan lives in New York and was the cofounder and Editor of *American Ceramics* (1982–1993).
Steven Montgomery: Subsequent Archaeologies, New York Foundation for the Arts, New York (May 29, 2015–ongoing).

*Facing page: Re-Entrance #2. 2008–2011. Painted, glazed, reinforced ceramic. 114 x 127 x 11 in.
Right: Re-Entrance #2 (Detail).*

