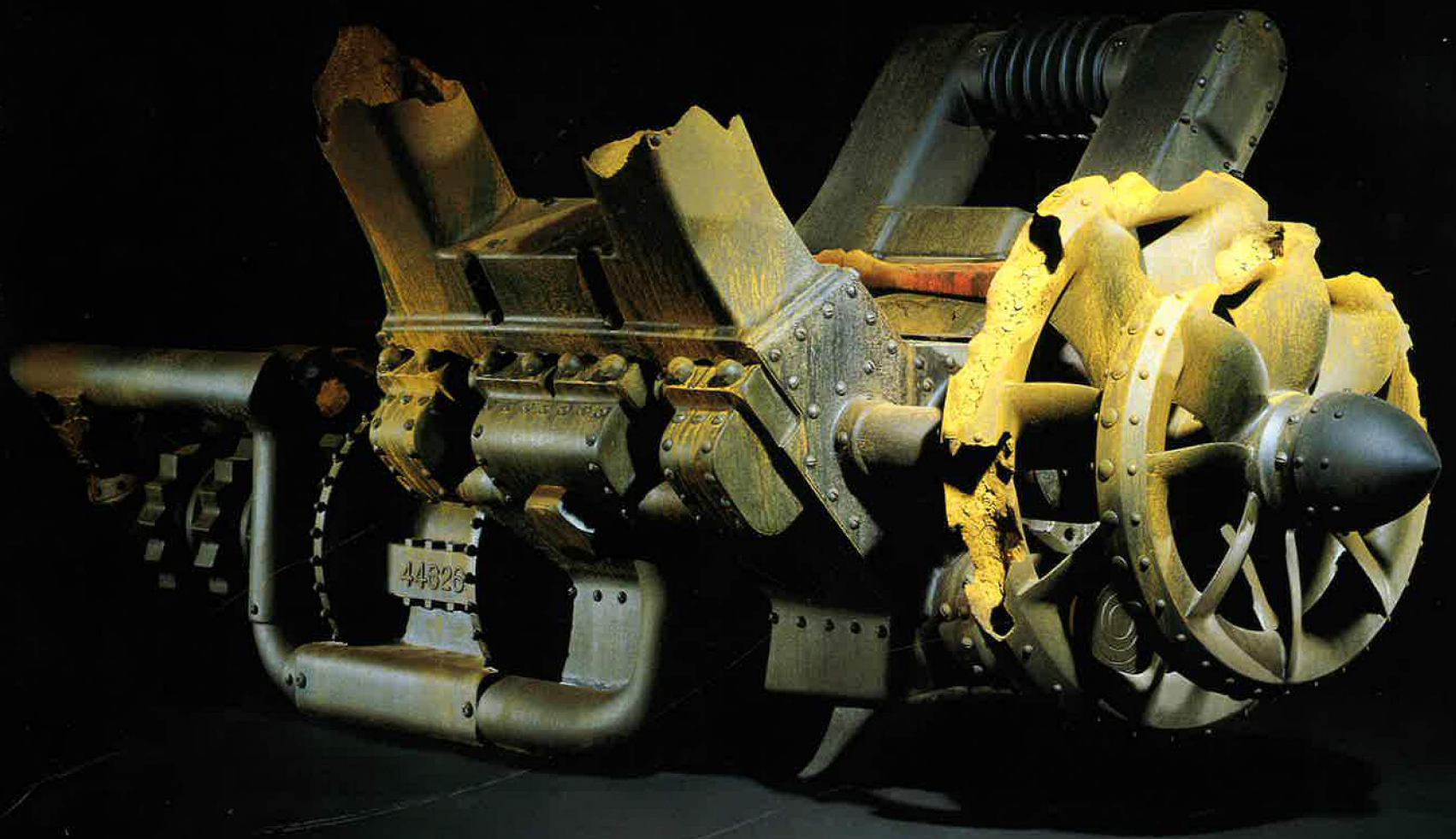


STEVEN MONTGOMERY



D-INDUSTRY

(1995) 26" h x 26" w x 15" d,
painted ceramic

Yet there is a metaphysical dimension to the work as well. Montgomery is building an anti-monument of what this transformation implies. Just as Brancusi's *Bird in Space* is not simply another representation of a bird, so Montgomery's entropy machines and engines are not only about a craft-like trompe l'oeil. Rather they are about a compression of time and how time is symbolically expressed in terms of industry and the effects of industry on personal realities. In spending time with Montgomery's "anti-monuments" one may realize that there is more to what one sees than what meets the eye. There is the mental and emotional engagement with these forms as well. *Static Fuel* gives us a nearly authentic view of the "guts" of a famous Detroit product, the V-8 engine—the cam shaft, the pipes, the gears, the driving mechanism, etc. But it also tells another story. *Static Fuel* represents the artist's story—really an allegory—of how things appear today. We are made aware of how the invisible realities have caught up with visible effects. Montgomery's synthetic engines are the story of an era in transition between industry and postindustry, between hard material and soft, between the legacy of hard work and the vestiges of frustration. One can also dwell on the formal qualities of his extraordinary and gifted craftsmanship, but that is only part of the story. It is the means by which the rest of the story is told. These are anti-monuments in the best sense. They tell us something of the truth about the effects of industry and they represent the reality of things through illusion. The core of these clay sculptures is about occupying three-dimensional space with a dynamic presence, but it is also about how we focus on time, history, material, and social responsibility.

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conflicting forces within the structure of the piece as they have been realized and visually transformed from the medium of clay into machinery. Clearly, the artist is aware of the formal manipulation of parts in relation to the whole not merely in technical terms, but according to the concept that informs the visual logic of the piece. There is no contradiction in doing this. The artist's concept is the essential component that brings the relationship of the physical parts into focus and thereby establishes a sense of the work's structural whole. This procedure is perfectly consonant with the formal aspect of the work. From a gestalt perspective, one could argue that the entire piece is known only through its conceptual wholeness. The physicality of the piece is observable only through an ambulatory relationship to details and to the transitions between the parts. This effect has become even more pronounced in the recent, large-scale works, *Static Fuel* (1998) and *Divergent C* (1997). It is within this context that we begin to see the evolution of his current work as a devolution of the industrial era, specifically in relation to the automobile industry in Detroit. This is best represented in *Static Fuel*, the most ambitious and conceptually complex piece that Montgomery has constructed to date. Having grown up in Detroit, and being familiar with the changes that have occurred economically and socially within the community due to the restructuring of the auto industry, Montgomery feels a compulsion to represent this transformation through sculpture. His message is not about the fetish of the automobile in American culture, as represented by the Photo Realists in the early seventies, but, ideologically, his sculpture is meant to provoke an understanding of the reality of social change through the intimate act of deconstructing the "engine" as symbolic of an industry that produced "car culture."

DISJUNCTION

(1996) 26" h x 22" w x 19" d,
painted ceramic

has never been interested in clay for the sake of clay. In this sense, he could not be labeled a typical modernist because he obscures the notion of "truth to the materials." Instead he plays with trompe l'oeil in relation to the medium. Yet he never loses his grasp of the fact that the material is clay; this is made clear in the process of his work.

Even so, his intention as an artist remains the primary issue. How he conceives the work in terms of a resonant statement on the human condition is the essential *raison d'être* by which the work proceeds to move us and to provoke us to consider where we are as a civilization and a culture in this rapid-fire era of perpetual transition. Montgomery's recent work over the past year is a slight departure from the simulated machines, plumbing and electrical fixtures, and engines of two or three years ago. There is no question that he is pursuing his own course and that the connections between the various manifestations of his formal/conceptual process are carefully conceived and executed. Montgomery has managed to cling to a certain aestheticized aspect in his work.

For example, *D-Industry* (1995) and *Quadrus* (1996) deal with rusted automobile parts, the decaying machinery that is visibly seen in the components of the engine, including the pipes, springs, gears, the various housings, fittings, and connecting devices. In *D-Industry*, especially, one feels the force of the engine casing as it bears against the extruding rusted interior. In a later piece, called *Disjunction* (1996), this structural opposition is also evident, but in a nascent stage. The tension, though present, is less formally rigorous. In *D-Industry* the external pressure of the engine casing pushes against the rusted amorphous inside and takes on a greater sense of empirical observation and a heightened degree of subtlety. Here Montgomery represents a more developed and sophisticated extension of these

Representing the Anti-Monument: Recent Work by Steven Montgomery

Robert C. Morgan

Three decades ago there was much talk about the anti-monument in art. It began with the Minimalists, then the earth artists, the anti-form artists, the process artists, and ultimately the conceptual artists. The era was pointing toward a kind of reductive posture in art. Everything had to be reduced and transformed into a modular format, an element that could be repeated and standardized through fabrication. The artist Robert Smithson wrote about the anti-monuments in Passaic, New Jersey—found sites, fraught with junk and detritus of all types: engine parts, rusted metal, bent pipes, disheveled canisters, hubcaps, bundles of wires, chunks of concrete, and so forth.

In a previous essay on Steven Montgomery, I discussed his work in terms of entropy. I was interested in his idea of simulating the appearance of machines, even though the machines were impossible by logical standards. I wanted to understand how he managed to represent them in a state of physical transmutation and disintegration. The issue is still a perplexing one. How could an artist with such a refined technique offer such an amazing allegorical summation of where we are today? The fact that he works in clay is important. It is not an accidental or incidental part of the work. Before he moved in the direction of clay, Montgomery explored a variety of other materials, some permanent, some relatively permanent, and some impermanent. He has worked both with small objects and with large-scale installations. The point being that Montgomery has always thought in terms of form and concept as precedents to his involvement with a particular medium. He

STATIC FUEL

cover and detail opposite
(1998) 27"h x 69"w x 31"d,
painted ceramic