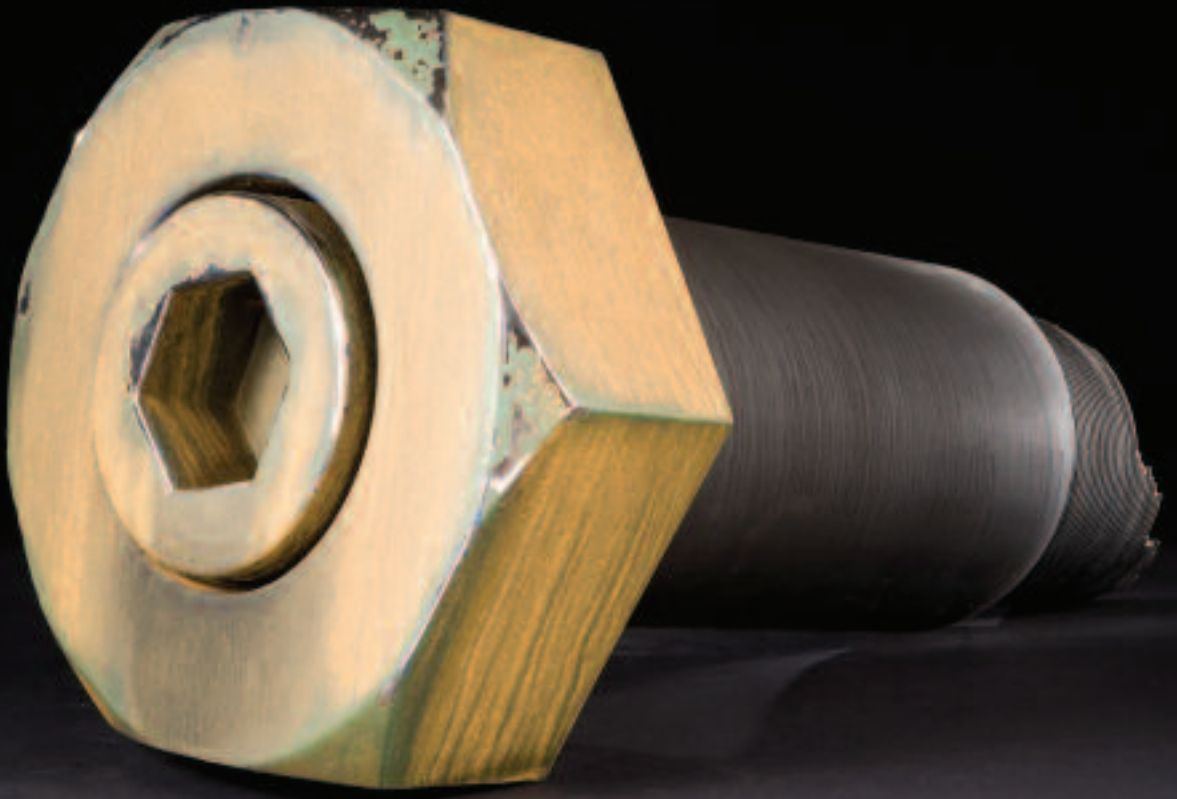


Steven
Montgomery
Broken

*Interview by
Ronald Kutcha*



Test Site (detail).

achievements, and in 2003, as a juror at the World Ceramics Biennale in Korea I had the pleasure of supporting him as a recipient of a distinguished award. I've always appreciated his prodigious development as one of the most uniquely inventive artists working in the medium of clay today and have enjoyed many conversations and encounters at gallery openings, museum exhibitions and other artists' social events. I have never however, until now, really asked him the same questions that many other casual observers of his sculpture have, from time to time, asked me. I recently spoke with the artist on the occasion of his solo exhibition at Ok Harris Gallery in New York, and provoked the following revealing responses from a series of penetrating questions exposing some of his motives and some genuinely personal insights. My first question asked him about his current exhibition entitled "Broken." Is this a comment on specific works in the show or a reference to any socio/political or even personal issues?

It is a sort of composite of all of those. Some aspect of damage, corrosion or implied impermanence unifies all of the work in the show and is the basis for the title. I've been involved with industrial, machine-like subjects in various stages of dysfunction for more than a decade but this show is a bit more comprehensive. It combines representative pieces from four different bodies of work, some of which have evolved over a number of years. For instance, small nuts and

IHAVE BEEN A GREAT ADMIRER OF STEVEN MONTGOMERY'S work for almost 20 years. As the director of the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York I acquired an early work for the museum's permanent collection and in my current position as editor of *American Ceramics* have overseen several feature articles on his extraordinary



Static Fuel.

bolts are an obvious feature of everything I've made but only after 9/11 did I decide to make nuts and bolts a subject unto themselves. The first structural elements of the World Trade Center towers to fail were 15 cm bolts that secured floor trusses to the outer walls of the buildings. Under severe heat from burning jet fuel the bolts fatigued and melted leading trusses to sag and floors to begin that horrific "pancake" collapse. I observed it all from my rooftop about a mile and half away. *Test Site*, my 40-piece floor installation of oversized nuts and bolts (some 1.5 m in length) was built as a monument, not to the event itself, but the overwhelming responsibilities placed on such rudimentary components of construction as a bolt.

Did growing up in Detroit, America's Motor City or Motown as the record industry calls it, have a conscious effect on your development as an artist?

Both profound, conscious and the influences are still evolving. My family was always supportive of my creative interests, but we lived in a creative void without cultural exposure of any kind. I first saw Diego Rivera's "industry" fresco in the Detroit Institute of Art on a school trip as a teenager and was impressed. I had been actively drawing and painting for my entire life but until then had never seen a bonafide work of fine art. The Ford Motor Company commissioned *Industry* in the 1930's with the intent of glorifying the

then burgeoning auto industry. I was astounded by the contrast between the mural's idealised portrayal of factories and workers portrayed in the mural and the dismal reality of Detroit in 1960s and '70s. My little corner of the city was relatively benign and working class but the surrounding city was rife with urban decay, crime and a sense of imminent danger around any corner. The place had a definite edge. The city's music scene was thriving but there was little creative activity going on around me except for a few raucous garage bands and a lot of innovative partying. So, my decision at about age 16 to seriously pursue art came without any sense of boundaries, which in retrospect, was a great benefit.

When or at what point in your career did the subject of machines as a subject capture your imagination and manifest itself in your work?

Upon arriving in New York in the early 1980s I began working with materials excavated from dumpsters and unattended construction sites such as electrical conduit and sheet metal. At that time I was making enormous structures that were reminiscent of dirigibles, bombs and hot air balloons and suspended them from the ceiling of my studio. It would have been an option to mechanise them with moving parts, flashing lights or a variety of other then trendy solutions that would render them as science fiction



Re-Entrance.

clichés. I cleverly avoided that by murdering them with gaudy colours and eventually threw them into the Hudson River adjacent to my Greenwich Village studio. What remained was an appetite for industrial imagery but a new approach seemed necessary. I wanted to invent my own technology, or at least the appearance of such, but without the literal interpretation associated with found object sculpture.

Were you drawn to ceramics as a means to express your concept of 'entropy' or the disintegration of machines or as subject or for a variety of other reasons...for its (ceramics) versatility to represent various other materials or for its tactility, for instance?

My initial involvement in clay was much more innocent: I had been interested in the image of a hot air balloon and a college friend suggested I take a ceramics class. Like many before me I was immediately hooked on throwing even though the concept of utility was of no real interest to me and the oppressive weight of the abstract-expressionist, Anglo Japanese pottery traditions lurked everywhere. I still throw as much as possible making components like propellers, air filters, or threaded cylinders to be incorporated into larger assemblages. Your question addresses concerns associated with my work only over the past 15 years or so after the benefit of working in many other materials

and the wisdom gained from years of “suffering and injustice” as an artist.

Did you ever make vessel-related ceramics or ceramics for use? If so, what did they look like?

I made many of bad pots as a student, but didn't everyone? I had fun smashing most of them against a brick wall and found the resulting piles of shards far more interesting than the pots. Several of my dysfunctional teapots are featured in Garth Clark's *The Eccentric Teapot* and *The Art of Tea*.

Do you consider yourself a sculptor, a visual artist, a ceramist or a realist? A sur-realist? A super-realist? A metaphorical symbolist? Any of the above?

To some degree all of those apply. I'm comfortable with sculptor/visual artist even though drawing and painting are also part of my vocabulary. 'Ceramist' should be reserved for practitioners of a more purist ceramic aesthetic than mine. My work incorporates non-ceramic surface treatments, wood and metal reinforcing and other purely sculptural solutions that don't fit in the definition of a 'ceramist'. I've always felt that my work was outside of many boundaries and upon first glance my work is not necessarily recognisable as art at all. They can appear as actual remnants or artifacts extracted from some long abandoned industrial site. It is only in the context of a gallery or museum environment that they are readily discernable and therefore readable as art.

Do you use models or photographs to suggest new or old subject matter?

I do conduct photographic reconnaissance missions out into the industrial landscape. I've documented subway tunnels, construction sites, junkyards and most recently war museums in Vietnam but the results only serve to reinforce my general vision and are rarely used to inform actual works in progress. I have a history of making drawings from my sculpture after they are complete but I do not plan my work in advance or make preliminary drawings or maquettes. Like a landscape painter, my observations of what I see around me are critical. However, my process is intuitive, impulsive, chaotic and only after the dust settles do I have a clear sense of what I am about.

Donald Kuspit, in his essay about your work said, “His representations ironically mock representation, suggesting that every representation begins to decay as soon as it is realised.” Do you agree with this? Is it your intention to be ironic?



Vase.

Irony is a by-product of my work rather than a cognitive intent. I do agree with his analysis though and appreciate his recognition of the tenuous nature of a viewer's response after identifying the work as *trompe l'oeil*, fake, or something other than a real machine. If you are a believer in the outdated modernist tenet that suggests there should be honesty in materials my work can be an anticlimax if not an outright offense.

In another essay about your recent work, New York art critic, Robert C. Morgan, characterised your sculptures as “anti monuments” and wrote: “Montgomery's synthetic engines are the story of an era in transition between industry and post-industry, between hard material and soft, between



Past Forward.

the legacy of hard work and the vestiges of frustration.” I assume that although you grew up in Detroit you never worked in an automobile factory yourself, is that correct? Did you father or another close relative work in the automobile industry and inspire you with similar thoughts about our times as Robert Morgan suggests?

I have no practical experience in any of the technical fields from which my subjects are drawn, but with clay I have the opportunity to project myself toward a fantasy world where I have a ‘faux’ expertise in all of them. Electrical engineer, architect, mechanic all become possible in spite of the fact that as a student I was completely inept in math and science. My father was in the building business and I enjoyed looking at the architectural blueprints and schematic drawings he would bring home even though I had no idea what they represented. I did work briefly as a drill press operator at a factory in rural southeastern Michigan and lately have begun using a drill press on clay.

Do you or have you ever owned a car and have you a mechanical bent at all? Do you love machines or hate them?

After living in New York City for 25 years, I have successfully managed to distance myself from auto dependency. The last car I owned was an old Volkswagen that caught fire while I was on the highway and quickly burned to a crisp. Much has been written about this incident in relation to my sculptural

oeuvre, but in truth it was just a shitty old car and a truly forgettable experience. Machines are an extension of human power. Science fiction is obviously predicted on that idea and our ability to create machines is one of the defining differences. Between humans and animals (along with communication and sex for pleasure). I am in awe of machines and the technology and brainpower that produce them. It is only too apparent that they are also subject to frailties, flaws, foibles and the ravages of time comparable to that of those who create them. At least in part, I attempt to communicate that observation through my work.

I see your work as truly elegiac in nature. Am I wrong in assuming you also see a pathos remembering the work ethic so many of our fathers or grand fathers had working in the

industrial parts of the world producing machines that were assumed to bring progress to the world in which they lived and from which we are gradually emerging?

Your question brings to mind my current studio environment and the socio-economic phenomena that surround my studio. I work in a large warehouse built in the 1870s to accommodate the boom in small manufacturing then springing up around the Brooklyn waterfront. The working class neighborhoods that revolved around those enterprises have gradually been uprooted as those manufactures became obsolete or were outsourced. The resulting gradual gentrification, not uncommon in other areas in New York, began with an influx of artists, including me, in search of low-cost housing and workspace. Predictably ironic then, my work uses the evolution and demise of manufacturing, as its subject. I will admit though that I count the plumber and electrician whom I call for occasional studio maintenance among the most ardent admirers of my work.

Ronald Andrew Kuchta is the former Director of the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse NY, and is now editor of American Ceramic magazine. Seven Montgomery was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1954. He received a BPh from Grand Valley College, MI, and a MFA from The Tyler School of Art at Temple University, Philadelphia. His work is included the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; American Museum of Art of the Smithsonian Institutions, Washington, D.C., Icheon World Ceramic Center, Icheon, South Korea, Taipei County Yngge Ceramics Museum, Yngge, Taiwan National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan, among other public and private collections worldwide.