

arts magazine

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murze

Featuring | Stephanie Mill, Pablo Ruiz, Glen Farley
Projects | Colour, Word, Social Art



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What set you off as an artist?

I am what you could call a “late bloomer” as an artist. I only began producing and exhibiting my art in 2011, as a complete change after working thirty years in the information technology field. I had not intended to exhibit my first kinetic sculpture but a good friend who is a professional artist convinced me to apply to two major juried exhibitions. To my great surprise I got accepted to both. After that I was smitten.

Looking back on my early life, I see a few key experiences that influenced how I conceive and produce my works. I was fortunate to have two grandfathers whom I loved to spend time with – one a very handy carpenter and the other an electrical engineer. In many ways, the technology and feel of my art would have been familiar and understandable to people of their era. My mother had a strong sense of style and design, and my father sketched and painted as a hobby. I have early and fond associations between the smell of turpentine and the production of art. As a child, I loved to create fantastical machines and other toys from whatever was available, and when my children were young we did the same together.

Tell us about the themes you pursue in your work

Much of my art deals with the relationship between humans and technology, and tends to focus on the negative aspects of this increasingly pervasive relationship. Specific technology related issues my kinetic artworks examine include electronic surveillance (Surveillance) web-based micro-jobs (eSerfs), social media (Reach) and electronic waste (Abandoned). Other themes I pursue in my work include refugees and immigration (Up North), and politics (Red State/Blue State, Lives of Loyal Service and Research). In addition to themes related to social activism I also produce works dealing with more personal themes such as family secrets (Secrets II) and aging (Grandma's Time and Baggage).

What art do you most identify with? any specific influences?

My art practice is inspired by the motion, mechanics and theatrics of Jean Tinguely, Arthur Ganson and Alexander Calder, but my machinery is concealed in found and created objects, so only the pure motion of the objects remains. Sometimes I cut small windows in the covers to expose the machinery for the especially interested. There are several contemporary kinetic artists that inspire me, including Norwegians Kristoffer Myskja, Atle Selnaes Neilsen and Lavasir Nordrum. Lavasir has also produced some of the fantastic films and photographs of my work found on my website.

Is there something you couldn't live without in your studio? what is your most essential tool?

This is a tough question. Of all aspects of being an artist, it is the production of art in my studio that I love most. So I am very fond of my tools, some of which I have inherited from my late grandfathers and father. I drill, solder and fabricate a lot with wood and metal, so these tools are indispensable. I also use my laptop to design, research, order parts and learn new techniques so it is also essential.

Tell us how you organise, plan, and prioritise your work

Every one of my pieces begins with a social, political or personal issue that concerns me, and often a particular motion or set of motions that interest me. Sometimes the theme comes first and finds a motion and sometimes I have an idea for a motion and the theme grows out of that.

I begin with sketches, either by hand or using an online drawing tool, then do some prototyping, then build a parts list and have several sessions on eBay to order parts, then design a wiring diagram and finally construction. I take pictures of the process and document it in a project book, and to a lesser extent on my website and Instagram account.

I have recently used CNC machining for the first time to fabricate some high-precision components but I am not sure I will continue with that - it takes some of the handiwork and fun out of the creation process. I also have many wonderful suppliers who provide components that I cannot produce myself or choose not to, including a 3D printing expert, a film and sound editor (my son), and graphic designers (including my daughter.)

Since audience/user experience is very important to me, there are many practical aspects to consider. Things like lighting, soundtrack levels (a crowded gallery space demands about twice the volume of an empty one), durability and accessibility for viewers of all ages and heights are just some of the considerations I need to include in the planning, production and testing of each work. I include counters on my work and some of the older pieces have now been run thousands of times. So they need to be built to last.

How do you navigate the art world?

I navigate a tiny corner of the art world in Norway where I live, work and exhibit most, and in Canada, my country of origin where I try to exhibit at least once a year. In addition to these two countries I have been fortunate to be accepted to exhibitions in Germany, Austria, USA and Sweden. But I find it challenging to identify appropriate exhibition opportunities and to cover the costs of shipping, etc. I feel my lack of a formal art education may be an impediment to getting certain grants and being accepted to certain exhibitions (the ones that are not anonymous) but otherwise I am content to be an outsider.

Describe how your work challenges social issues

In addition to exhibiting my work in large exhibitions where I hope people will be encouraged to think about the social issues presented, I engage in special projects. I have exhibited my refugee piece Up North in collaboration with refugee teenagers in Oslo. My piece on electronic waste, Abandoned, is used to inspire Masters students each fall at the University of Oslo as part of a course on the ethics of Information Technology. I have held workshops with children and am currently holding artist talks and exhibiting several of my works for elderly folks at 11 senior centres outside Oslo.

What do you believe is the role artists should play in communities and society

Artists should be catalysts for people of all ages to think critically about social, political and environmental issues. My works are particularly popular with children and the young at heart, even though they address serious issues and have many levels of meaning. I believe that a whimsical or humorous treatment of serious themes can be an effective invitation to reflection and discussion. In addition I believe kinetic art can capture the attention of some people who might otherwise not be interested in art or the underlying issues.

Are there any upcoming exhibitions or projects in the works?

I am participating in a large Norwegian regional exhibition called Art out West in the fall which includes opening my studio to the public. I am applying to major international exhibitions in New Jersey, USA and Toronto, Canada and I am completing a new sculpture on smartphone addiction that involves motion, film, sound, the capture of video comments from the viewer and for the first time, everything is controlled by a Raspberry Pi microprocessor. As they say, lots of moving parts!