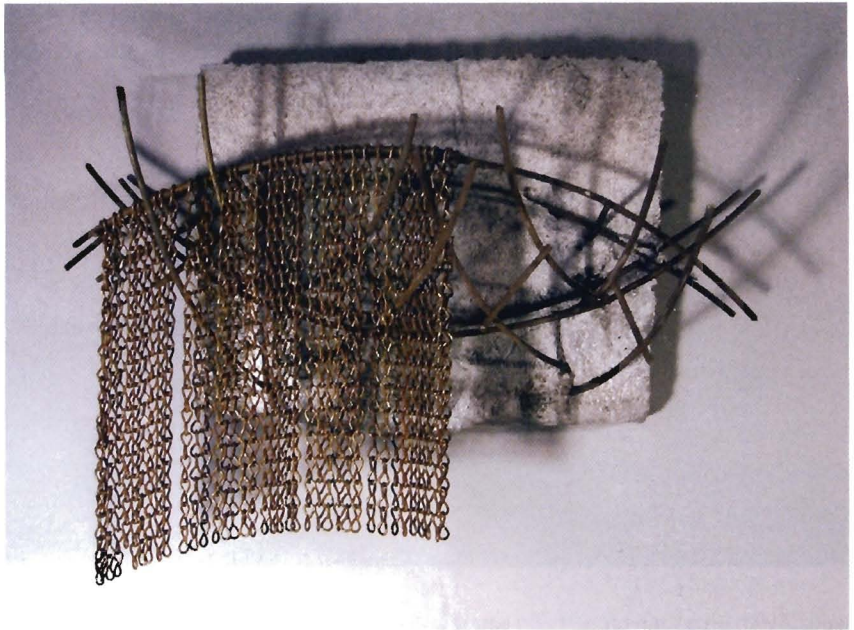


## Work sample #6



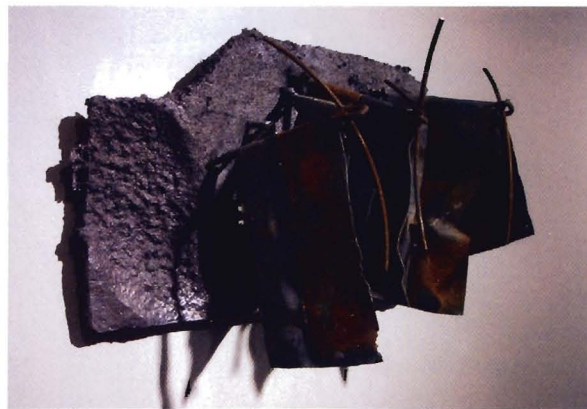
# ROBERT BIELAT

## Absorbing Sculpture

In a contemporary art world seemingly devoted to the dictates of the market and the novelty that feeds it, the slow process of aesthetic maturation too often goes underappreciated. Now pushing 60, Detroit sculptor Robert Bielat makes the case for recognizing the importance of mastery gained through material practice in the development of an artist's work. Preserving the refuse of life within the refuge of art and sustaining a relationship to lost time have long been Bielat's concern. He shares in a recognition of the existential ground zero of the modern condition as initially understood by the Romantics and subsequently by avant-gardists from Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust down to Gerhard Richter, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and even Damien Hirst. The substance of Bielat's sculpture hasn't deviated much: mashing up disparate elements of the broken world has been his stock in trade for three-plus decades. Nowadays, however, it seems like everything coming out of his studio is a winner. This wasn't always the case. Twenty or 30 years ago, Bielat could be wildly uneven in his manic quest to hold entropy at bay. The once angry young man has settled into a more measured grumpiness.

Bielat has always been prolific, and his exhibitions are delirious in their sensory overload. His solo exhibition this past fall at Synergy Gallery was packed to the gills with work completed over the past three years. There were freestanding, tabletop, and wall-mounted sculptures festooned with found objects and store-bought hardware, all done in bimetall casting, a technique he has perfected over the course of his career. Bimetall casting combines material with a low melting point (in Bielat's case usually aluminum) with a more heat-resistant metal like steel. "Static" materials, as Bielat terms these

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Clockwise from opposite, bottom left: *True North*, 2006. Bimetal casting and grindstone, 7 x 8 x 2 in. *Cassandra*, 2004. Bimetal casting, steel, and limestone, 46 x 8 x 8 in. *In the Rigging*, 2006. Bimetal casting and steel, 11 x 15 x 7 in. *Large Wall*, 2006. Bimetal casting and stone, 19 x 13 x 4 in. *Banners of War*, 2006. Bimetal casting and lead, 12 x 16 x 8 in.

less malleable elements, are set into Styrofoam maquettes, which evaporate when molten metal is poured into bentonite and sand molds formed around them. The castings are further worked to create finished objects.

In terms of scale, Bielat's major work of recent years is the "Sentinel" series, floor sculptures set upright on polished cylindrical limestone bases. A group of these forms was amassed in one corner of his recent show, like totems erected to the gods of some long-lost civilization. The "Sentinels" register the origins of sculpture in prehistoric ritual objects, but, at the same time, they display the effects of industrial production. Cast-off gear or camshaft housings from a busted engine are positioned at the bases of several sculptures, where the bottom of the cast metal meets the limestone plinth, evoking a machine-age utopia now gone to seed in the erstwhile Motor City. This detail echoes Diego Rivera's Depression era masterpiece, *Detroit Industry*, installed in the Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts under the patronage of Henry Ford's son, Edsel, which features a giant stamping press rendered as Coatlicue, Aztec goddess of the earth and death, signifying the inevitability of the struggle over materiality and time that limits human life. Interestingly, one of the "Sentinels," a piece draped with

metal chains hanging from steel eyehooks embedded in the pitted aluminum of its fragily undulating body, is titled *Cassandra* after the Greek mythological figure endowed with the gift of prophecy but fated never to be believed.

While the recent tabletop and wall-mounted sculptures are more diminutive in size than the "Sentinels," they aren't "minor" in terms of their execution or intent. The physical experience of lived space-time is at the heart of the wall piece, *In the Rigging*. The work consists of an aluminum slab, with pieces of rusted rolled steel wire sticking out. A curtain of lightweight steel chain, patinaed with acid bath, hangs down from the topmost wire arc like a sail gone slack in a doldrums. On one level, the piece reflects Bielat's fascination with the Great Lakes that surround his home state of Michigan; it also connects with primordial associations of water as the source of life and creative energy. To be alive is to be "in the rigging," enmeshed in the forces of nature that carry us along the path from birth to death.

A Vietnam vet, Bielat also regularly addresses violence and physical pain, circumstances in which incarnate existence is most palpably felt and put at risk. Many of Bielat's works feature barbs or hooks that can do harm if touched. In others,

the threat is implied, as in the early assemblage, *Dum*, a wall piece in which the title is spelled out in toy blocks encased in wire mesh. Amid the blocks is a real U.S. Army-issue hand grenade with the pin positioned as if daring the viewer to pull it. Several recent pieces seem to refer directly to the war in Iraq. *Living in War Time*, a tabletop sculpture, consists of a stepped aluminum base supporting what appears to be a collapsing edifice. The piece brings to mind the looting of the Iraqi National Museum in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion. It also re-affirms the message of Peter Paul Rubens in the *Allegory of the Outbreak of War* (created during the height of the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants in Europe) that art and culture are among the first victims of human conflict and the barbarity that usually ensues.

Like all true modern artists, Bielat's mastery is self-determined. Although university trained, he's developed his aesthetic lexicon and working methods through trial and error. Coming to self-knowledge and daring to act on it regardless of what others say or do, is what the father of modern aesthetics, Immanuel Kant, defines as enlightenment. Bielat is an enlightened one indeed.

