

*Arthur Ganson, Thinking Chair (detail), painted wood/mixed media, 26 x 30 x 30".*

*Photo: Chehalis Hegner.*

## New Movements in Kinetic Sculpture

GWENDOLYN HOLBROW

Arthur Ganson planned to become a surgeon, but somewhere along the pre-med path he took a detour onto the road less traveled. Today, instead of scalpels and forceps, he wields pliers and welding torches, and the towers of boxes stacked in his gritty industrial studio have labels like Springs, Doll Parts, Air Hose, Webbing, Dried Leaves, Bronze Bushings, and Miscellaneous Wire Parts. Over the past thirty years, Ganson has

developed this assortment into a personal vocabulary of sprockets and pulleys, crankshafts and levers, from which he creates elegant and witty mechanical art.

Ganson's work owes a debt to the young Alexander Calder. Though best known for inventing the mobile around 1930, Calder made his first kinetic pieces for his miniature circus, Cirque Calder, in Paris during the 1920s. Formed from bent wire, cork, and scraps of fabric, and powered by pushing, turning cranks, or pulling strings, the dollhouse-sized animal and human figures performed their stunts with naturalistic motions and derring-do.

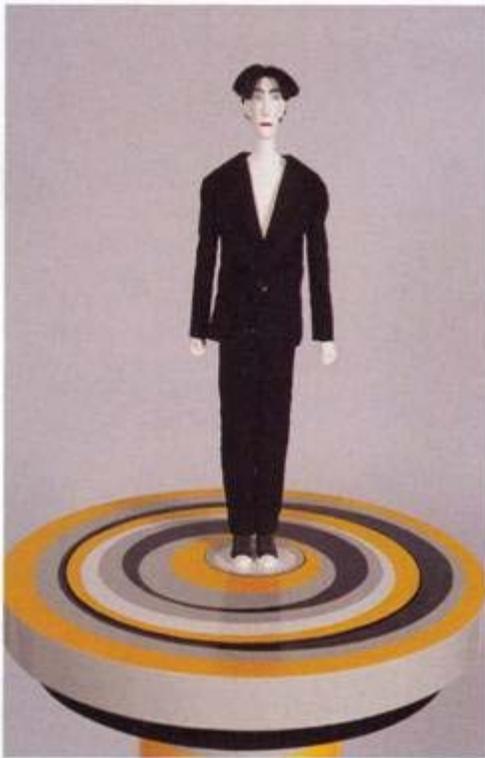
Like Calder, Ganson employs bent wire, and much of his work is toy-like in size, but the mechanical parts are orders of magnitude more intricate. Some pieces are powered by turning cranks, others by electric motors in order to protect their delicate mechanisms. Revolving gears and oscillating cams make a rag doll stir restlessly, or transform scraps of torn paper into a flock of migrating swans. An ostrich feather tenderly caresses a violin. A complicated machine endows an inanimate object with a lifelike walking motion, allowing a wishbone, a yellow chair, even a dry curled artichoke leaf, to stroll contemplatively.

According to Ganson, these pieces are expressions of his own emotions and experience. "Everything's a self-portrait, right?" he says. But he is not trying to bring something inanimate to life. "I don't want to pretend that these are anything but little bits of metal. This is not magic," Ganson states firmly, adding, "It could be that the little chair is the puppet and the mechanics is the puppeteer."

Pat Keck, on the other hand, is a contemporary Geppetto, deliberately bringing her puppets to life. Her studio holds row upon row of chisels and rasps, hammers, saws, and lathes. Wooden heads of all sizes line the shelves like visitors from Easter Island. Keck's early puppets have evolved into elaborate animatronic figures, and their long rectangular forms, narrow faces, and Warholian mops of thick straight hair are only slightly

exaggerated versions of Keck herself. They turn over an hourglass, walk in their sleep, play musical instruments, and watch you through their glass eyes.

It was the early death of punk performer and countertenor Klaus Nomi that inspired Keck's first animated figure. "I so did not want him to have died, that it occurred to me that I should resurrect him," says Keck. "It was actually like trying to raise the dead." And she did exactly that, creating a life-sized reclining figure of Nomi, painted black and white, that could sit up and lie down. Nomi's aesthetic, a theatrical cross between Kabuki and carnival, continues to inform Keck's own.



Keck's most recent body of work, on view this summer at the Genovese / Sullivan Gallery, spins on turntables, suggesting disorientation and lack of control. The largest figure is Fortune, a pale four-foot woman with yellow hair and a string of pearls, standing on a large roulette wheel that visitors may turn. Other foot-tall mannequins whirl on nested spiraling discs painted in her signature colors of black and white, red and yellow. Much of her work explores "who's really in charge and who's pulling the strings," according to Keck.

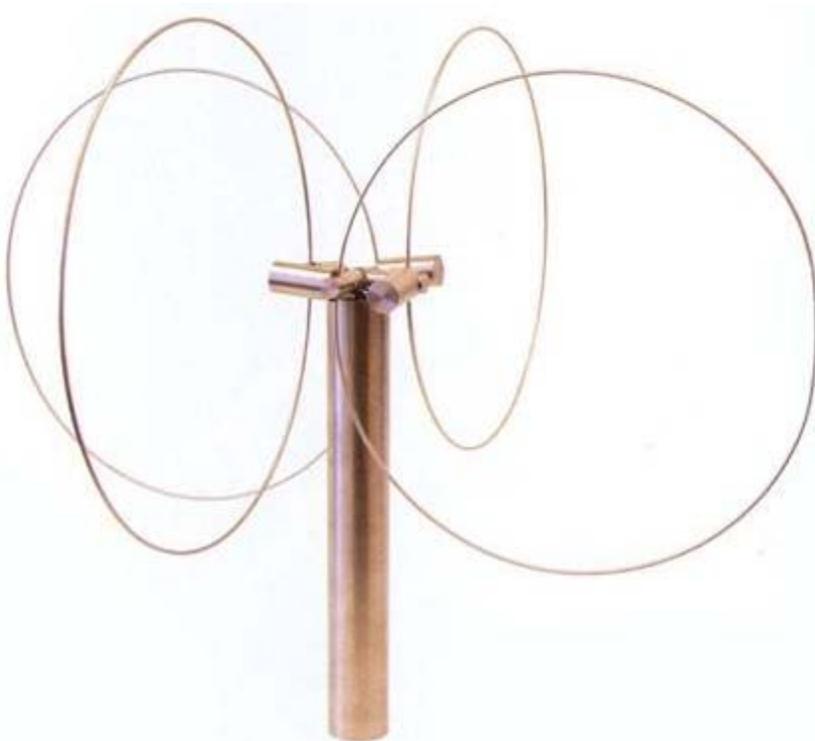
*Pat Keck, Spinning Sleeping, painted wood/mixed media, 1994.*

"You think you have control over what happens, but there are so many things you have no control over."

Back in the 1980s, the World Sculpture Racing Society held kinetic sculpture races in Cambridge, MA. Ganson, Keck, George Greenamyre, and Bill Wainwright were all

members, and the latter two are also acclaimed kinetic sculptors. Greenamyers's colorful wind-driven steel sculptures refer to whirligigs and American folk art, while making pointed social commentary, and his newest piece, *The Merry-Go-Round of Hidden Agendas*, was recently installed in the DeCordova Sculpture Park. Wainwright is best known for sparkling mobiles of light-refracting films. These artists, heirs of Alexander Calder, represent the side of kinetic sculpture descended from automatons, weathervanes, and mechanical toys.

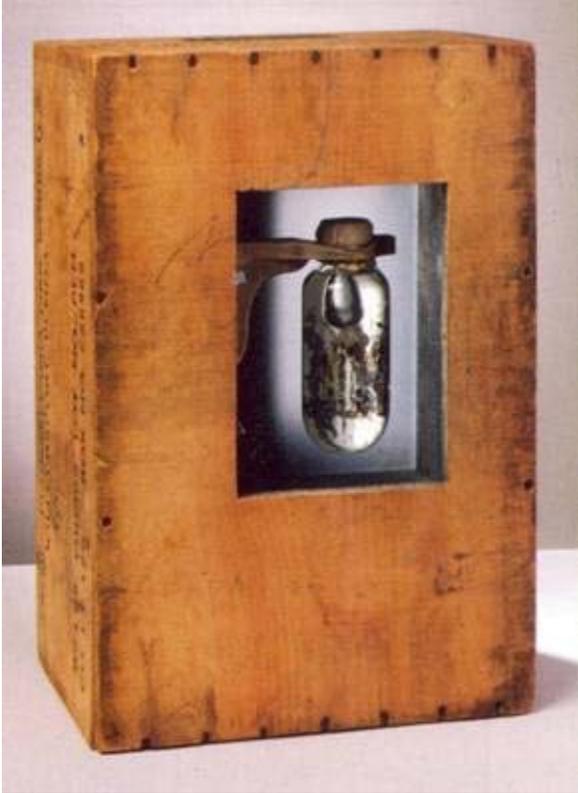
As Calder and the Dadaists and Surrealists added movement to sculpture in Paris, the Constructivists were doing the same in Moscow and Berlin, but with a more industrial and architectural approach. The next generation of kinetic sculpture, including the self-annihilating machines of Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely and the geometrically engineered abstract forms of American George Rickey, moved closer to the mechanical Constructivist esthetic.



*Anne Lilly, There's a Certain Slant of Light, stainless steel, 23 x 12 x 12", 2007. Courtesy of Anne Lilly. Photo: Peter Harris.*

Anne Lilly's sculpture draws more upon this tradition. Her sleek futuristic creations in brushed stainless steel produce complex movements from precisely machined, yet simply shaped, cylinders, rods and gears. "There are almost no forms; it's just lines," she says. "What's interesting to me is getting emptiness and matter kind of laced through each other. There has to be matter to have motion." And unlike most kinetic sculptors, Lilly may begin by creating a structure to see how it moves, rather than imagining an outcome and working to manifest it. Not always, though: "I had a desire to see something expanding and contracting...something that would give me this swelling," she says, which resulted in her current body of work.

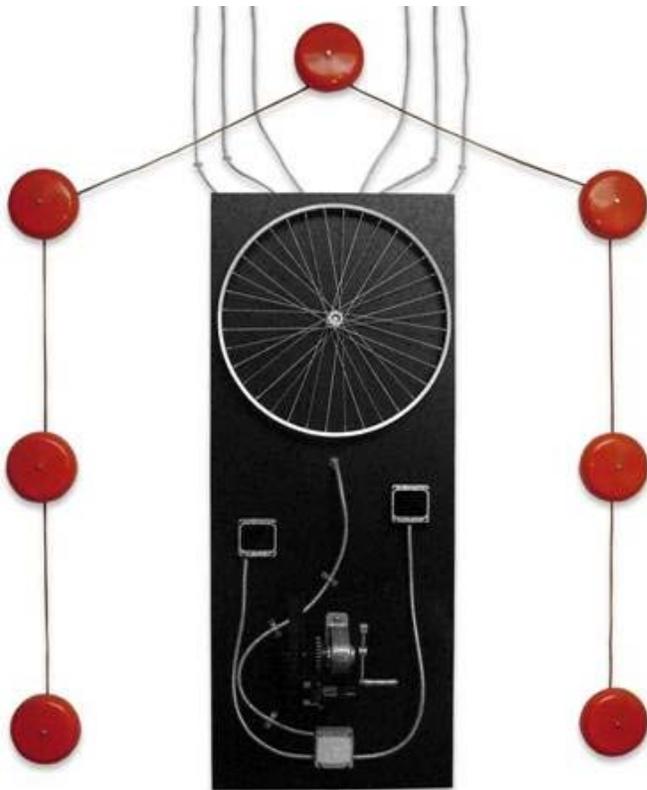
Although this artist focuses on negative space, and employs austere geometric forms and industrial material, the objects execute astonishingly graceful organic gestures. Slender steel rods define planes and volumes, which silently sway, expand, contract and pass through each other. The motion is reminiscent of surface patterns on water, swaying tentacles, or a meadow in the wind. "Finding a system that results in its own choreography," Lilly calls her process. The viewer supplies the power by rotating the base or geared cylinders, which Lilly considers vital. "You can feel the mechanics, feel the piece responding," she explains. "I think people are really starved for physical experience."



*Steve Hollinger, Kwajalein, mixed-media sculpture (responds to sunlight). 18 x 12 x 10", 2006. Courtesy of Chase Gallery. Copyright the artist. Photo: Peter Harris.*

Steve Hollinger prefers to detach his work from the viewer. Moving parts are enclosed in vintage wooden explosives boxes, blocks of concrete, or glass cases, and powered by sunlight. "I want to create a sense of independence, and, in quite a few cases, a sense of isolation, where the piece could live on its own without reliance on someone pushing a button," he explains. "The solar power allows me to disconnect the piece from the viewer and the world. It gives it life." And his fascination is with time, rather than space. "I've read other kinetic sculptors were interested in space, and movement through space, and so on, and that's not something that I think about too much," he says. "Mostly I think time, and transformation or change."

Some of Hollinger's boxes, containing elaborate rotating flip books or wheels of images with strobe lights, were on display last spring in the *Picture Show* at the Photographic Resource Center as part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival. Other pieces depend on rotating polarized filters or tiny motors to animate them. Behind glass walls, butterflies flap their wings and bionic jellyfish propel themselves delicately through water when exposed to light. In "Blue Heart," a moving piece in both senses of the word, light causes brilliant blue liquid to circulate through the spherical chambers and slender capillary tubes of a human-sized glass heart.



*Ezekiel Borges Plateau, The Crank-O-Wank, Bicycle wheels, bells, film winder, electrical components, 60 x 24 x 5, 2007.*

Far out on the performance end of the kinetic art spectrum, with clear ties to Dada, is the Musée Patamécanique. Patamechanics, according to curator Neil Salley, is a syzygy between science and art, which is also an accurate description of kinetic sculpture as a whole. Like Hollinger's work, the Musée is contained in a box, but in this case the box is a historic building and both artist and visitor are actually inside. The motive power is

supplied primarily by the exertions of the curator himself, with a little help from the viewer, who must vigorously turn a large crank to initiate the process.

Before conducting the tour, Salley inquires, "Have you any aversions to stroboscopic lights? Foul odors? Loud sounds?" Once inside, the visitor encounters all of the above, plus an oracle, a time machine, and other kinetic works. Close collaborator Hans Spinnerman's "Dream of Timmy Bumblebee," a Patamechanical apparatus that extracts the dreams of bees and displays them in glass jars, is the most intriguing individual piece. A genuine *gesamtkunstwerk*, the Musée stimulates the five traditional senses plus several more: the sense of proprioception, the sense of wonder, and the sense of fun.

Where to see kinetic sculpture:

MIT Museum: Arthur Ganson, *Gestural Engineering*, ongoing,  
<http://web.mit.edu/museum/exhibitions/ganson.html>

DeCordova Museum: Anne Lilly until August 12 in the *2007 DeCordova Annual Exhibition*;

*Trainscape*, September 1-January 13; various outdoor sculpture, including the wind-driven "Monument to Frustration and Low Achievement" by George Greenamyre, ongoing; <http://www.decordova.org>

Musée Patamécanique, Bristol, RI: Neil Salley, ongoing, open by appointment only, contact the Office of Tourism at <http://www.museepata.org/>

Plymouth State University Gallery, Plymouth, NH: Arthur Ganson, November 17, 2007-January 25, 2008, <http://www.plymouth.edu/gallery/exhibits.html>

Busch-Reisinger Museum: László Moholy-Nagy's 1930 Constructivist sculpture, *Light-Space Modulator*, is activated every Wednesday at 1:45 pm, <http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/exhibitions/busch/1880topresent.html>

Museum of Fine Arts: The MFA has a couple of Calder mobiles and his charming "Cow," a crank-operated wire sculpture now sadly immobilized behind glass, but still delightful to contemplate, <http://mfa.org/>

You can also see a wind-driven George Greenamyre sculpture in front of the Massachusetts College of Art on Huntingdon Avenue, rolling ball sculptures by George Rhoads in Terminal C of Logan Airport and the Museum of Science, and another by Craig Bloodgood at the Boston Children's Museum.

If you would like to participate in a monumental Rube Goldberg contraption, or just watch it run its course, join the Friday After Thanksgiving Chain Reaction at MIT, run by Arthur Ganson, <http://web.mit.edu/museum/programs/fat.html>

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