

STEVEN MONTGOMERY



was invented, but transformed to suit the differences between that era and our own.

The classical ruin was the paradigm motif in eighteenth century art. The conjunction of the ruin with decline and fall is made explicit in a famous passage in Edward Gibbon's *Autobiography*: "It was in Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first entered to my mind." Goethe, portrayed by Tischbein as musing alongside the tomb of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia, is the paradigm eighteenth century poet and thinker, whose mind was fixed on matters of "damage, fragility, and the passage of time." The paintings of ruins by Hubert Robert and Giovanni Paolo Pannini, purchased and brought home by travelers on the Grand Tour, served as romantic souvenirs of philosophical moments passed in the presence of broken columns and fallen architraves. The engravings of Piranesi conveyed through their exaggerated proportions the irrecoverable grandeur of the civilization that erected the Colosseum, the aqueducts, the Forum, and the Pantheon. The eighteenth century gardens were ornamented with artificial ruins, to afford

leisured aristocrats poetic occasions to ponder the brevity of earthly existence and the irresistibility of change. In a sense, Montgomery's pieces are artificial ruins for a twenty-first century sensibility.

An artist bent on conveying the aesthetics of "damage, fragility and the passage of time" to contemporary viewers must find a contemporary equivalent to the ruin. Obviously, the classical ruin has lost its power to affect this, and though a visionary ceramist could readily enough shape clay in the form of columns and capitals and even sarcophagi, most of us lack the culture to be affected through them by thoughts of "damage, fragility, and the passage of time." Montgomery is a native of Detroit, Michigan, where the standing ruins of the great automobile factories in Highland Park or on Piquette Avenue in Detroit's east side, speak far more eloquently of decline and fall than what modern travelers see from the espresso bars on the Valentine hill in Rome. What he found as the vehicle of his vision is something with the *implicit* aesthetics of the classical ruin, but using contemporary motifs, namely pieces of contemporary machinery fallen into a condition of desuetude. The fallen state of his machinery is able to do this because of the