

1969

The Creation of Three Original Junk Sculptures

Norman Bennett

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1969 Norman Bennett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

THE CREATION OF THREE ORIGINAL JUNK SCULPTURES

An Abstract of
A Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Norman Bennett

August 1969

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
CEDAR FALLS, IOWA

The purpose of this thesis is to apply any sculptural concepts and beliefs, as well as my sensitivity to materials, to the creation of sculpture from junk materials.

The text of this thesis is concerned with a personal definition of junk, a brief historical background of the use of junk in art, personal statements concerning the nature of sculptural material, personal statements concerning my sculptural concepts and beliefs, and a short discussion of problems which arose during the creation of my thesis works.

Photographs of these three works are given for visual consideration by the reader. The original works are located at the Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa.

THE CREATION OF THREE ORIGINAL JUNK SCULPTURES

A Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Norman Bennett

August 1969

This Study by: Norman Lawrence Bennett

Entitled: The Creation of Three Original Junk Sculptures

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Ralph W. Haskell

~~Chairman, Thesis Committee~~

Clifford H. Herrold

~~Member, Thesis Committee~~

Jack F. Kimball

~~Member, Thesis Committee~~

Allan Shields

~~Dean of the College of~~
ALLAN SHIELDS

DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND FINE ARTS

Gordon J. Rhum

~~Dean of the Graduate College~~

July 25, 1969
Date approved by
Dean of the Graduate College

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE	1
INTRODUCTION	2-4
SCULPTURAL MATERIAL	6-7
SCULPTURAL CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS.	8-14
THREE ORIGINAL JUNK SCULPTURES	15-16
<u>DENVER NO. 1</u>	21
<u>STUDIO NO. 8</u>	26
<u>GRIFFITH NO. 1</u>	31

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

VIEWS OF WEISSMAN'S STEEL YARD, CEDAR FALLS	5
FIGURE 1, <u>Denver No. 1</u>	17
FIGURE 2, <u>Denver No. 1</u>	18
FIGURE 3, <u>Denver No. 1</u>	19
FIGURE 4, <u>Denver No. 1</u>	20
FIGURE 5, <u>Studio No. 8</u>	22
FIGURE 6, <u>Studio No. 8</u>	23
FIGURE 7, <u>Studio No. 8</u>	24
FIGURE 8, <u>Studio No. 8</u>	25
FIGURE 9, <u>Griffith No. 1</u>	27
FIGURE 10, <u>Griffith No. 1</u>	28
FIGURE 11, <u>Griffith No. 1</u>	29
FIGURE 12, <u>Griffith No. 1</u>	30

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this thesis is to apply my sculptural concepts and beliefs, as well as my sensitivity to materials, to the creation of sculpture from junk materials. It is my belief that these works speak for themselves. Personal statements concerning my sculptural concepts and beliefs are given to clarify my rationale for this thesis. A visual presentation of these works is intended to indicate a synthesis of my concepts, beliefs, and sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

For the sake of clarification, the term 'junk' has been used as a broad term. Basically, junk includes anything that has been discarded and is no longer wanted by its original owner. The derogatory inference often associated with this material is not relevant in this study. Junk, although being discarded, is not necessarily useless or ugly. This material may be useful and quite beautiful when used in sculptural forms. Thus the term 'junk' is merely a term of convenience.

The reasons for selecting junk for the material from which these works were to be created are: 1) a personal interest in junk as an expressive material, 2) the sculptural characteristics and spontaneous nature of junk, 3) the ability of junk to evoke an ultimate sculptural form with a minimum amount of effort, and 4) the relevancy of junk to the world today.

The use of junk as a sculptural material has been substantiated by the modern concept that art can be created from any material, a concept that has developed during the twentieth century. Junk has been used by many well-known artists during this century, and during the last decade has attained a position of wide acceptance among artists in the forefront of modern artistic development.

The use of junk objects in art seems to have begun in the early part of the twentieth century. Picasso is often credited with the first use of junk objects, at that time referred to as found objects, in his art. He incorporated a piece of chair caning in his painting, Still Life with Chair Caning (1911). After this painting, the use of found objects, usually in the form of old newspapers, was adopted by other cubist painters such as Braque and Gris. During this period, Picasso expressed his desire "to debunk the idea of 'noble' means."¹

The Dadaists, an anti-art movement of the early 1920's, used combine paintings, ready-made art, collages, and assemblages as their weapons against the sentimental and pompous in the art and life of their era. The Surrealists, an outgrowth of the Dada movement, noting the inherent symbolic quality of junk, used this material in their works also. Among these artists were Duchamp, Arp, Ernst, Balla, Picabia, and Breton.

In the late 1920's and 1930's, the use of junk in art was dignified by Kurt Schwitters, a German artist who introduced his 'Merz' art to the world of art. His works in collage and assemblage during this time were of high artistic merit. Also during this period, Gonzalez

1

H. Rasmuser and A. Grant, Sculpture from Junk (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp. 1967), p. 7.

was using junk objects in his welded metal sculptures. During the 1940's David Smith, perhaps the foremost American sculptor of this century, established junk as a highly expressive material in his abstract welded metal sculptures. Thus the use of junk in art was becoming more and more evident.

The late 1940's and early 1950's was a period during which the use of junk in art did little more than hold its own. Then, in the late 1950's, there was a resurgence of the use of junk in art objects and during the 1960's the use of junk moved to a place of high acceptance in the art world, being found in the work of such artists as Nevelson, Dubuffet, Tinguely, Seley, Oldenberg, Johns, Burri, Rauschenberg, Cesar, Stankiewicz, Kienholz, Dine, and Mallery, just to mention a few. The use of junk in the creation of art objects has reached its maturity and proper place in the world of art today.



VIEWS OF WEISSMAN'S STEEL YARD

Cedar Falls

SCULPTURAL MATERIAL

The artist creates from material at hand, from that which he knows and is striving to know. He relies upon his experiences, and because these experiences are limited his tools for expressing himself are limited. Accessibility is important to the artist; he uses those materials easily available to him. Richard Stankiewicz has stated that,

It was natural for Michelangelo to carve marble because this was the typical material of architecture and sculpture in his time. Living and working in Florence, whenever he looked around, he saw marble buildings and sculpture, and marble quarries in the adjacent hills. I grew up in New York and when I look around I see slums, junk piled at the curbs, civilization's discards; it is only natural for me to try to use some of these materials to make sculpture.²

Expanding Stankiewicz's statement, it is quite clear that we live in a nation of junk piles. This is a nation that unintentionally builds monumental piles of junk which might be conceived as an ironic homage to the machine age. Junk is all around the artist, and for the artist not to take advantage of the materials around him would be contrary to his modern mode of thought.

The use of junk in art, or more specifically sculpture, coincides with accessibility, and perhaps more importantly, relevancy. Materials used to express the ideas, thoughts, morals, standards, etc., of a civi-

2

From an interview with Mr. Ralph Haskell, Professor of Art, University of Northern Iowa, concerning a statement made by Richard Stankiewicz, during a panel discussion at the National Sculpture Conference at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, Spring of 1964.

lization should be relevant to that civilization. This is perhaps the reason that materials such as marble, bronze, wood, clay, etc. common to past eras and civilizations are seen less and less in the sculpture of today. Junk is a relevant material today, not just because there is so much of it in our environment, but also because it is a living testimonial to change and impermanence. This material is also relevant to the future in that it seems that junk will always be a part of the existence of man. Man and civilization will continue to change and, as they do, their discards will make up the junk piles of the future.

The aesthetic or expressive quality of a material is important to the acceptance of that material as a genuine 'art' raw material. Junk is very flexible in these areas in that it can elicit a broad range of responses. Because of this flexibility, it is highly acceptable as an 'art' material.

SCULPTURAL CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

The sculptural concepts and beliefs which were applied to my junk sculpture were the product of four years of study at the University of Northern Iowa. During the period of time devoted to the creation of these thesis works, these concepts and beliefs have matured and crystallized. These concepts and beliefs had a great effect upon my sculpture, but likewise the material influenced these concepts and beliefs and caused them to broaden. I grew to understand somewhat the nature of junk and to respect it as a legitimate sculptural material.

This material held no derogatory connotation. To call something 'junk' does not mean that an object is no longer worthwhile to hold in esteem or that it is no longer pleasing to look at. Quite the contrary, these objects often become more 'beautiful' after they have been exposed to the elements of weather and abuse. Junk has an inner being, just as men have an inner being, and this inner being must be respected if the sculpture, of which these objects are a part, is to be successful.

Junk takes on the dimension of aesthetic when it becomes a part of an art object. Not all junk objects are thought to possess an aesthetic, although they may. However, those materials, which have become a part of my works, possess a personal aesthetic. The term 'aesthetic', as used here, is equated to the 'personal appeal' an object may have to me. It is a sensitivity that I have for an object.

When this sensitivity is not present, there is not the 'pull' that other aesthetic objects have on me. When selecting materials to use in my works, I base my selection upon this sensitivity or 'pull.' Their aesthetic may increase, decrease, or remain the same, depending upon my susceptibility at a certain moment. Therefore, this aesthetic is relative to the person, to the way a person feels at a particular moment, or to the circumstances in which an object is viewed. I go to the junk objects, in their habitat, and if they appeal to me, I take them to the studio and use them in my work. Seeing them for the first time in their habitat often is the seed for a new sculpture, in that I may see a junk object and desire to make it a part of a sculpture, although at the time the final sculptural form of which this object is to be a part is as yet unrealized.

I very rarely have a preconceived idea of what I will do, except that I wish to create a sculpture that 'works.' I conceive a work while doing it, not before. This conception often takes place while selecting and studying materials, and continues to develop and grow while the work is in progress. A work is never completely conceived until it is finished. Picasso once stated, "A picture is not thought out and settled before hand. While it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change."³ On this same subject, David Smith, perhaps the foremost American sculptor,

3

D. Meilach, and E. T. Hoor, Collage and Found Art (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1964), p. 14.

has commented that, "I cannot conceive of a work and then buy materials for it. I must find a part and create a work from this."⁴ This spontaneity of creation is especially relative to my work and the material I use because of the changing nature and impermanence of this material.

I feel an understanding of the material that is used in the creation of sculpture, as well as its potential as a sculptural material, is necessary if the highest possible results are to be realized. It is necessary to involve one's self in these objects. Their inherent qualities, texture, form, patina, being, etc., should be respected at all times. Through this understanding and involvement one learns to sense how a junk object can be utilized to its utmost potential in a sculptural form. There is often a direct correlation between the success of a sculpture and my understanding and involvement with the junk objects that become a part of that sculpture. When there is a lack of involvement and understanding, my work is not as successful. When this occurs, the objects must either be 'reused' or abandoned for the time being. Some objects are lost completely.

I very rarely paint my work unless it is necessary to obtain a unifying effect. I limit myself to the natural patina of the objects I use, incorporating their textures and forms into the final work. To paint these junk objects often destroys their native qualities and limits

4

G. Carandente, Voltron, Philadelphia: (University of Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art. Distributed by H. N. Abrams, New York, 1964), p. 42.

their being able to be 'themselves;' however, if the total form of a work is all-important, and painting will increase the power of that form, I find it advantageous to paint my work.

Strict adherence to formalized theorems does not affect my sculpture. My work is personal. This work is affected by personal sculptural concepts and beliefs which are the synthesis of past and present sculptural thought. However, the application of these concepts and beliefs to the actual creation of my works is not in the realm of conscious thought. I create a sculptural object that to me 'works,' something which through habit has become immediate and without need to think about. All of the separate criteria, before needed for judgement, have become one, and simply that is, 'Does it work?' This judgement is totally visual and has nothing to do with a verbal aesthetic judgement. By creating something that 'works' I hope to create something which possesses an existence of its own, in the realm of the visual world. To quote David Smith, "Sculpture is."⁵ This is what I hope to do, create something that "is." David Smith has stated that,

When I work, the train of thought has no words, it is simply all in the visual world, the language is the image. The image itself possesses little art history. Most of the words of art have been an actual hindrance to the understanding of art, . . . perception. Percept on through vision is a highly accelerated response, so fast, so complex, so free, that these qualities are

5

Ibid., p. 5.

not attainable by the very recent limited science of word communication I do not work with a conscious and specific conviction about a piece of sculpture. It is always open to change and new association.⁶

Barnett Newman, contemporary American painter and forerunner of primary painting, has stated this concept another way, "Esthetics is for artists, as ornithology is for the birds."⁷

What I strive for in my works is a dignified, self-sustaining form that exists in itself. I desire forms to exist without a reason except that they be themselves. To make a statement with junk, or any other material, one states what best that material can state, itself. To state something else might be worthwhile, but in doing so, one loses the force of the material.

I have no theme or deliberate sequential progression in my work, except perhaps an attempt to capture an inner spark of life that exists in the material I use. These objects possess an individual 'life' in themselves. To combine a number of different objects into a whole without destroying this 'life,' which I hope to unite in a new 'life' of the final form, is my goal. It is also important that their other qualities of texture, line, form, etc., are not lost in the finished

6

David Smith: A Retrospective Exhibition (Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1966), p. 95-99.

7

D. L. Shirley, "Barney," Newsweek, Vol. LXXIII, April 14, 1969, p. 94.

work. This is not to mean that each junk object is to stand out as a distinct part of the whole, but means that these objects must contribute their part to that whole. They must look as though they belong together. They must complement each other and the whole, and yet remain true to themselves.

Being bound up in a meaning when working with a material can get in the way of one's understanding of that material and its potential. I wish to create sculpture, not symbols.* The forms and materials, which are used in my work, are intended to make the sculptural statement. To quote a statement by Dale Eldred, contemporary American sculptor, on his thoughts about meaning,

The other day, when somebody asked, 'would I explain what I built in Mankato?', they were talking about this idea of the public being involved in what I built. . . . I had no personal hang ups, absolutely not anything. I just went out to build the best thing I knew how to build. I didn't think about anything more than that, and they raised the question, "Don't you have a responsibility to the public?" Yes, you're Goddamn right I do. I have the responsibility to build the best Goddamned thing I still know how to build and present it to them. And, they have the responsibility of finding out. Well, they said, 'What is it?' Well, I said, 'It is what it is.' How can someone ask you what a sculpture is when it's right before you. That's the Goddamnedest question that I ever heard. . . .you're standing in front of a Buick, and you say what is it. Well, it's a Buick. That's a sculpture. That's a man. That's a tree. It's as simple as that.

*

The titles of my work refer only to the locations from which the materials came, nothing more.

They're looking for some mystery to the whole thing that makes it a sculpture. . . . They're not talking about what's visual about it. They are talking about, 'What are those mysterious things?' . . . I simply say, 'It is what it is.' . . . see it's real, very real. . . . come over and touch it. I don't think the artist has a Goddamned bit of responsibility to the public, as far as what he makes. ⁸ . . he is giving . . . something that always becomes public.

A meaning can only be relative; it is the art object that remains the same. We build monuments to ideals and men, and that is perhaps our downfall; we should be building monuments to those things of which monuments are made.

8

From a tape of a discussion between Dale Eldred, Chairman of the Sculpture Department of the Kansas City Art Institute, and the Need and Scope Committee of the Art Department, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, on March 7, 1969.

THREE ORIGINAL JUNK SCULPTURES

The three works submitted as thesis works are Denver No. 1 (figs. 1-4), Studio No. 8 (figs. 5-8), and Griffith No. 1 (figs. 9-10). These works are the result of my desire to create sculpture by applying to my work my personal sculptural concepts, beliefs, and sensitivity to materials. To me, these sculptures exist in themselves. They are visual objects, and because of this they require no literary explanation or defense. They speak for themselves.

These works were neither a beginning nor an end in my sculptural development during the period in which my thesis work took place. This period was characterized by search and investigation into the sculptural potential of junk materials. Because of the broadness of this search, certain problems arose which were unanticipated. These problems were directly related to the specific characteristics of certain junk objects, and for this reason the problems were somewhat unique to a particular junk object. These separate, unique problems required solutions which would solve the problem at hand, but solutions which were also important to future works. In essence, they broadened the possibilities of other sculptural objects and kindled new ideas and avenues of exploration that could be investigated in future sculpture. The problems which arose during the creation of these thesis works facilitated solutions which directly affected the thesis works themselves and also formed a

basis for future sculptural inquiry. Because of the important stature of these problems to my development, I feel it is important to discuss them in relation to the works with which they were directly concerned.



FIGURE 1

Denver No. 1

Metal, Wood and Fiber



FIGURE 2

Denver No. 2

Metal, Wood and Fiber



FIGURE 3

Denver No. 1

Metal, Wood and Fiber



FIGURE 4

Denver No. 1

Metal, Wood and Fiber

DENVER NO. 1

Denver No. 1 raised the problem of combining a number of dissimilar junk objects into an integrated sculptural whole. These objects were characterized by a number of different textures, patinas, forms, etc., associated with metal, wood, simulated hair, and compressed fibre which made up the junk materials used in this sculpture. It was necessary to combine these distinct parts into a sculptural whole in such a way that they would 'work' together and add to the whole sculptural form. Denver No. 1 was the solution of this problem; however, it also opened new avenues of possible future investigation concerning the use of dissimilar junk materials in sculpture, such as mixed media junk sculpture handled in a non-objective manner and the use of junk objects with new materials such as aluminum, plastics, etc.



FIGURE 5

Studio No. 8

Metal



FIGURE 6

Studio No. 8

Metal



FIGURE 7

Studio No. 8

Metal



FIGURE 8

Studio No. 8

Metal

STUDIO NO. 8

Studio No. 8 raised the problem of creating a unified sculptural whole from selected and altered junk forms with similar characteristics. This work made use of mangled and crushed sheet steel from a car fender as well as parts of an old car bumper. Because of the nature of the materials, the extreme number of interesting things already inherent in the objects themselves, there was little need to use a great number of parts in the sculpture. It meant creating a sculptural whole from a minimum number of parts in such a manner that a maximum number of things were going on. Inherent in these parts were variations in textures, movement, negative and positive forms, etc. which added a great amount of variety and vitality to the work without the use of a variety of different parts. The implications of this work upon future sculptural inquiry are broad. There exists the possibility of reducing the number of junk objects to one and relying upon the inherent characteristics of that object for variety and interest. There is also the possibility of increasing the amount of alteration of the object by the artist in order that he may have more control over what takes place. There exists the possibility that the artist might rely entirely upon his selection of junk materials, materials which already possess inherently interesting forms, to create a sculptural object, or there is the possibility that the artist might use any combination of the procedures mentioned in his creation of sculpture.



FIGURE 9

Griffith No. 1

Metal



FIGURE 10

Griffith No. 1

Metal



FIGURE 11

Griffith No. 1

Metal



FIGURE 12

Griffith No. 1

Metal

GRIFFITH NO. 1

Griffith No. 1 raised the problem of creating a sculptural whole from two parts with equal forms. This sculpture utilized two portions of a car chassis of equal dimensions and form to make possible a variety of relationships between the two forms. It became clear that the solution to the problem would more adequately be solved if this work were to be constructed in such a manner that a variety of relationships could be obtained and a 'new' sculpture could be constructed at will. To facilitate the sculpture taking on a number of relationships between its parts, holes were drilled at equal matching intervals on both members. These members were to be secured by the use of two bolts at their points of contact. Thus by moving either or both members, a 'new' sculpture could be created. The number of possible positions of the two members could be increased by turning either or both members upside down because of adjustable couplings at the base. Also the fact that this sculpture could be placed in a horizontal position as well as the vertical increased the possibilities of the work twofold. Thus an interesting aspect of the problem of combining two equal forms into a sculptural whole evolved, that of multiple sculptures. For this sculpture, a related aspect of the primary problem had to be considered, this being how to increase the power of the forms utilized in this sculpture. It became evident that because of the nature of forms and the desire to increase their force or power, it would be advantageous to paint these forms.

Although this was something I seldom do to my sculpture, for this particular problem it seemed an adequate solution for the unique problem which existed. This particular work also raised interesting considerations for future study such as increasing the number of 'now' sculptures by increasing the number of holes in each member, increasing the number of members in a particular sculpture, or combining different forms into one sculpture. The possibilities of such multiple sculptures appear to be quite interesting and worthy of future consideration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carandente, C., Voltron, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art. Distributed by H. N. Abrams, New York, 1964.
- David Smith: A Retrospective Exhibition. Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1966.
- Kramer, H., "The Sculpture of David Smith." Arts, 34:22-43, February, 1960.
- Meilach, D. and E. T. Hoor, Collage and Found Art. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1964.
- Moore, Henry, Henry Moore on Sculpture. Edited by Philip James, New York: Viking Press, 1966.
- Rasmuser, H. and A. Grant, Sculpture from Junk. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1967.
- Read, Herbert, A Concise History of Modern Sculpture. New York: F. A. Praeger Publisher, 1964.
- Russell, J., Henry Moore. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968.
- Shirley, D. L., "Barney," Newsweek, 73:93-94, April 14, 1969.