

• Dearborn artist Rhett Johnson poses with one of his creations for a solo exhibit of his assemblage art at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum in St. Joseph. The exhibit, titled "Beyond Lost," opens June 7.



The **LOST** and Found Art of Rhett Johnson

The workshop floor is littered with pans, coffee pots, ice cube trays, ironing boards, a smorgasbord of things metal. Rhett Johnson wanders among the castoffs of American kitchenware. He is worrying over his next work of art, a make-over of a room at Kaleidoscope, the children's creative art center in Kansas City.

"I need to see a chicken in all of this mess," Johnson muses as he moves some bunt pants around with his foot. His look is not that of a Rockwellian artist, brush in hand gazing from subject to canvas and back again. Johnson has a Harley-Davidson doo-rag on his head, a work shirt, jeans, and heavy duty work boots. Often his hands are gloved, handling not a brush but pieces of metal, rebar, or chards of glass.

Just minutes before he had put the finishing touches on a whale that had evolved out of an ironing board and parts of the material littering his workshop floor. This mess, as he called it, is the art world in the mind, heart, vision, and workshop of long-time Dearborn resident Rhett Johnson. It is a world not of paint and canvas nor clay nor stone, well maybe an occasional stone. The art spirit reflected in his 60 x 60 foot workshop is unique, one which has garnered Johnson a growing reputation as a premier mixed media artist throughout the Midwest and even beyond.

That reputation has landed a major solo exhibit at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum in St. Joseph. The exhibit will

run from June 7 to Sept. 8. Titled "Beyond Lost" the exhibit not only culminates Johnson's own evolution in mixed media and assemblage art, it also sheds light on what American artist and teacher Robert Henri meant when he said "the study of art is the study of the relative value of things."

Much of Johnson's art is made of cast-offs or ordinary things that few people could envision being art at all. And now with this exhibit, the artist is introducing the idea that art can be made from the remains of over 300 abandoned privies from the Platte and Buchanan County areas.

"From privy to art is a big distance," Johnson explains. "With vision you can make art out of anything."

Easier said than done, according to Director of the Albrecht-Kemper Terry Oldham.

"We have lived with these things all our lives. Rhett sees the potential that we don't see," Oldham became familiar with articles on privies and went to visit Johnson's studio and gallery.

"I was absolutely fascinated by the uniqueness of his art and the creative ways he recycles stuff," Oldham says. "He is so creative we just had to give him lead time and space for his work."

That lead time has been especially important because much of this exhibit has taken months to prepare after weeks of conceptualizing the artwork itself. Plus, Johnson has had other commissioned works to do, including rebuilding an interactive play room at Kaleidoscope.

With the apt title of "Beyond Lost" working in his head, Johnson has been producing pieces made of bottles, glassware, and china dug from area privies. He takes the glass, which is often very sharp, and runs it through a continuous-motion machine that grinds it smooth with water and friction as if the pieces had been rocks worn smooth in a stream. Some of the glass objects will be backlit giving the art a stained glass appearance.

With 300 privy digs to his credit, Johnson admits some skills to probing for abandoned privies. Usually, he can find 20-50 bottles per dig, and only two have yielded nothing.

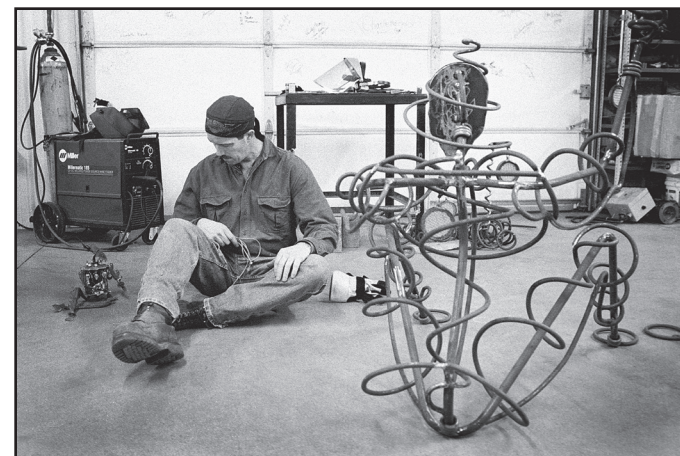
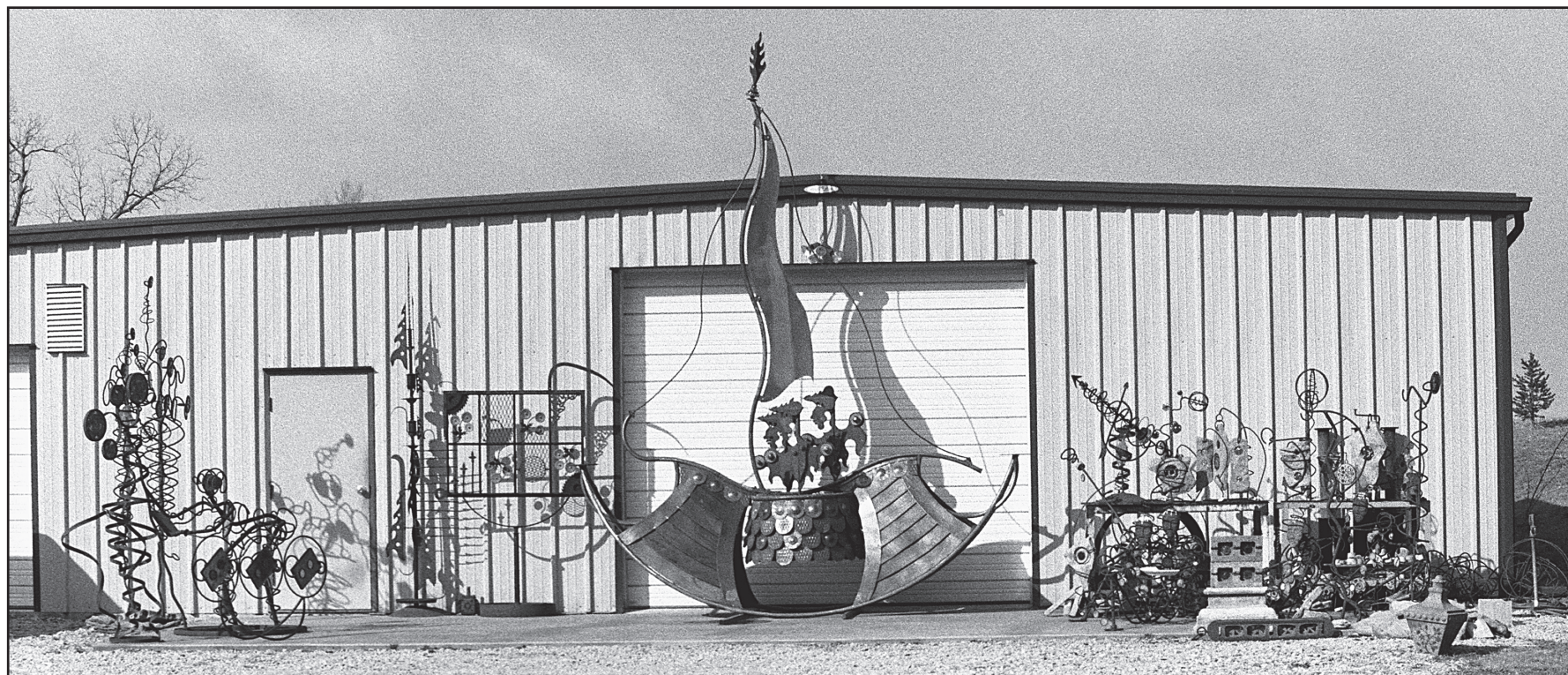
"It is exciting to transform something you find into something else," he says.

The centerpiece to the Albrecht-Kemper exhibit is a nearly two story steel sailboat with sailors which Johnson coaxed out of the metal into fluid forms much as he did years before with wood and carving knife. For another part of the exhibit Johnson created full-sized human figures, "carved" out of "rebar," sitting around a campfire like some prehistoric family gathering. Johnson's artist vision, however, was looking more into the future than the past.

"At one point, I dreamed these metal remains are out in some landfill and they get fused together after a nuclear holocaust and just slowly start climbing to the surface," he says. Each figure has a human face that looks etched out of sand. Johnson spent hours sitting on the floor of his workshop bending his own legs and torso to try to imagine how

Photos and story
by Bill Hankins

• Over 300 privy digs in Platte and Buchanan Counties have yielded hundreds of artifacts (below), which Johnson has reclaimed as art.



Rhett Johnson
solo exhibit
Albrecht/Kemper
Museum
St. Joseph, MO.

"BEYOND LOST"
June 7-Sept. 8

• Outside Rhett Johnson's workshop, some of his assemblage art rusts in the weather, attaining part of the image needed for the "Beyond Lost" exhibit.

• Johnson, above, analyzes his own body posture in order to bend the "rebar" accurately into human form.

Landmark People

• Quitting time is 6 p.m. for both Kelly and Rhett Johnson, who admit that they could create art well into the night if they did not establish limits to their working hours. The artists relax on their porch after a productive day.



• Johnson helps his nephew, Dakota Johnson, find some parts to create a driver for his Pinewood Derby car entry for Cub Scouts. Below, the artist puts the finishing touches on a small detail piece that will become part of his exhibit "Beyond Lost."



his creations would be sitting around their mythic campfire. He would then painstakingly bend the "rebar" to just the right angle before welding the various parts together.

Those familiar with art at the end of a brush might find this kind of art daunting. Not Johnson.

"If I don't have the skills to make it," he adds, "I will learn."

"That's what amazes me about Rhett," Oldham says. "He won't let realities of the day get in his way. If there is no machine to do it, he will make the machine to do it. That is the farm boy aspect of his art."

The art journey is one of discovery for Johnson, who has had no formal art training. Each day, each project is one of problem solving and trial and error. "The vision part you either have it or you don't," he says, but admits, "Sometimes I struggle. Sometimes I don't want to come down here in the morning. I dread it."

Johnson's success at finding solutions to art problems has drawn the attention of one of the biggest names in commercial art--Hallmark Cards. The Kansas City firm, one of the largest family-owned businesses in the world, has sought Johnson as an inspiration for their own artists and brought them to his Dearborn workshop to witness the Johnson approach to art.

Steve Birkes is Hallmark's Resources Consultant. Part of his job is to help his creative people keep the elusive juices flowing. He talked Johnson into doing the first workshop with eight artists. Nine more workshops followed.

"Rhett is the premier found objects artist in the whole area," Birkes says, but that is not the reason he keeps bringing artists back.

"Rhett's enthusiasm is the reason we wanted our folks to meet him--especially in his location--not a corporate building," he explains. "You step off into his world and get his enthusiasm, his willingness to share."

Birkes knows the Hallmark artists are successful, but everybody needs creative renewal. Artists range from a year of experience to 20 years and they all, according to Birkes, get inspired.

Are there tangible results from these workshops? Birkes says the renewal of the artists' creativity and enthusiasm is the point, and that you might not notice specifics in Hallmark's products. However, he adds, there are more found objects and adhesives in card lines today than ever before.

The hundreds of handwritten messages and signatures on the walls of Johnson's workshop attest to the effect



• Art meets technology whenever Johnson has to bend iron to create one of his pieces of art. Johnson is a perfectionist, often reworking a piece of metal until he can coax another 1/2 an inch of angle out of it.

the workshops have had on the participants.

Recognition in the art world has been hard-earned by Johnson. For years, while working for an air cargo company, his artistic impulses were fulfilled by woodcarving, which he performed on the side. Carving was a talent he discovered when he was young. While mowing, a piece of Box Elder flew out and hit him on the leg. Out of anger, Johnson was going to fling the piece as far as he could, but on impulse he kept it and carved the wood into a human shape. That early piece foreshadowed Johnson's desire to make art out of the ordinary. He still has that carving as a reminder.

Carving as a sidelight took the form of creating Civil War soldiers and wooden Christmas ornaments.

"Back in the 80s I took my war pieces to White Cloud, Kansas, and a guy bought everything I had," Johnson says.

The ornaments led to a *Country Living* magazine article in 1987, which in turn led to 40,000 responses to his art.

Art changed for Johnson when he quit his airline job of 18 years to devote his full

time to developing his creative vision. Although a scary financial decision, it seem-ed a natural choice since Johnson's wife, Kelly, is also an artist.

"Kelly starts work in her shop at 5 a.m.," Johnson says. "I start a day, seven days a

little later, but it is all day, seven days a week."

Kelly, who has also had her work exhibited at the Albrecht-Kemper, combines her interest in Native American culture with a skill in beadwork.

Having a partner with whom to talk through the problems of creating art has been valuable to husband and wife. Besides her skill as an artist, Kelly can boast that she might be part of the reason for a waiting list for Hallmark workshops.

"Kelly is one heck of a cook," Birkes says. "That is one of the major feature of the workshop."

The Johnsons try to bring their creative days to a close around 6 p.m. when they gather at the house or, weather-permitting, on the porch to unwind. Without setting a time limit, both artists know they could work on into the night. Still, evenings are often spent browsing through art books.

Johnson's assemblage art gets a helping hand when husband and wife head to St. Joseph on some Fridays to go to the garage sales, sometimes hitting 60-70 in a day, not looking so much at what is there, but as what it could be. They rarely come home empty-handed.

"We can fill the van for \$30," Johnson says. He then houses his future art in a neatly organized 60 ft. long storeroom on

the side of his workshop.

"It is a bit of a disease," Johnson admits. "I have enough stuff in storage to last a lifetime, but there is always a possibility of finding something to add to the repertoire, something no other artist has."

For example, at a sale in Wathena, Kansas in December, he found "a box of eyebrows," in reality replacement brushes for sweeping machines.

Besides quitting his airline job, another major change for Johnson was a show he and Kelly did in Boston in the 90s. His work was still in transition, both woodcarvings and assemblage art. In Boston, the assemblage sold out while the carvings did not.

He then threw himself into his mixed media and assemblage work with a passion. Johnson knew he had made the right decisions when he collected enough money from 85 ironing board chickens for the Hen House grocery store chain to build his workshop.

"Doing this is a financial and emotional roller coaster, but it is a great ride,"

1967--

Johnson's first carving was this figure made from a piece of wood which had flown out and hit his leg while mowing.



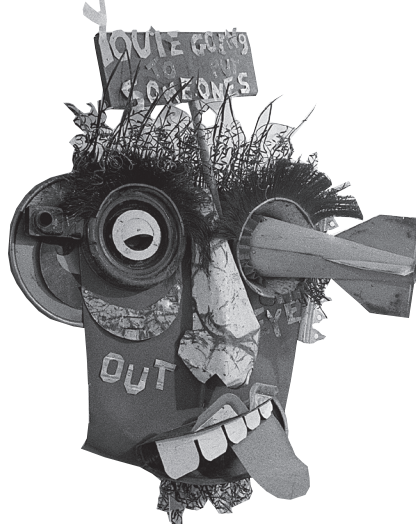
1988--

After selling out all of his Civil War carvings at a show in White Cloud, Kansas, Johnson's woodcarvings became more intricate like the one here.



1995--

In his first full year devoted to art, Johnson created this involved piece of assemblage art called "You're Going to Put Someone's Eye Out."



Developing a Personal Vision

Landmark People



• Searching among a roomful of metal kitchenware, Johnson looks for just the right pieces to create a whale for the new attraction at Kaleidoscope.

Johnson admits.

The life style of an artist is not just the creation of art. With growing success comes the business side for artists. Commission work can be time-consuming with meetings, bid proposals, and even hiring a liaison to help with communication between the artist and client. Johnson says at one point he had to hire a seismologist to test one piece of art to see if it would withstand an earthquake. With the St. Joseph exhibit looming, Johnson still has to write program information, background to the exhibit, and descriptions of each piece. It will also take a few days to move the large pieces into place. Total satisfaction is still hard to come by for the artist.

"You're never totally satisfied," he says, as he tries to figure out how he will run water through the noses on a large Kaleidoscope piece. "I would still be working on it if not for the other deadlines."

"I think the exhibit will be able to say

what I wanted to say--developing thrown away stuff into art. I hope people will be able to see how this became art."

With vision, he adds, "you can make art out of anything."

It is at the junk yards or auctions that a piece of art begins for Johnson. He can see an object and create the piece of art in his mind without actually building it.

"My job then is to decide which idea deserves the energy to be built," he says. Often that decision-making process is a struggle.

"I pace. I work. I go get on the tractor until I can decide what it will be," he says, adding that a piece can take a day or a month.

"You can't just make it happen." His determination to stay with something is the only aspect he brought with him from his childhood. Although Johnson never took art in school, his determination was present early on and it aids him today on an especially tough piece that he tries to make into art.

"I never like to get whapped," he

says.

But it is often the materials that dictate the speed of a project, which will change from start to finish.

Johnson explains how he has waited a month for just the right piece to complete a piece of art, and that sometimes it does not happen. That patience in getting just the right part to make the art complete has paid off in experience. Johnson now knows the easiest way to make a nose through what he calls his "coffee pot training." He also knows that ice cube trays can make great mouths.

"It is amazing," Johnson says, "what you can learn in this business."

It would be easy to look at the vast array of Rhett Johnson's work admiring the art that grew out of the ordinary. If people only marvel at the pots and pans, cleverly assembled, they might, Johnson says, miss some of the message.

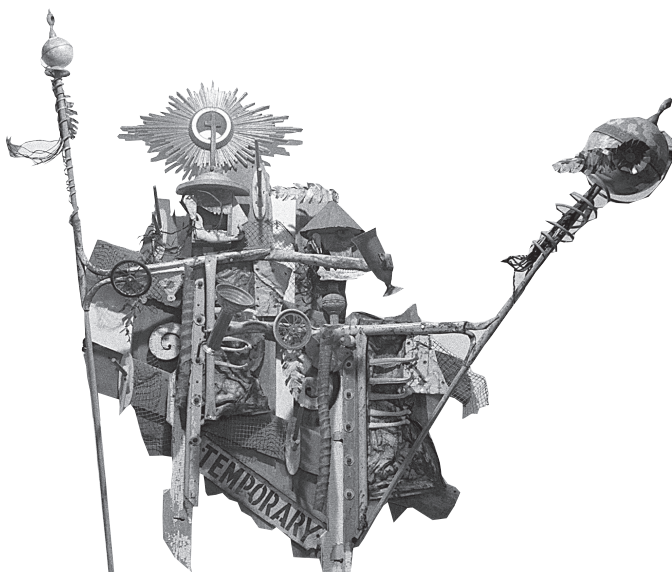
One of his works that appeared at the World's Window Gallery in Westport 10 years ago was called "Day of the Dead" and featured a Native American figure

1996--

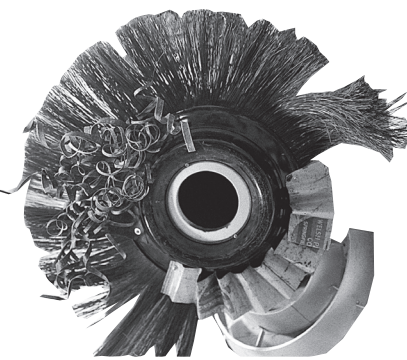
These figures were part of the First Place winning entry in Costume Competition at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico

1997--

"Culture Killers" is one of Johnson's more intricate assemblage pieces.

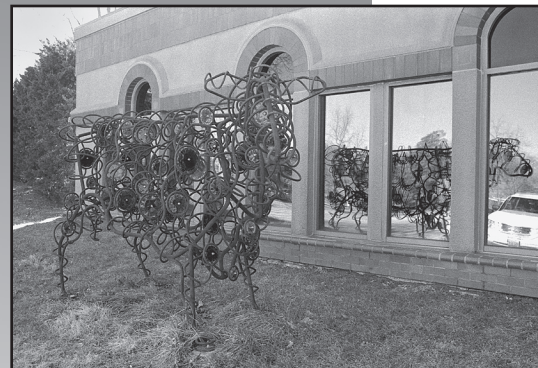


An EYE on Rhett Johnson Art around KC



Hen House Grocery Stores

From ironing boards to art, 85 chickens grace the ceilings and walls of Hen House Markets all over the metro area.



KC Toy and Miniature Museum

"I tell people it is made of rebar--that stuff they use in highways," Jo Bonewits, volunteer coordinator, says about the cow art in front of the museum.



Science City

These cows could hit the side of a barn at Science City and are a hit of the exhibit there as well.



• With the lights off, one can imagine Johnson's artwork coming to life and telling their stories to each other at his gallery in Dearborn.

crucified on the hood of a Mustang car.

"I went up to a lady who had been standing in front of the piece for a while," Johnson says. "She was crying. I knew she understood."

That day Johnson saw a whole new side to his own art.

"I had done it for me," he says, "but I suddenly saw the impact of art."

2002--

Not only does this piece going to Kaleidoscope combine many characteristics of Johnson's approach to mixed media and assemblage art, it must also have running water coming out of the "noses" of the various coffee pot faces.

