

PATRICK KELLY INTERVIEW WITH JOE BARRINGTON

(and Little Joe Hammer)

PK: Most people are familiar with your work that derives from utilizing found steel objects that you manipulate into familiar and recognizable objects, people, or animals. How far back does this approach to sculpture making go?

JB: Using found, scavenged, or reclaimed materials goes back to the beginning of making sculpture.

Early on it was as much for financial reasons as aesthetic ones. Growing up in a welding shop in the Texas oilfields there was always an abundance of pipe, tank steel, and all kinds of other shapes easily available that were headed for the salvage yards. Now, most of the material I scavenge or recycle are materials that I use because of a particular shape or texture that I want to use to get a specific look for a piece. A good example of this is the use of the interior side of oil field storage tanks to construct the skull pieces. The texture of the steel is very reminiscent of the texture of bone.

PK: Did the “scavenging” for material start before or after receiving your BFA in sculpture?

JB: I have always been a collector as many artists are. My collecting started as a kid. I still have things I picked up or scavenged then. One of my favorites is a cow skull with horns I picked up when I was in high school. I use many of these things as models as well as physically using them in my sculptures. One of the first large pieces I did while I was in college is a large sledgehammer that sits on campus at Midwestern State. When I got ready to build it, my Dad and I went down on the Brazos River and picked up a discarded pecan tree log for the handle. That was probably one of the earliest times I set out to scavenge a particular thing for a sculpture. I grew up in a family that bought and sold metal—brass, copper, steel, cast iron, etc. So it was a natural thing to see lots of potential sculpture materials.

PK: Tell me about Little Joe Hammer.

JB: As I have said before, I started going with my dad to work at a very early age. I spent a lot of time around men. These were not men in an office. These were men who worked mostly outside and could've been described as “manly men.” They worked on farms, ranches, oil rigs, drove bulldozers, etc. They smelled like tobacco, sweat, dirt, oil, and gasoline. In short, they smelled like men. These men also hunted, fished, cussed, drank, gambled and told stories. The stories were about work, women, hunting, fishing...well you get the idea. I heard and saw all of this while standing by my dad's leg as a young boy. Dad was also my filter for all of this and I got strict instructions on what I could

and could not repeat when we got home.

My point in this is that Little Joe is a compilation of all of the characters I was exposed to and all of the stories I heard. He is the granddad from East Texas who went to school three days total; he is the uncle who was the most skilled meat hunter, fish catching, most talented welder, binge drinking, etc. guy in the world. Little Joe Hammer is a compilation of all the things I could have been...had it not been for the man whose leg I was standing by. That man allowed me to be what I am today—a sculptor.

PK: It seems you are making work that is honest with subjects you are intimately familiar vs. simply translating what you observe. Do you sometimes feel the sources for your subject finite or do you find yourself seeing things you want to explore in constant supply?

JB: I used to worry about running out of ideas for pieces. Now I worry about running out of time. It seems that each new trip or experience leads to more ideas for pieces. I have said in the past that I don't know how a young person makes art if they don't have any life experiences to draw from. In short, there are an infinite number of pieces to build in a finite time.

PK: I think inspiration derives from perspective. Some artists are participants, some are keen observers, and some are both. You, personally, draw from experiences, people, animals, and objects of which you are familiar. And you often add a touch of humor in your work, which historically is common with Texas artists of any discipline. Is this purposeful?

JB: That's an interesting question. Storytelling is something that has always interested me. I think writing/storytelling would be something I would pursue if I did not build sculptures. I think the best stories always involve humor; therefore, humor finds its way into my work. I believe that some artists take themselves way too seriously and their work might benefit from the insertion of a dose of humor. I have always believed it is OK for the public to be entertained by artwork.

I have always felt/thought I was fighting a battle with a short sword. I grew up in a small rural West Texas town with no art program, or artists in my family. However, they were creative, crafty, and superior problem-solvers who could repair or build anything. I had no art history, nor visited an art museum until I was in college. So to answer the question, I think humor was a way to build interesting, entertaining pieces while I grew as an artist.

PK: Well I could jump on my soapbox on the arts in our education system (or lack of it) but I'll refrain...kinda. You make a good point. I think most artists are excellent problem solvers and likely due to the fact that creative thinking makes them so. That's why art is important in schools, not so kids can make ceramic ashtrays ad infinitum.

Okay, back to the point. If you look at Texas visual arts from the 1960s, you see a “Texas vernacular” that incorporates humor, and sometimes it’s not universally translated or understood. Possibly that is the reason Texas art, until recently, has been deemed “regional.” Do you think about how your work is translated or received by someone not familiar with your subjects and what they reference?

JB: My work tends to run in series. The pieces in each series are closely related to each other. Sometimes these overlap, and sometimes I will revisit a series years after the main body of work is completed. With that being said, the idea of the work translating out of the region is something I am conscious of as I enter shows and make public art proposals. Some of my Texas/regional pieces such as roadrunners, horned lizards, and armadillos are not things I would propose in the Midwest, or Deep South. Ravens on the other hand are ubiquitous and therefore translate really well; they are found pretty much worldwide and even span the gap from the most remote rural areas to the largest urbanized cities. I do consider myself to be a regional artist, albeit a large region. I am making a conscious effort to build work that reaches across a much larger geographical area, and translates to a much broader audience without abandoning my rural Texas roots.

PK: For the Cell Series you are proposing utilizing the raven as subject. Can you briefly describe what you plan to do and why?

I have been building the raven sculptures for quite a few years. They have always intrigued me. They are very social birds, with interesting interactions. They have also long been considered messengers by the Native American tribes. In the last few years the idea of using the raven sculptures as messengers in my work has become more prominent. The ideas I am trying to convey to the viewer covers a range of topics including social interactions, as well as man’s impact on our environment, with a focus on our throw away society. Many of my ravens are made of discarded materials such as tires scavenged off the highway.

The Cell Series shows have interested me since their inception at the Old Jail. I always look forward to seeing how each artist utilizes this unique space.

As I have thought about this project, a series of words have come to mind: confinement, abandonment, loneliness, confusion, delusion, despair, hopelessness, overwhelmed. If I am successful, these same words will come to the viewer’s mind. There are no right or wrong interpretations of this scenario; each result from the individual’s own experiences in life. Hopefully they will open up dialogue between the viewers and their friends.