

NICHE: A WEEKLY PEEK AT AN AREA ARTIST

Lawrence L'Hote

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Don Shrubshell photo

Lawrence L'Hote shows some of his works at his home.

"Lichtenstein, that guy stole everything he ever did," said Lawrence L'Hote mildly, pointing to an abstract design he lifted from a Mary Heilman painting. In a sense he's right; the great pop artist took advertisements and comic strips and made them into fine art.

If you want to think of it that way, then all of L'Hote's own art is, in some manner, also stolen. The materials he salvages from Dumpsters and demolition sites. The subject matter he models after magazine and newspaper illustrations.

"No one's safe," he joked.

Somewhere along the way, however, L'Hote's art becomes strikingly original. A Matisse nude, which he crafted from polished recycled steel, gleams from a bright blue background of burlap. On a wire caricature of Hillary Clinton inspired by New York illustrator Ken Fallin, L'Hote added a halo of patriotic stars and, after the New Hampshire primaries, a tear sliding from her cheek. His wire and metal interpretations of Fallin's renderings, often clipped from The Wall Street Journal, have earned the praise of Fallin himself.

L'Hote is 68 years old, a Columbian born and raised. He's tall and gentle, speaking softly in part because of a hearing disability the doctors suspect he got during his two-year stint in Erlangen, Germany, during the Vietnam War. His career was spent mainly teaching physics at Hickman High School, and art-making only entered his life five or six years ago, when he was caring for his dying wife. He took up woodworking at first, and when he fashioned an imaginative handle for a desk he built for his granddaughter out of twisted copper wire and clothes dryer parts, a friend remarked, "Why, Larry, you're an artist."

Although he is a process artist, concerned more with the avenue from scrap to art than with the finished product, he'll admit that there are "personal metaphor-type things" at work. Pointing to a series of wire portraits hanging above his couch, he said tenderly, "That was going to go into a landfill."

"You can take something that is perfectly worthless and people throw out as trash, and turn it into something nice like that," he continued. "I don't really care that it's got smudges on it, or it's a little rusty; I've already taken it a long ways."

Although artists he admires - like Robert Rauschenberg - often pasted together various found objects in their dirty, original



Don Shrubshell photo

At left, L'Hote digs through items he collected to make a variety of art.

forms, L'Hote gives trash hope for salvation. The result is a series of work featuring careful, clean lines and silhouettes, which are humanly imperfect but by no means chaotic.

Neighbors can't be blamed for worrying that his backyard has become a trash heap, but with a little imagination, you'll see it is the artist's supply closet. Scrap wood leans against the side of the house, along with a jumble of indiscernible, rusty machine parts and tools he brings home in his black Ford F-150. Nearly buried beneath a shopping cart are a couple of small helium tanks L'Hote got from public administrator candidate John Sullivan when he was campaigning around the neighborhood, blowing up balloons for children.

His art isn't some big political statement about how we all need to recycle. Nor is it frugality; L'Hote insisted his retirement pension is plenty to live on and buys new stuff when he needs to. He just likes the idea of rescuing the unwanted, reshaping it, giving it back life. He says he wants the art to be happy, that's all. Though he sells his work at various fairs and has exhibited on the brick walls of Lakota Coffee Co. for two years, making art happy also means occasionally giving it away.

"I made 50 or 60 folding stools," L'Hote said, referring to the beginning of his art career, when he claims his brain made a mysterious switch from left to right, from science and physics to art and design. "I did these random acts of kindness, give them out to people that come along and watch their face." Partially influenced by Lewis Hyde's "The Gift," L'Hote believes people who have talent bear a responsibility to share it with others. Quoting Matthew 5:15, he said, "You don't put your light under a bushel, and that's what it's about here. There's stuff sitting here behind the couch and it's not doing anything. ... I give it to people. It's much better."

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