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Everyday objects inspire new show at birdsall gallery

AMY J. BARRY, Special to The Day

Like everyone, Peter Kirkiles has a junk drawer filled with everyday objects: rulers, can openers, jack knives, screwdrivers, paperclips and assorted pens and pencils.

The difference between our junk drawers and his is that Kirkiles' stuff has been re-imagined as giant-size sculptures, crafted in rare woods and metals such as bronze, brass, and stainless steel. His creations are on display in a show titled "Mixed Lot" at the Diane Birdsall gallery in Old Lyme.

Kirkiles, who is a design fabricator by day - recreating objects for other artists, designers, celebrities, and contractors - insists there's no message in his sculptures.

"The message is that I consider these objects. It's art when I'm making them, and in the end they're mute," he says. "The act of making them is an artistic act, but I don't care how they're arranged, I'm not trying to communicate a message.

Kirkiles' objects may not be meant to convey a message, but they do have their own stories. "During the last two years I realized I'm not just limited to woodworking or metalworking tools," Kirkiles says, "and that there are other objects in the world, and especially in the junk drawer, which I grew up rummaging through, and objects I've kept in my drawers and pockets that are meaningful to me in really quirky ways."

As an example, the particular type of fountain pen with which his mother would write letters inspired his jumbo fountain pen.

"Her penmanship was one of the things I remembered most," Kirkiles says. "I had one of her (vintage) fountain pens in my drawer.

"I'm a sucker for beauty, the beauty of the things that I like," he adds. "I don't worry about the nicks and scratches. It kind of makes it look better. I think all the quiriness adds to it (versus) if they were pristine objects."

This is the second show of Kirkiles' sculptures that gallery owner Diane Birdsall has presented. The first was in 2011.

She notes, "I love the objects. I love what they stand for because I, too, have memories associated with some of these objects that have nothing to do with the fact that Peter created them - they're just personal reactions."

"I loved playing with things like this when I was young and they were in the junk drawer and they were available to me to touch," Birdsall continues. "They weren't in a precious place called only 'tools.' In the tool sense, (the work) is created with memory and association with memory. And I love the colossal size in which Peter works. I just love seeing it isolated on the wall or floor like it is now - an object to reckon with, be considered. Bigger is better, I don't know. I was a lifeguard and we used whistles like this."

"I don't watch sports at all, but the time I was doing the whistle I was realizing these Acme thunder whistles are ubiquitous," Kirkiles responds. They're everywhere - in the Super Bowl, my sons' soccer games, in a hockey game - and if you ask someone who has on sports attire, they inevitably have one in their pocket. What an amazing object and it's almost invisible.

IF YOU GO

What: "Mixed Lot" by Peter Kirkiles

Where: Diane Birdsall gallery, 16 Lyme St., Old Lyme

When: Through March 29.

Information: (860) 434-3209
or
www.dianebirdsallgallery.com

And so, I wanted to make it at a size in which I can kind of examine it; it's an embraceable image of a cultural (icon). I made it out of metal like the real whistle would have been made with this awesomely beautiful maple burl ball (the pea) inside."

GROWING ART FORM

Kirkiles lives in South Kent with his wife and three sons, but he grew up in Guilford, which is where he says he got his start in industrial arts - in the school's detention room.

"When I graduated high school in 1984, they had eliminated their vocational tech program for some reason but had been donated an amazing shop equipment set from somebody at Pratt & Whitney. So they had all this machinery but had gotten rid of the whole program, and the shop became the detention room. And so, from freshman year on I became a juvenile delinquent, and when I graduated my sister was at the top of her class and I was like 250 out of 300 kids. But I won the industrial art award every one of the four years."

In 1989, Kirkiles went on to receive his BFA from Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and in 1998, his MFA in sculpture from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan.

"The day I graduated from the Museum School I moved back in with my parents in Guilford and got a job with Peter Versteeg of Versteeg Art Fabricators in New Haven," Kirkiles says. "Versteeg was the layout guy for Donald Lippincott who built monumental sculptures for such (famous artists) as Louise Nevelson and Ellsworth Kelly. He had started up this company, and I was his first employee and learned his technique of layout and precision, which then allowed me to apply those things I learned when I started making my own sculpture."

Sculptures by Kirkiles have been in exhibitions throughout New England and New York. His "Four Colorful Rules" - 6- by 10-foot rulers - lean against trees in the grove of the Governor's Residency Sculpture Garden on Prospect Avenue in Hartford.

"I like to take things apart and I like to touch and feel things," Kirkiles says, "and I have three little boys - 8, 11 and 13 - and my youngest, William says, 'I hope you don't sell any of (the sculptures) because I want them in my bedroom.' What's better than that?"
