

# THE EXPANSION WORKS

FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURE CREATED, NOT BY DESIGN OR LABORIOUS EFFORT, BUT BY SIMPLE INTENT—MAYBE IT'S NATURE IMITATING ART

**Mike Shaffer**

Objects as works of art probably began with Marcel Duchamp in 1917. In the troubled 30s and 40s most object-related efforts, though subdued, were spent on painting images of objects. Fernand Léger, for example, painted *Pair of Pants* in 1931 but it was not until the 50s and 60s that objects themselves in art really caught on as evidenced by such works as Joseph Cornell's small box-like still lifes and later, Jasper Johns's bronze Ballantine beer cans. Andy Warhol of course lead the movement for two decades with his two- and three-dimensional representations of Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes. Recently Jeff Koons has inserted himself into the art world with his often irreverent treatment of objects as cultural icons as have many others.

I began to use found objects in my work in the late 60s. The Expansion Works series, begun in 1970, is an "expansion" of a style and technique developed earlier in the Research Works series, a group of over 200 assorted sculptures, paintings, and design accessories. The earliest Expansion Works were made of scrap metal and other objects foraged from rural roadsides. I was fascinated with the shapes of twisted and distorted pipes and beams and the rough and pitted texture of rusty corroding machinery. I was also pleased about being able to make odd and interesting works of art from such impressive raw materials and being able to get them for such a modest price: nada. I felt like I was making the proverbial something from nothing.

It was gratifying to be able to transform what would be considered by most of us to be junk and debris into something of possibly some value. It's like bringing about a resurrection of sorts of certain inanimate

objects. I'm not a religious person but I think of it as a way of making a philosophical statement about optimism and finding happiness through miraculous change, transformation or starting a new life.

I try to add a few new works to the series each year. I am not interested in assembling parts and pieces into something beautiful. I want to create sculpture that says, "If you will just look at me carefully you will find that I am actually interesting—never mind what I am technically or by definition or where I came from or what I was. Just appreciate my lines, my shape, my texture, my color, all my intrinsic qualities for what they are now. Take me as I am," (The title of an old hymn, I believe).

The true nature of the series can best be understood if the works are viewed as a group rather than one by one. Individually they range from the sublime to the ridiculous. The surfaces of the earliest works are left pretty much in their natural state, which in many cases is rough and crusty, even soiled, while later works have glossy or painted finishes. Some of the early pieces resemble the work of Richard Stankiewicz.

The more complex works appear to have come into existence as a result of some thought but most of them are not the result of painstaking manipulation of materials. I want them to seem casual, almost inadvertent, maybe even thrown together. My purpose is to focus on objects that have, in effect, already been made or shaped by nature—a situation where, in its simplest form, nature and the world at large are making works of art by doing what the artist does. As a

result, the objects essentially preexist and need only to be brought to viewers' attention. I want to keep the artist's influence on them to a minimum so they can be what they are and not reflect artist-imposed qualities. It's art by intent and by declaration with the details dictated by chance or whim and sometimes by accident. By simply placing an object, or group of objects, on view, maybe with a little cleaning up or painting and adding some means of support, I can, in true Dada fashion, tweak peoples ideas about what art is.



Typical of many works in the series is *Wheel Horse* (right) made from assorted found objects in 1991. One of the simplest is *T-Ball One* from 1989.



The Expansion Works are important to me because they are manifestations of a belief in a philosophy and a purpose for making them. They also enable me to derive a great deal of inexplicable satisfaction from feeble attempts not only to be a maker of important and valuable things, but also a discoverer, a transformer and a recognizer of something profound amidst considerable chaos.