

Handyman's Special

BY C. GARR

Science gets more interesting when it stops making sense. That's what artist Steven Brower loves about the work of "the fraud guys," as he calls them. Nikola Tesla, for one, invented alternating current but then began pushing crackpot theories about using the earth's magnetic fields to transmit power. Then there's the "free energy pioneer" who developed a motor that could run forever on air and pulverized water. Supposedly, Brower showed up for an interview at the Lombard-Freid gallery with a biography of this man, John Worrell Keely.

Brower was still in the middle of the book, but had already concluded that the man was an artist. He was just born too soon to call himself one. "You can't have frauds in art," notes Brower. "The art system is pure belief." And to some extent, he has found his own precursors.

Brower's current project, "Utility," has converted his entire gallery into a giant perpetual-motion machine and an examination of that "belief." Water circulates constantly, uselessly, through copper tubing stretched an inconvenient foot or so off the floor. It flows from the kitchen out to a model dam about the size of a toilet tank. In fact, inside this little reservoir is a toilet tank—its unlovely innards. Talking on the gallery's phone triggers the opening of the dam's floodgate; it waters a weed growing in a plastic bucket below. Flushing the real toilet in a back room pulls a string that does, well, nothing—though several holes have been drilled in gallery walls to accommodate the string's passage out to the mini-reservoir. Then all the water is carefully filtered through a scale-model waste-treatment plant before circulating back to the kitchen, where it's dumped unceremoniously down the drain. The exhibit also includes a homemade time clock (for the gallery workers), solar panels powering a surveillance camera that keeps vigil over a small moon, and a scale model of the gallery itself where viewers can watch the moon on video if they stick their heads inside.

The installation has a jerry-rigged look by design. Brower wants "evidence that it's a made thing." There doesn't seem much chance of missing that point. Brower can't stop tinkering with the one piece that doesn't work. The gallery's radiator didn't generate enough pressure to power even a modest steam engine, as it turned out. So he's building a pump by hand. He points out that he made the fittings, made the handle, then admits sheepishly to buying the pipe. No doubt he would have smelted the ore himself, were it possible.

Brower says he began to paint years ago be-



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cause it forced him to really look at things for long periods of time. For him, a portrait was about analyzing the muscles under the subject's skin, thinking about the weight of the head. He seems less intrigued by the art of a thing than by its mechanics, and that's an unusual quality in an artist. Yet, in a way, "Utility" goes right to the core of what art is all about: the invention of the useless.

BROWER SAYS THAT when you're an artist, you have to be two people: the guy who paints landscapes in his studio, and the guy who first spends the day hanging drywall or doing construction. "You have to be schizoid. Finally, I decided to do the same thing all the time." So when he got a job digging a ditch, he later made a scale model of the ditch. Work became his sketching exercise.

Now he has a job as a model maker, creating product facsimiles for ads. "Real products are inferior because they're mass produced," he explains, "so we get hired to make a perfect one." It's an ironic sort of job for an artist to have—turning everyday products into one-of-a-kind (art) objects to expedite their sale. For example, Brower worked on a couple of Gillette

Mach 3s that were a foot long, a couple that were a yard long. "We make drawings and take the thing apart to figure out how it was made, so we can very carefully make one copy of this mass-produced anonymous stupid object. But then you learn all this respect for common stuff. They're like miracles, all of them. If you stop to speculate about what went into this razor, you might actually have a problem with throwing it away. For me, the real world is populated with all these various facades and they're designed to keep you from questioning what they are."

A couple of summers ago, Brower went to a Dairy Queen in northern Michigan, where he noticed a poster in the back room illustrating how to make the cones—how many twists, what kind of peak. "You eat this ice cream cone, and you have no idea that somebody had to take a course to learn how to make it. Everything is so heavily determined. I love the idea that there's a right way and a wrong way, that you can't have a left-handed twist." Naturally, he asked for the poster, but the manager refused to turn over these valuable trade secrets.

"Utility" addresses the facade of the gallery, if not the trade secrets. "When you come into a

gallery the guy behind the desk is always someone you're kind of afraid of. The people who work here forget that people see this place as kind of slick, but it's the artificiality of these spaces that makes them acceptable to rich people and intimidating to everybody else. I thought, those things that make it possible for the space to be neutral should be the subjects of the show. Because it's not a neutral space at all. It's highly designed, and you're supposed to be manipulated when you come in." The exhibit disrupts the usual gallery experience, turning the white cube into an obstacle course and taking the viewer into rooms normally off-limits to visitors.

Yet there's none of the hostility associated with, say, Chris Burden's passive-aggressive attacks on art institutions. In one piece, Burden installed massive timbers against a gallery's weight-bearing walls and each visitor who entered through a turnstile increased the pressure, making it possible (though unlikely) that the pressure would eventually bring the building down. Brower appreciates Burden's work, but his own work is not about protest. "All I want to do is call attention to the fact that you're dependent on things that are designed to be hidden and taken for granted, and they're a little nefarious."

IN THE SUMMER OF 1996, Brower made a pilgrimage to what was once Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He discovered that this innovative school—where artists like John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg taught—has become a Baptist boys camp.

The building originally designed by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius is now fronted by a totem pole. Brower had gone to look for evidence of perhaps his biggest "fraud" hero, Buckminster Fuller, who built his first large geodesic dome at Black Mountain. It failed, and Fuller labeled it The Supine Dome. "He was such a great failure," says Brower. Of course, the inventor of the geodesic dome was far from a complete failure, but his dome idea was just the tip of a cosmological iceberg. His worldview included everything from the three-wheeled Dymaxion car to a plan to stack hundreds of houses in airplanes and drop them on underprivileged areas. In other words, a cornucopia of global, revolutionary, and completely unrealized plans.

Brower went to the site of the supine dome and erected a Tensegritoy, a Fuller-inspired toy available in museum and toy stores, and one of the few traces of his visionary work remaining today. "Making models, I always see scale as very important, because what I can expect in the world is kind of diminished in general. I really feel like the idea of 'getting somewhere' is totally depleted. I can only see it as nostalgic."

As he said of his show, "Utility is very close to futility." □