

FUNCTIONAL OR FANCIFUL?

BROWN'S SCULPTURAL CONGLOMERATIONS



The motion and glint from the mirrors are the first things to catch your eye. Then you see it: a big metal fish – a yellowfin tuna, in fact – with a propeller in its mouth, gently revolving in the breeze in front of the granite monuments, just past the U-Haul place as you drive west on Tenney Mountain Highway in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

"It's sort of an eclectic combination of working with what I have to make something new," Pete Brown said of his sculptures. "I like to take items that don't really belong together and put them together. It might be a usable item or not."

Brown grew up mechanically inclined. "I was a mechanic for many years," he

said, adding, "I even had my own shop in Franklin for five years." Today, his primary career is building street rods, also known as "rat rods." Brown says these are made from a "conglomeration of parts from different makers – Ford, Chevy, Buick. I like to concentrate on having a strange power plant. I go for more exotic things, like a 1941 tank engine that's going in one street rod right now. I've also used snowmobile carburetors." One vehicle he made for himself logged over 31,000 miles from New Hampshire down to North Carolina and back through Maine. "I use parts that weren't meant to be together, but I adjust them and make them work out.

Sometimes it just falls together, so I like to say I get lucky a lot. It's a lot of trials with errors."

His sculpture started as a hobby, something to do on the side, but Brown notices that his career is transitioning into mostly sculpture. When I went to visit him in August, he was sold out of his big sculptures. It was raining again, as it had most of this summer. Visitors must pick their way carefully through all the pieces of metal piled everywhere, scattered on the ground and hidden in the mud, but Brown knows where everything is and glides easily on his improvised ramps in and out of his studio/home/workshop/hoarder's paradise. As we talk, he temporarily turns off his homemade rock tumbler (powered by a windshield wiper engine), in which he is making sea glass.

It's hard to tell where the workshop ends and the house begins: There are parts everywhere. A light is made from bicycle gears. Instead of a kitchen table, there's a lathe. Likewise, it can be hard to tell what is intended to be a sculpture and what is intended as a useful machine. The massive fan in the yard could be either. In fact, he constructed it to keep cool in the summer and help blow away the bugs.

"It's my second fan," Brown explained. "The first one stood about 15 feet tall – it was only a three-blade. The blades were constructed from pre-1936 car hoods, which were divided down the middle. I took both sides of the hoods and put them back to back. The concavity lent itself well to moving air. That had a rototiller transmission. A fellow drove by and said he had to have it and ended up trading me a late-model S10 pickup truck for it.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

PETE BROWN

Pete Brown uses wedge-shaped nails to create dragonflies, photograph Marcia Santore.

"The new one is 25 feet tall with four blades constructed from 55-gallon drums. I welded the barrels end-to-end and cut them in half, lengthwise, so I got two blades out of each set of two drums. There's a large pulley made from a wheelchair rim that drives it. The axel and bearing came from a four-wheeler."

Behind the house is a massive line of rusty antique cars piled up and over each other, like a major accident that stopped in time in the woods. Brown says he finds materials like these mostly by word of mouth. "Loggers, contractors, job sites, hikers – just to get a line on where there could be something in the woods. Then I talk to the owner about what I'm doing and take it all out. I don't find a lot of frames, engines or axels. I find a lot of old bodies from when cars were being taken apart for the war effort. The frames I am finding were put out of use after the war and were just lost behind someone's barn." Some parts go into the sculptures, others into the street rods. Brown laughs and adds, "I am finding I like materials that are easier to work with – predrilled anything is great!"

Brown was recently invited as a guest artist to a summer art class taught by Annette Mitchell at Plymouth State University. He brought several sculptures with him but did not return with any of them. One piece was another version of the yellowfin tuna. Another was one of his favorites, a bar stool made from the foot of a treadle sewing machine, a



tractor seat and the rear axle of a Ford Model A.

Then there was the hanging fish made from old metal sap buckets that undulates in the air. "My stepbrother was in charge of a rental property a while back that had a dilapidated old sap house," Brown said. "There were all these sap buckets lying around, so my buddy Matt and I went up with a truck and loaded it up with them. We thought about making a serpent that would come up and out of the ground, but I decided to go with a fish. The buckets are so thin with the age and the rust, you can cut them with scissors. It took me a while to get it to the point where it

wouldn't just dissolve in the rain. I went with multiple points to hang it from, and it really moves like a fish in the wind when it's balanced."

Pete Brown's hanging fish made from old metal sap buckets (Photograph courtesy of Annette Mitchell).

| Marcia Santore



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