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 resting in Detroit junkyards and giant electrical conduits snaking along the walls of tunnels and train wells in the subways of Lower Manhattan. Most of the machines are huge, up to six feet tall, while others are quite small, less than a foot tall. Close up, however, something seems amiss in these united, 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, gears, and knobs 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," Montgomery said. "They don't look, feel or smell like clay. That is partly because of the oil paint finish that is not fixed.

Two fooled Ivan Karp, aolly 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 great 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 $2,000 to $25,000.) The gallery does not specialize in ceramics, but Mr. Karp, who was an airplane mechanic in the United States Air Force during World War II, found Mr. Montgomery's works provocative.

"Montes 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 offspring 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 train wells," he said.

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

"I'm terrified of technology and machines," 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 occupied unhurried, but never removed 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 ceramicist for 25 years, Mr. Montgomery was born in Detroit in 1944 and studied ceramics at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia before coming to New York in 1963. He switched to working in metal, drew drawings of war machines and dirigibles, and in 1987 returned to clay. He began making his organic machines in 1993.

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

"I'm terrified of technology and machines," he said. "When I saw them for the first time, I thought maybe the carberry-like work was mixed media: the screw heads looked too real. Big is not always better.

She compared Mr. Montgomery's work to that of some contemporary Chinese ceramists in the way they, too, put it, "capture reality." "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 machine. He points to a wrench on an engineline object in the show. "Look at what the large wrench is doing on that work," he said. "It's an uncloaking the value that would let the motor oil go forth."