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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 lily-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 dome-covered table saw.

But patterns begin to emerge. One is spare parts. Like poets who "borrow" headlines and bridge graffiti, or photographers who make art from what exists, Tony is a scavenger. From the scrap yard, he finds pieces of curly, curvy and straight steel. "I'm hardly ever looking for anything specific," he says, "but I won't leave empty-handed." One favourite 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 red-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 centred on an individual object, such as the friend's dad's propeller that Tony mounted on a stable base; an added lawn-tractor seat made a fantastic, Monty Python-like pretend-vehicle. A company that punch-presses steel plates for agricultural seeding

creates plugs that become knobs or stony orbs; he carries 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 old-style polyester. From Tony’s hand, lilies are made of the bells of trombones, and their centres 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 longing has been with him for a long time to make the earth a better place. “When I was younger, I wanted to be one of those people who clean up the planet,” he says. It’s not a means to an end, but just a way of art. “My work isn’t consciously about recycling, but using discarded items in a different way,” he says. Another thread in Tony’s art is movement or the sense of movement. Motors spin balls and people, coiled steel suspended planet-like from a hook turns in its place, little worlds spin on their axes. The abstract figures, or sentinels, “guardians,” as Tony calls them, generally stand on tripods for balance, but they are tense with their perceived animation as though they would step off their rust-stained sidewalk and walk away. “Bowlegs,” a painted fibreglass figure, is hip-hop cool in his stance, and looks frozen in mid-saunter. Tony says he sees movement in the pieces, and also in the way they cause us to move around them, evoking motion in us.

Outside Star Supply, Youngstown discount surplus retailers, sit the “tube worms,” as he calls them: giant, colourful curves and loops of industrial duct-work, a collaborative project

with local artist Pat Crowe. The owner commissioned Tony to create something to identify the series of buildings as being part of the same business, a defining sculptural presence. As they ride by in cars, kids must imagine sliding through them. The tubes are dynamic, a motion that is still, as are so many of Tony's pieces. If I had known Tony's art before knowing Tony, I would have expected him to be fidgety and excitable, as opposed to calm and quiet as he appears.

Although many artists find a niche, working in the same medium, frame of reference, tone, etc., Tony says he never cared about maintaining consistency, but rather is trying to achieve a balance between the machine and the organic. Flowers, worlds, geodes, crystals, metals and other elements from the natural world are held together or made fun with motors, wheels, frames and platforms.

There is also a sense of whimsy and imagination in Tony's work. This is not the place to look for the suffering side of the human experience. It's in the creation. "These things are fun to make," he says. There is a child's sense of surprise and wonder in the pieces, and in Tony, too, when he says, "I feel like I don't ever want to grow up." Although it would be impossible to actually ride, one piece is a kind of medieval metal scooter. A small photo album of his art features the blurred figures of delighted children in the spinner—a device shaped like a round plate with a rail to hold everyone in. At the faculty art show, Tony swung himself up onto the seat of the propeller sculpture, looking like someone who thinks in shades of fun.

Tony, like most artists, traces his creative spirit back through his life to a home where the artistic impulse thrived. His mother made arts and crafts, including little scenes in blown-out eggs. One of Tony's first welded steel sculptures was a stand from which she could hang the eggs, "kind of a cross between a tree and a mushroom cloud." Tony attended pastel classes in Boardman, a suburb of Youngstown, and drawing classes at the Butler Institute of American Art,

tucked into the Youngstown State University campus. His family thought he should be a professional engineer, but he had other ideas. “My aptitude test gave me high scores for being an entertainer. I am that, in a way, with my art,” he said.

He earned a BFA from YSU in 1982 and an MFA [Master’s in Fine Arts] from the University of Cincinnati in 1987 when he was thirty. He has taught foundation design courses to incoming freshmen at YSU since 1989. “Teaching’s a blast,” he says. “Students are always showing you new ways of seeing things.” Teaching part-time isn’t lucrative, though, and he also works part-time in an auto body-shop to help pay for supplies. He says his close friends bug him to get a full-time job with benefits. I set out to write a poem about Tony’s art that was more about Tony.

Portrait of the Artist

It starts with the propeller
 from someone’s father’s plane
 three steel legs prop it up
 and one tall step,
 Tony swings into the rusty
 seat extracted
 from a broken lawn
 tractor. He teaches enough
 to pay for his studio,
 some welding stuff and
 all these ideas
 in his head. His friends
 want him to work
 more, buy a new car.
*A lot of people just
 don’t get it,*
 he says. *I’d buy
 paints.* After
 the show they’ll load
 the propeller in the truck
 and drive away,
 a pickup with a propeller
 off the back.

See him up there
bending his knees
think of the man
on the flying trapeze.

Tony's art finds itself scattered around the Youngstown area and wider region, and as far away as Florida. A winning sculpture in a contest sponsored by Mount Union College, "Tenskwatawa," is infused with Tony's whimsical eye as well as more grounded ideas. It was inspired from the somewhat socially-depressed atmosphere of Youngstown. According to the Mount Union website, "The abstract work composed of seemingly continuous curves, arcs and rings... points skyward signifying a sort of evolution or uprising." The piece is named for a Shawnee, who was alarmed by the white settlement of native lands at the turn of the nineteenth century. He used his knowledge of an impending solar eclipse to convince his people that as someone who could stop the sun, he could speak for the gods. He warned the Shawnee not to "sell" their lands to whites, intermarry or drink alcohol. The statue stands poised in a flower garden overlooking a peaceful grassy clearing.

Solar Eclipse

From the garden pushing up
daisies and yarrow, I am
a prophet. My namesake,

Tenskwatawa, warned
that weak knowledge
leads to ruin. I carry

the same message:
be wary of solvents
that dissolve you,

don't sell what you don't
own, don't love who
would convert you.

My rings and arcs spin
beneath the frozen sun,
one day I will walk

across this grassy place,
hold books about red and black
stars, the Shawnee people.

Another piece that has found a home far from home is “Bowlegs,” the man-sized sculpture cut with a chainsaw from a block of styrofoam. Tony then built up the surface with fibreglass and plastic fillers. “I’m working backwards: taking the armature to a thinner form than I’m seeking, building the surface up,” he said. He covered “Bowlegs” in metallic swirls, then layers of coloured, but clear, paint. The sculpture was purchased by a mall in Florida. Many years later, his relatives travelled to the area and took some photos to show Tony that although there had been many changes in the mall, “Bowlegs” still had a place on the ivied podium. Sitting in a mall might seem to cheapen the art, but malls are often the site of rites of passage, and after a while I became reconciled to the idea that a sculpture that is so comfortable in its own skin would move in the same space with teens and pre-teens who are trying to change out of their clumsy and selfconscious selves.

Bowlegs

He saunters past
the grand piano
cool as jazz, as green
all the way to a mall
in Florida where ivy
loops like shoppers.
He’s polychrome beneath
clear paint polish,
who wouldn’t want
their muscles to sleek
like that, hips

to sling low, to colour
the air with insouciance
while young girls try
clothes on their new
shapes, moist-handed
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-yard 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-blast 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’s eye, the piece has a distinct front and back, but since others thought they were reversed, he 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 out 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 volume. The base of the sculpture is double curves, connected with moon-like spheres. This is anchored with arched supports and knobs that look like wheels. At the top of the double curve sits a round frame, and from that hangs a loop of coiled steel. Plugs at the sides give the illusion of handles. The coiled steel is symbolic of the modern world, Tony says. "It's wrapped around so chaotically because that's how the world moves... the knobs don't work because it's too far from being tuned." Right down the path from this statue is Bliss Hall, home of the schools of art, theatre and music. Sal Attardo helped him with the piece.

Statue Near Bliss Hall

When you suspend
the planet's rings over
orbits and solstices, add
handles that turn
but don't connect.
Give people
a sense of cause
and effect, though
only you can turn
the world until
it rusts into place.
The knobs on the back
feet will be like
the wheels
of the expanding
universe. Say

you are celebrating.
Weld initials
onto the half moon,
T.A.S.A., yours
and a friend's,
because a cosmos
is too big to create
by yourself. Call it
the modern world,
and put it right
outside, but never
entering, Bliss.

When YSU built an extension onto Bliss, Tony was asked to help construct a huge, decorative steel gate that would commemorate the art of the steelmakers that forged an economy for decades of Youngstown's history.

On a smaller scale, Tony made a series of orbs, as he calls them. The cores are made of ceramic, in a two-piece mould, and spiralled around with layers of clay coils. He refines and defines the areas with a trim tool, then they're fired, coated with several colours of acrylic lacquer. When he sands them, it reveals the underlying layers of colour. They are mounted on different bases, suspended by axes that stick out from both poles of the orbs. One is suspended by a base made of steel. Tony sees it as a cross between medieval and sci-fi, with its spikes and grooves. "It's just fun to take a chunk of steel and take an oxyacetylene torch and carve it," he says. He cuts sections away and the abrasive wheels on the grinders carve and shape the surface. He leaves evidence of the wheels' rough bite.

Touch the World

To its flaming
metal universe,
the torch
or lightning

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
it is a glassy
brain, colour
currents course
the hollows,
the earthen dreams.