



ROYCE CARLSON

restraint is not an option

Photo by Ruvi Wijesuriya

My best inspirations come early in the morning as I lay in bed. Between sleep and waking is when creative ideas land and take root in my mind. I have more ideas than I can ever create, so I need to be discriminating in deciding which ones to realize. Ideas that make me smile are worth doing; ones that make me laugh go to the head of the class. The more preposterous the idea, the more compelled I am to actually build it.

Ideas for sculpture seem to come out of nowhere, as gifts from the Muses, but I believe they come from past experiences that sink into my subconscious and roil around, mixing and blending into a delicious stew. I purposely seek out unusual things, events, people and places, not only because it's fun, but because I know it will add exotic spices to my creative melting pot.

When I am out at swap meets and yard sales looking for my "art supplies," I see things in terms of shape and form. I often buy things with interesting shapes even though I might not know what they were really for or even have a particular use for them in mind. I have lots of this stuff. Sometimes I sort it by shape. Round things like bearings and gears go in one box. Wrenches and similar-shaped items go in another box. Occasionally people leave interesting bits of steel junk outside my shop gate and I never find out who left it.

I'm often inspired by one piece of junk or another, which is why it helps to have a good pile of it handy. When I look at pieces of scrap steel, they look back. They suggest an idea to me and off I go. I found some great pieces of farm equipment once. I think they

Cosmic
bottle
opener

were parts of some kind of harvesting equipment but they looked like pterodactyl heads to me. I bought a bunch of them and built steel birds. Wrenches became leg bones, caps from industrial oxygen cylinders became bodies, and small garden rakes became tails. I welded gate hinges on as wings and added walnut picks as tendons. I used springs to allow the birds to rock back and forth a little.

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One of the side-benefits of having steel as my art medium is that I can also make my own tools from useful scraps. I built my own hydraulic press and I am most proud of my tubing roller. I built it out of scrap steel, caster wheels, sprockets, industrial drive chain and a seven-ton bottle jack. I use it to curve square steel stock into circles and arcs. It's proven to be very useful and only cost me \$200 in materials. I also like to decorate the tools with interesting bits of leftover steel.

Indulging my creativity is so much fun that I try to encourage others to explore their own creativity. Over the years I've hosted several art parties. We usually start with a large paint-primed board and everyone gathers around and creates a collaborative painting. The sole purpose is to have fun together

making art. It's an exercise in community building and an excuse to interact with others in an interesting way. The final outcome is not as important to me as the interaction between the participants.

For some of my larger sculptural projects, particularly the ones that I take to the Burning Man festival, I stage work parties—half work, half party (often more than half party!) I teach the participants how to use the welder, plasma torch, etc. and give them tasks to complete. At a work party this year we created coat racks with cup holders for an event. I provided the shop, equipment, my junk pile, and the participants were free to create whatever they wanted within some basic constraints. The pieces had to be tall enough that you could hang a coat or two on it, it had to have a tray or something to set a beer or a cup on, and it had to be stable enough not to fall over in a breeze. By the end of the night, we had five!

I like to make things that move, especially wind powered sculptures. The wind plays with them and they play with the wind. I attached rounded river rocks to a few of my wind sculptures just so the rocks could go for a ride.

A friend recently gave me a run-down 1970 Cadillac to see what I would do with it. It's a huge car—over 20 feet long—already an “over the top” vehicle, but I wanted to take it further. After all, why just do when you can over-do? This gigantic vehicle had only dinky, little tail fins



Shovelhead



Cosmos 1

so I replaced them with six-foot fins that would make Dr. Seuss proud. The roof was rusted out so I removed it completely. I already had two abandoned beauty parlor hair-dryer chairs that showed up here a couple of months before the Cadillac. At the time I didn't know what I would do with them, but when the Cadillac arrived I built a platform where the roof used to be and attached the chairs. The whole car was developed in a similar way – there would be a part of the car that was screaming to be enhanced. I would look through my pile of junk and something would seem to cry out “ME! Put ME on the Cadillac!” It's still not done. There are a couple of spots still waiting for just the right embellishment.



Cadwac

Going for a drive in the Cadwac is certainly a fun experience. The now rainbow-colored beast is twenty-one feet long, has upper deck seating, light-up pink flamingos and now sports a thumpin' sound system! I usually take six or seven friends along for the ride and cruise downtown Prescott to give a smile to the tourists and locals. There is as much entertainment for us as there is for them; women shriek, many folks whip out cameras, wave, lean out of their cars and honk or give us the thumbs-up. Cheering is also quite common.

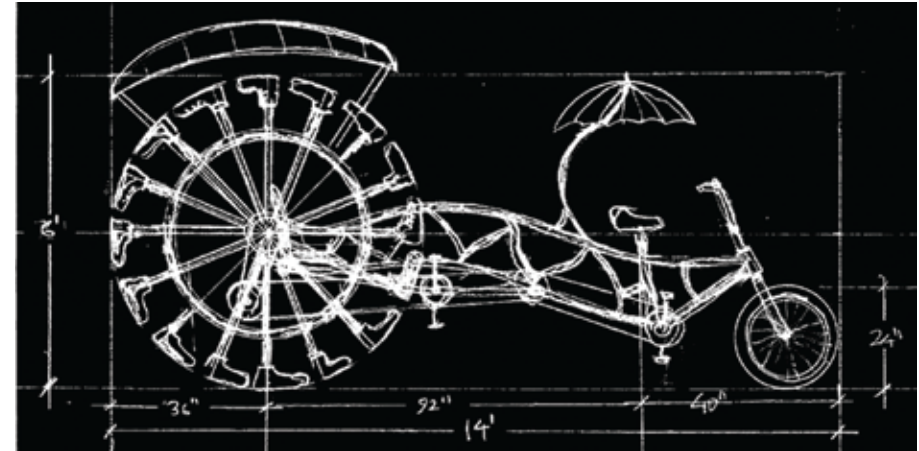


Rock rides

I can hardly think of a more useless contraption, but I just had to make it and did a sketch right away.

I don't always have to create in such a spontaneous way. Sometimes I will do detailed drawings of a vision from my head before fabricating it. I cut shapes out of plate steel, bend tubing and rod and then piece a sculpture together in quite a linear fashion. Most of my wind sculptures happen this way. Because they are large and kinetic, they need to be engineered so that they can be transported in pieces, easily re-assembled, and be quiet and balanced when operating. I also need to design them so that the ball bearings can be replaced when they eventually wear out. This takes some of the spontaneity out of the initial process, although spontaneous embellishments appear once the serious structural stuff is completed!

One "spontaneously engineered" project was the Seussian Pedal Tractor, a 14-foot long pedal-powered tricycle. The complete idea landed on me one morning in a pile of smiles and giggles. I can hardly think of a more useless contraption, but I just had to make it and did a sketch right away. After the first sketch, I spent quite a bit of time doing detailed drawings and researching the best parts for the drive train. I designed it so it would just fit on one of my flatbed trailers so it could be transported. It takes three people to pedal it.



Seussian Pedal Tractor on the Road



Dancinator

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It goes really slow and though the brakes look impressive they aren't functional. Instead of tires on the six-foot diameter rear wheels, I mounted sixteen pairs of shoes. It leaves footprints instead of tire tracks and I'm smiling now just thinking about it!

I'm lucky that creativity puts food on my table and can be considered my job, even if it seems like play. People always ask what I do in my spare time, "after work." I play some more, editing video that I've taken or creating music on my computer. And I almost forgot about Pyroklectic, a fire dancing troupe that I belong to! After all, what can make an evening more complete than tossing a few flames around with friends?" 