

AROUND TOWN

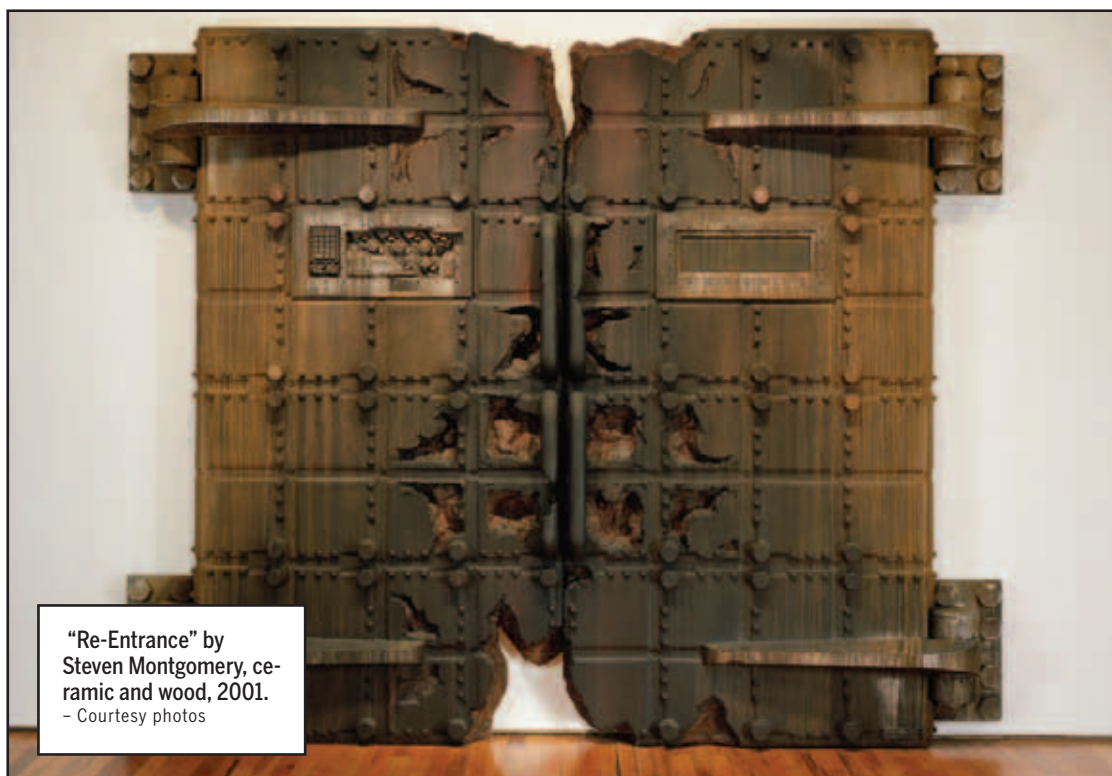
Edward Steichen: Portraits — Edward Jean Steichen helped photography gain acceptance as art with his soft-focus portraits. During the prohibition era, as chief photographer for Conde Nast publications, Steichen pioneered a boldly geometric style, manipulating light and shadow to striking effect. Fred Astaire, George Gershwin and Frank Lloyd Wright are among the notable subjects featured. National Portrait Gallery

Spring Thaw — Christine Gray rejects the Martha Stewart ethos of striving for perfectionism in the everyday through her images of domestic paraphernalia exaggerated to absurd dimensions. She first creates "micro-sculptures" of her creations, then paints from those the multiple layers of mediation reflecting our contemporary fear of the natural chaos of the world. Project 4 Gallery — *Chris Klimek*



— Courtesy photo

At the Corcoran, a fiery re-entry



"Re-Entrance" by Steven Montgomery, ceramic and wood, 2001.
— Courtesy photos

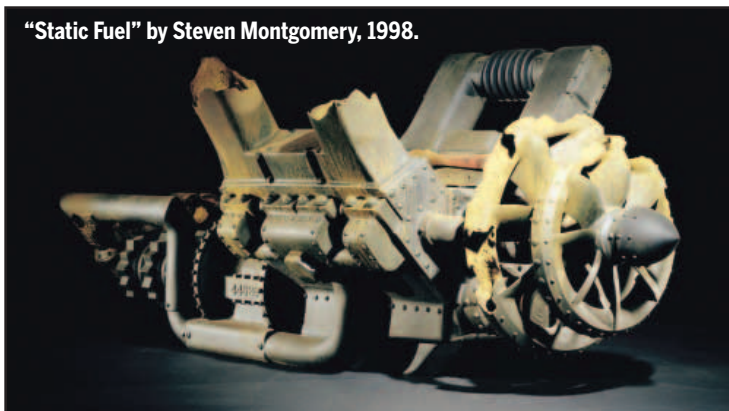
By Chris Klimek
Special to The Examiner

Reaching the end of the Corcoran's current "American Evolution" exhibit, you might be forgiven for thinking you won't be permitted to leave. The final piece in the show is Steven Montgomery's "Re-Entrance," an oppressive painted-ceramic sculpture of a massive, armored door — to a prison? A vault? A fortress? Its surface is scarred and corroded; its mechanical innards exposed. It looks like nothing else in the show or the museum. That "Re-Entrance" concludes the Corcoran's sprawling, thematically-arranged overview of its American collection only amplifies its portent of doom.

Montgomery, 54, had no say where it was placed, but he certainly isn't displeased.

Montgomery completed "Re-Entrance" in 2001, and thought it looks like something he might have begun on Sept. 12, he says the piece predated the tragedy. In fact, the World Trade Center attack — which Montgomery witnessed from the roof of his apartment building, about a mile-

"Static Fuel" by Steven Montgomery, 1998.



and-a-half away — had the effect of lightening his subsequent output. "Most of what I make these days is painted green," Montgomery says, and indeed, there is a bronze patina to his more recent sculptures, in stark contrast the rust and decay of "Re-Entrance."

The rust began to appear in the early '90s, when Montgomery, having freshly extricated himself from an unhappy marriage, began thinking of what he calls "the tension of opposites," and making work that explored a millennial "sense of cynicism; that sense of fragility, impermanence, and frailty." Montgom-

ery thinks that line of inquiry may have reached its apex in "Re-Entrance." "There's something about that piece that's very seminal for the moment," he says. I don't know if I've done anything quite as good [since].

Montgomery grew up in Detroit. The decline of the Motor City's once-mighty automotive manufacturing base seems an obvious inspiration for his vocabulary of damaged, exaggerated, or simply absurd technology — a motif that's more apparent in "Static Fuel," the 6-foot-long faux-engine he has on view in the Smithsonian American Art Muse-

If you go

"The American Evolution" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art

When: Through July 27, 2008

Where: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW

Admission: \$14; \$12 seniors/military; \$10 students

More information: corcoran.org

"Static Fuel" is on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery.

Where: Pennsylvania Ave. and 17th St. NW

Admission: Free

Admission: 202-633-2850; americanart.si.edu/renwick

um's Renwick Gallery, than in "Re-Entrance." What the pieces share is their basic material: Montgomery sculpts these from clay, rather than assembling his pieces from found objects. "Clay is a great way to invent your own technology, even if it's false, he says. "If I want a pipe wrench to bend a certain way, you can't do that in reality."

Montgomery says his lack of industrial training can add a new layer to the pieces. "People who really do know engineering can look at my work and identify the fact that I don't know a thing about what I'm making," he says. "There's a kind a humor to them, if you really do know what you're looking at, by which you can tell that there are things in there that are completely illogical." But suspension of disbelief still matters to him. "At least for a second, you have to consider the possibility that these things are real, or I've failed."

While Montgomery isn't bound by the industrial landscape's tiresome obedience to the laws of physics, he does find it to be a generous muse. "I don't look at art for inspiration," he says. "I don't look at anything historical for inspiration. I look at crap on the street."

Creative hospitality

By Chris Klimek
Special to The Examiner

Most people don't like to be observed while they're at work. But the roughly two dozen painters, sculptors, woodworkers, jewelers, photographers, and video artists who keep workspaces (and in a few cases, residences) at 52 O Street Studios will Saturday and Sunday disregard their natural desire for privacy to welcome in the great unwashed masses for a glimpse — or, if you've got the attention span, a six-hour stare — of the sweaty work of making art.

Among the two dozen artists participating are Lisa Marie Thalhammer. Her wry paintings of "Girls & Guns" and "Lot Lizards" (i.e., prostitutes who work truck stops) have been exhibited locally to wide acclaim. Betsy Damos, whose drawings, paintings, and sculptures grapple with the problem of urban sprawl, will be on hand, as will sculptor/metalworker Adam Eig and Stevens Jay Carter, whose "C-Note" series places vibrant mixed-media works on 3-D plexiglass.

Brooke Claggett, who has kept a woodworking studio in the basement of the 91-year-old building since the Fall of 2006, says the artists of 52 O Street continue to support the idea of an annual open studio because it helps them reach a broader audience than they might otherwise. "It tends to draw people who don't go to all the gallery openings and don't go to museums all the time, because it's informal, and it's not at all intimidating," she says.

"It's really quite a different experience from seeing the finished work in a gallery. You get to see some of the experimentation that goes into the final product."

If you go

52 O Street Studios: Open Studio

When: Today and tomorrow (April 26 and 27, 2008), 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Where: 52 O Street NW

Admission: Free

More information: 52ostreetstudios.org