

KAREN SCHUBERT

Earthen Dreams: Writing Poems from the Art of Tony Armeni

At first blush, Tony Armeni's art is a motley collection of dimensions, textures, materials and themes. There are tiny, sparkling worlds skewered on axes; larger than human, bellied or shielded sentinels; sleek like flowers with scintillated inner bells; a corrugated metal archway; a gate; a motorized human spinner; other pieces that launch bowling balls onto an elevated track or cleave them with a covered table saw

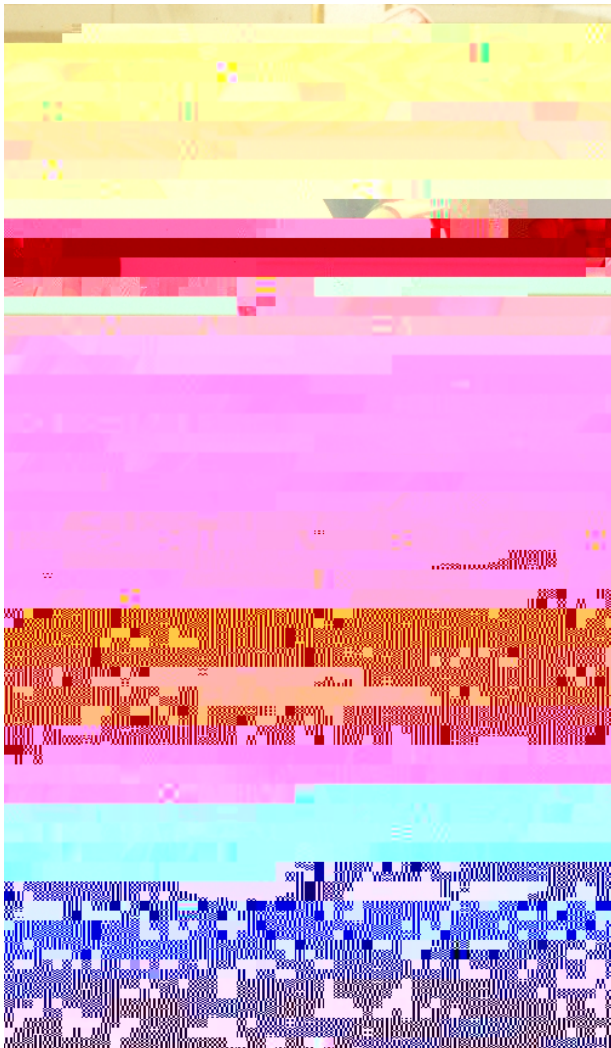
But patterns begin to emerge. One is spare parts. Like poets who "braid" lines and bridge graffiti, or photographers who make art from what exists, Tony scavenges. From the scrap yard, he finds pieces of curly, curved and straight steel. "I'm hardly ever looking for anything specific," he says, "but I won't leave empty-handed." One favorite place to hunt is Niles Iron & Metal in Niles, Ohio, near Tony's home in Youngstown. It's a good source for coil stock. When metal is milled through dyes and rollers, it's stretched-hot, and when it's derailed it whips into coils. There is a mountain of it, Tony says, and it has made its way into several pieces.

Some of his pieces are based on an individual object, such as the friend's dad's propeller that Tony mounted on a stable seat, an added lawn tractor seat made a fantastic, Monty Python-like pretend vehicle. A company that punches steel plates for agricultural seeding

creates plugs that become knobs or stony orbacles the plugs home in five-gallon buckets. He searches for bowling balls for "Table Saw Bowling." The newer urethane constructed balls don't shatter, so they have to be the sturdier polyester. From Tony's hand, lilies are made of the bells of trombones, and their centers iridesce with brass and plexiglass shavings. The brass has to be dry from the machining process; many use oil, and that won't work with epoxy. The acrylic is parings from a shop that makes ground lenses.

A guy he knew from childhood—we grew up drawing together," he says—gives him access to the scrap hopper at his metal fabrication business. Even the building that houses Tony's studio, a former bread factory, is a refitted space. Although the processes he uses sometimes involve a nasty soup of toxins, causing environmental stress, at heart Tony likes the idea of using stuff that already exists as much as he can. He said the long time has been with him for a long time to make the earth a better place. "When I was younger, I wanted to be those people who clean up the planet," he says.

to sling low, to colour
the air with insouciance
while young girls try
clothes on their new
shapes, moistened
boys unlock the tight
walk of sixth grade.
Soon he'll be on a CD
cover, some guys
in their forties playing
music they loved
when they walked
the mall with Cokes
and loneliness and songs
in their heads.



“Max” is another “sentinel” made from scrap finds. Tony would like to experiment more with the surfaces of his pieces, particularly with applied colour, but it is cost prohibitive. The best he can do now is sand them to clean them of the mill scale—a rough surface that results from the machining process. When the sculptures are outside, as are most (“Max” overlooks the sculpture garden in front of the McDonough Museum at YSU), they develop a dark brown patina from natural oxidation, known to the lay person as rust. Tony used most of the scrap pieces just as he found them, and set out to make “Max” asymmetrical for interest. “Max” sets a good example for what happens when artists send their pieces out into the world: they are open to interpretation. In his mind, the piece has a distinct front and back, but since others thought they were reversed, I asked me which way I thought “Max” was facing. I could see it both ways.

Max

Like a found poem, Max
 was in his elements
 at the scrap yard, around
 the bend of arms and legs,
 in the hollow where rain
 rusts and stains the cement
 by the sticks of his feet.
 He is asymmetrical for
 interest, engineered
 stable on his tripod.
 Sentinel of the sculpture
 garden, he faces forward
 and behind, proverbial eyes
 in the back of his head,
 one way looking down
 thoughtfully, the other arching
 toward the metal planets.



Behind the McDonough Art Museum sits a sculpture, higher than the door, which was commissioned by a friend in Lake George, New York. Tony began this sculpture with line drawings of the elements he had. He made a pattern on cardboard, laid it on the ground, and from the drawing the construction evolved. The original seemed too spindly, he said, so he added pieces to fill in the shape and create a larger

melts lick
and flare.
The world spins
coiled thick
like winds
around eddies
and dips, red
rivulets
drift into gold
and blue,
stabbed through
north
and south.
To fingertips