

BALANCING ACT

In 2008, Hurricane Ike flattened Nic Nobilique's studio in Galveston Island, Texas, destroying all of his work. The hurricane also decimated a one-of-a-kind cold-steel press machine Nobilique uses to mold and press his cold steel into airy sculptures. But to twist a cliché, you can't keep a good artist down. Nobilique rebuilt his machine and studio. The people in the Dallas/Fort Worth area benefit from his tenacity. Cameron Gallery hosts a reception and display of his sculpture on April 10. The eight new pieces will be on display until May 10.

Nobilique says his inspiration comes from human sources, such as Picasso and Gustav Klimpt to the 3/5/8 mathematical formula that underlies the helical structure of crystals, DNA and the delicate lace of a waterfall. His steel structures — though massive — float through the air like smoke or music made solid.

Tell me about the title of your current show.

The title of the show, "Grind Hassle Jump Jam," is a reference to what my last year and a half or so has been like. What I've had to do to survive and to produce a new body of work, which is this show. It's been a chaotic roller coaster. Figuring out how to rebuild my life after the hurricane and just very, very slowly putting the pieces back together again while dealing with one obstacle after another.

How did living through the hurricane impacted your art?

I wouldn't say that the experience has changed the way I create or my perspective as an artist. Really, it just made me appreciate even more how lucky I am to be doing what I love. I am not so quick to build sculpture and crank out paintings, not as proliferative as before the hurricane. Now I really appreciate every piece of steel and tube of oil in my studio.

One of your sculptures — "The Embrace" — is clearly massive, but looks like it will come alive and jump into the air. You've told me it is made of Corten steel. How did you get it to achieve that fluid shape?

I was actually kicked out of The Denver Institute of Art when I was 20. I taught myself everything I know and have built my own custom fabrication machines that can handle the size and scope of my work and manipulate steel the way I want it too. I cold-roll the steel on a pretty enormous machine I built from junkyard parts. The first one I built cost about 60 bucks, then it was completely fucked in the storm. So I just built another one, this time for about 150 bucks, and used a salvaged transmission from an oil rig and other miscellaneous parts and hydraulics and wired it up to a couple of motors so I can send the steel in and reverse it with 60 tons of pressure. The same three roll pinch machine at the big fabrication joints costs tens of thousands of dollars at a minimum and mine works better. This is the kind of thing you have to do if you are serious about being an artist and working in my medium of steel. I learned a long time ago that if I was going to be successful and if I was ever going to be able to manipulate steel the way I see it in my head, I'd have to get real creative and be super determined to make it happen.

How did you train yourself to build a machine that can cold press steel?

I went to school at a technical college in Santa Ana, California where I studied pliable materials engineering. At the time, I didn't know some of that education would help me later when I decided to be a full time professional artist. I really wanted to improve the design of skateboards, make surfboards, and build skate ramps, which I did. That has all played a part in what I do now and I've had to learn to do the rest. My dad is a retired science teacher, he's really great at a lot of the electrical and mechanical things and when he's not in Michigan he helps me work out the kinks. I've blown up a lot of motors trying to get my rolling machine just right. I think I can build it now with my eyes closed! It's about 10 feet long and 3 ½ ft deep and 4 feet tall. It weighs about a ton and a half.

Talk to me about the mathematical formula behind your work.

My sculpture is based on the idea of 3/5/8 mathematical beauty, suggesting everything in nature can be broken down into those proportions and that everything is a structural spiral. The finished sculpture is graceful, ethereal, soft, and happy although it comes from rough, cold, rigid steel. It's not about making a social or political statement or regurgitating a bygone aesthetic or art movement. My sculpture is about form, lines, and movement from the depths of my own imagination that engage the natural environment in an oddly organic way. I want



my sculpture to play a visual trick, a balancing act, and contradict the very nature of the material I use to produce it. I want the viewer to see it floating and balancing delicately with a confusing afterthought of the enormous weight involved. It may weigh a 400 pounds but it almost floats when it's sitting right. So, that 'feeling' you mention — it's every bit intentional and has everything to do with making something graceful rather than industrial and hard feeling.

ON VIEW APRIL 10 — MAY 10

"Nic Nobilique:
Grind Hassle Jump Jam"

Cameron Gallery, Dallas
www.thecamerongallery.com

You have added in a "green" component to your work. Can you tell me about that?

I use all salvaged and reclaimed steel as well as powder coatings that are exponentially better for the environment than liquid finishes. Sustainability in public art is something I focusing more and more on. There's a bit about this on my web site www.nobiliquestudios.com and just click the recycle logo.

I know this is a cliché question, but what inspires you?

My inspiration is everywhere and all around but does come from life experience and life-long passions. I spent my whole life as a skate boarder. Everywhere I look I can see something skateable. Most people see a curb, ledge, stairs, a drop-off, whatever. I always see at it as the next thing I could ride. It translates into art because when I'm walking around or driving through the country or in the city I might see the way a hill comes down to the base of a tree or a tree growing up through the cracks in the pavement and be inspired. In this way a hill, valley, and a house can instantaneously realize itself as a sculpture in my head, the way I see it anyway.

— RINA SZWARC