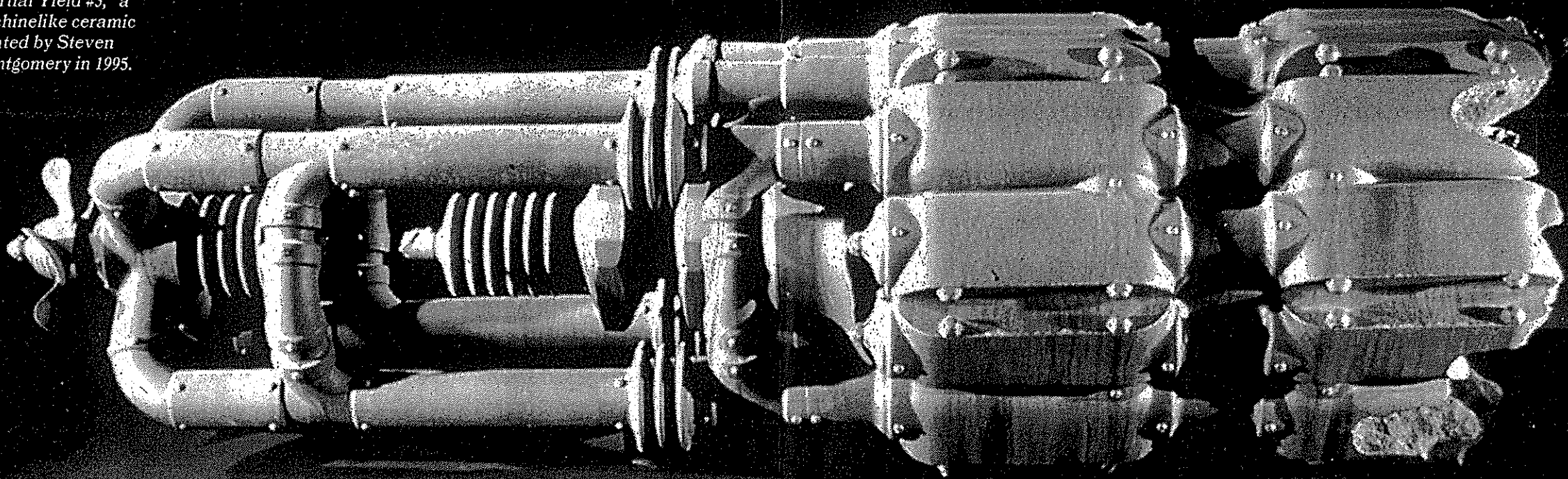


## ART / ARCHITECTURE

"Partial Yield #3," a machinelike ceramic created by Steven Montgomery in 1995.



Photographs by O.K. Harris Works of Art

# Fantasy Machines From Technology's Dark Side

By RITA REIF

AT first glance, Steven Montgomery's fantasy machines resemble the images that inspired them — metal engines rusting in Detroit junkyards and giant electrical conduits snaking along the walls of tunnels and stairwells in the subways of Lower Manhattan. Most of the machines are huge, up to six feet long, while others are quite small, less than a foot tall.

Close up, however, something seems amiss in these umber, dark crimson and black assemblages: Here and there, they appear to be broken or corroded. The simulated encrustation that should imply decay on the pipes, gears, manifolds, mufflers and screws instead raises questions about what the machines really are.

"I'm not sure anyone would guess by just looking at them that the machines are clay," Mr. Montgomery said. "They don't look, feel or smell like clay. That is partly because of the oil paint finish that is not fired."

They fooled Ivan Karp, a SoHo art dealer, who is familiar with the trompe l'oeil effects artists use to trick viewers. "I was drawn to the machines for their sculptural vitality and wasn't aware of the material that he

was employing," Mr. Karp said. "That for me and for everybody was a grand surprise."

Six of Mr. Montgomery's fictitious machines are on exhibit at Mr. Karp's O.K. Harris gallery on West Broadway through Jan. 2. (They range in price from \$3,500 to \$22,000.) The gallery does not specialize in ceramics, but Mr. Karp, who was an airplane mechanic in the United States Air

**Steven Montgomery's ceramics reflect an apprehension about the efficiency and durability of machines.**

Force during World War II, found Mr. Montgomery's works provocative.

"Mention ceramics, and most people think of vessels or something adorable or lovable or at least tender," Mr. Karp said.

To him, Mr. Montgomery's objects are not adorable or tender; they are aggressive. "You have to be confounded by the fact that he would translate them this way," Mr.

Karp said.

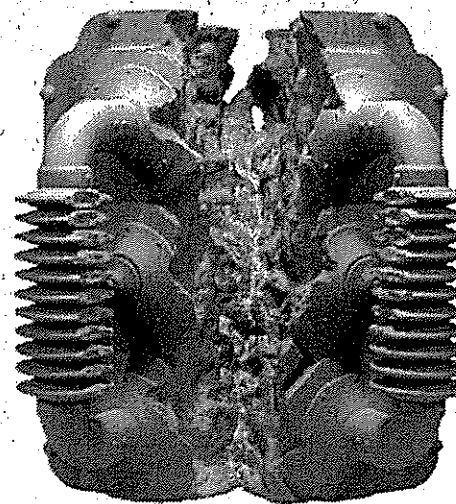
Mr. Montgomery has mixed feelings about machines. He is fascinated by their form and power; for him, machines reflect the underbelly of urban life and are the wellspring of his esthetic heritage. "When you get off the No. 6 train at Canal Street and walk through the tunnels to the J or M trains, you see a whole series of awesome electrical pipes, elbows, connectors and cables along the walls and lining the stairwells," he said.

But he also has strong reservations about the efficiency and durability of machines, even though he uses a potter's wheel and kiln in his own work.

"I'm terrified of technology and machinery," Mr. Montgomery said. "In 1979, an automobile I was driving caught fire on the freeway and burned up on me. It was engulfed in flames in a minute and a half."

Mr. Montgomery escaped unharmed, but never renewed his driver's license and never drove again. Today he uses clay to do far more than replicate metal. "I'm commenting on my mistrust of technology," he said.

A ceramist for 25 years, Mr. Montgomery was born in Detroit in 1954 and studied ceramics at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia before coming to New York in 1980. He switched to working in metal, did drawings of war machines and dirigibles, and in 1987 returned to clay. He began



"Disjunction," from 1994, another Montgomery work in ceramic.

making his ceramic machines in 1993.

To lessen his exposure to large kilns, Mr. Montgomery fashioned his works out of a series of components. A year ago, he began to make smaller works that he calls "studies." He says he expects they will evolve into larger works. "The big ones are the ones that engage me," he said.

Mr. Montgomery is having a good year. In July, he was awarded a grant from the Pollock-Krasner foundation for his work, and his "Standard Emission," a small carburetor-like object, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two weeks ago it went on view in "Clay Into Art: Selections from the Contemporary Ceramics Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," an exhibition of 61 works that remains through May 30.

Jane Adlin, who organized the show and is a research assistant in the museum's department of 20th-century art, said she preferred Mr. Montgomery's small works. "They fool you," she said. "When I saw them for the first time, I thought maybe the carburetor-like work was mixed media: the screw heads looked so real. Big is not always better."

She compared Mr. Montgomery's work to that of some contemporary Chinese ceramists in the way they, as she put it, "capture realism." "But I think he stands out as distinctive," she said.

Mr. Montgomery's work is also marked by a sense of humor, incorporating what he calls "jokes" in his machines. He points to a wrench on an enginelike object in the show. "Look at what the large wrench is doing on that work," he said. "It's unscrewing the valve that would let the motor oil gush forth." □