

Heroic Primitivism

By Alfred Jan

Many contemporary artists, by rejecting constructivist metal monoliths, are returning to a more organic, expression, which also serves as antidote to the machinations of an overly technological world. However, primitivism itself, far from homogeneous, can be delicate and whimsical as well as strong and ominous. Unfortunately, the recent surfeit of playful forms actually drains the primeval of its inherent rawness, as captured by Jean Dubuffet and other post-World War II Art Brut practitioners. Today, Michael Norton, along with other artists such as Coleen Sterritt and Michael Riegel, similarly instills, primal power in his sculpture.

From North Dakota, Michael Norton originally studied bronze casting at Humbolt State University, but eventually became disenchanted with the labor-intensive co-ordination required. Artmaking had become a major competitive project involving too many prima donnas fraught with metal sculptor macho. Norton decided to start over at San Jose State University and find a medium more compatible with his tough and single-minded but independent sensibility, and discovered that he could channel it into mixed media constructions of natural found objects and manufactured discards. The major breakthrough in his art was achieved not without insecurity along the way, but support from mentors such as art professor Donald Shaeffer at San Jose State helped him persevere.



Yellow Wire, 1983

Wood, paper, plaster, wire, paint
108"x 84"x 72"

Bamboo, plaster, raffia, sticks, and corrugated cardboard form the armatures which are enhanced by interspersing junk such as partially unraveled mattress coil springs, metal wire, horseshoes, animal skulls, and other assorted objects. Many layers of paint are then enthusiastically slathered and dripped on, producing a thick, tar-like surface in dark reds, black, browns, with flecks and streaks of yellow, green, and blue. **Lambs Ladder** suggests a stand for hanging carcasses after the hunt, accentuated by blood red paint running the length of the pole impaled with an animal skull. **Yellow Wire** sets a multi-colored corrugated cardboard "hide" out to dry, offset by a sloping non-functional extension. Coils of tangled wire further punctuate sculptural space like a brushstroke rum amok. Torn and singed cardboard painted rawhide brown and jutting beams dripping with shellac give **Chameleon** the brutal demeanor of a torture device. In **Shoes**, Norton attaches wooden clogs and several horseshoes to the framework with wildly twisted wire, suggesting furious animal stampedes.

Norton's robust constructions successfully embody the forceful, even violent side of primitive culture, and as corollary, the far greater violence perpetuated against those same civilizations. All that remain are the skeletal artifacts, a compelling juxtaposition of poignancy and barbarity.