

Ed Love's Scrap Yard Spirits

By Paul Richard September 15, 1986

The welded steel sculptures of Washington's Ed Love are African as river spirits, American as cars.

They're made of scavenged scrap yard junk -- saw blades, rake teeth, xr plumbers' pipes, chains, chromed Pinto bumpers -- but they have the look of beings, not human beings exactly, and not robots either. They have an older sort of power. They look like hawk-headed Egyptian gods, wounded metal warriors, ferocious forest guardians or clanking statues in the park that rise and walk at night.

Love's hands are blacksmith-strong. You ought to see him working. He says welding is "home cooking. It is chemistry and intuition merged ... You take 2,000 degrees, put it into a very small cone, and you dance that cone over the pieces of metal. The steel runs together and then you move on ... solid to liquid to solid to liquid ... it is mantra-like." You cannot see his eyes -- they're either masked or goggled -- and, half-blinded by his welder's torch, you can hardly see his statues. He's a bear of a man, but his statues loom above him. Some are eight feet tall. Amid the raining sparks and blue-black smoke and jagged, dancing shadows, they begin to look alive.

"Soundings," an exhibition of Love's sculpture, opened yesterday at Howard University's Gallery of Art. To walk among his statues is to know the man who made them, his love, his rage, his music. His creatures fill the air with howls and dirges, hymns and songs of praise.

There are 62 on view, but the catalogue lists only seven lenders. The artist owns the rest. It is not that Love is unknown: He's been appointed to the board of the Washington Project for the Arts, he's shown frequently at Howard, and "Ed Love on Fire," a television portrait, was broadcast last week by WETA. But the art market's hardly noticed. Love's work, to put it lightly, is extremely hard to sell.

This city's corporate art buyers, who insist upon the safe, who find even the abstractions of Sam Gilliam dark and problematic, will not soon place Love's pieces -- his pale, bloated killers, his glaring masks and warriors and victims dripping blood -- beyond the white couch in the waiting room. So strong are his passions that most of Washington's museums, notably excepting the WPA, also shy away. One wishes this city were less timid, or would learn to pay attention to the competent, committed artists in its midst.

His Howard show should help him. For Love at last has found a champion whose position and credentials cannot easily be ignored.

Robert Farris Thompson, professor of African and Afro-American art at Yale University, was curator of "Soundings." Thompson's reputation is such that the National Gallery of Art has thrice employed him to organize its shows. His "African Art in Motion," 1974, was one of the first museum shows to free the art of Africa from its museum cases.

Thompson not only chose Love's show. He submitted for the catalogue an enthusiastic 72-page essay that relates Love's metal sculptures not just to David Smith's, but to those made by the blacksmiths of Mali and Nigeria and 18th-century Dahomey. Love's largest statues shine. Thompson ties their glitter "to the tinfoil wrapped around glass jars and other vessels on black graves from the Carolinas to New Orleans," to chromed Haitian banjos and to the "Throne of the Third Heaven," the remarkable assemblage by Washington's James Hampton now in the permanent collection of the National Museum of American Art. That Thompson loves Love's sculpture shows on every page.

Love, while welding steel -- and Thompson understands this -- strives to bind his statues to Senufo and Yoruba art, to the murals of Siqueiros, to the Rasta "skanking" of Bob Marley, and to the music of Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, Lester Young. When Love speaks of the artists he feels linked to, he speaks mostly of musicians. The postures of his statues -- they kick and bend and strut -- are the postures of the dance.

There is another influence -- "or confluence," Love calls it -- apparent in his art. It is seen perhaps most clearly in the slender linearities and complex, rhythmic colors of his newest painted pieces. They mark him as a member in good standing of what's come to be known here as "the Howard School."

Love has been a professor at Howard University's College of Fine Arts since 1968. To see his exhibition there is to call to mind his colleagues -- among them Jeff Donaldson, Skunder Boghossian, Malkia Roberts, Al Smith, Frank Smith, Ed Sorrells-Adewale, Jarvis Grant and Winston Kennedy (who initiated "Soundings"). With these and other colleagues working in black Washington, Love has tried to shape an art in which the black experience, memory and hope, old symbolic patternings and industrial materials, America and Africa, might somehow coexist.

"I would argue that some of the richest minds in American art are on this faculty," writes Thompson.

If he can see that in New Haven, you might think that the Howard school would be supported proudly, not offhandedly dismissed, by this city's art authorities.

But listen to Peggy Cooper Cafritz, head of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Interviewed in the current issue of the Washington City Paper, she's asked: "As a person dealing with the arts here, how do you see Howard's contribution?"

"I don't see it," Cafritz answers. "And I think that's the problem. I'm not sure Howard is currently playing a role in the cultural life of this city."

She ought to see Love's show.

bat10 Next Monday, Love will be 50. His father was a janitor, Mississippi-born, who moved west to Los Angeles. ("He wouldn't stop working. Days he'd work two jobs, then, at night, for therapy, he'd rebuild the garage, trying to transform nothing into something.") The house was always crowded -- "it was the way station for both my mother and my father's people coming up from the South" -- and Love's art is crowded, too.

Crowded and split-minded. "Soundings" is a word that conjures both drum beatings and delvings. Almost all Love's sculptures suggest many things at once.

"Mask for Mingus" (1974) is part bass viol, part torso and part face. "ReMan" (1980) is at once a muscled guardian and a maimed and peg-legged victim. When he asked to display the hanged man of "Jes' Us #3" (just us, justice, Jesus) outside the D.C. Superior Court building in 1980, the court system rejected it. "Bird #5" is part Senufo hornbill totem and part hymn to Charlie Parker.

Even when Love's sculpture approaches pure abstraction, he extracts from their metal parts layered iconographies. He sees in "Nyabinghi (for Robert Nesta Marley)," one of his strongest pieces, arbors, gateways, echoes of David Smith's "Cubis," palm trees, bending dancers, Rastafarian dreadlocks, moons. The statue he calls "Numbers" (1973) is at once a sort of African honorific sculpture and a portrait of a bird-eyed numbers runner in high platform shoes.

Love attended Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles (he later learned that Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston had studied there as well), but he never took an art class there. Instead he played baseball. He was good enough, at 17, to catch the interest of "the Willie Mays, Orlando Cepeda Giants," but instead -- to emulate his father, who had quit school early, or perhaps to hurt him -- Love spent four years in the Air Force in Georgia and Japan.

He would hold all sorts of jobs -- janitor, waiter, car parker, bartender, draftsman -- before going back to school and earning his bachelor's and master's degrees at California State University. He went to Sweden, then to Howard, where, wandering the neighborhood, he found "a junkyard and a bumper-replating factory" not far from the school.

A bumper, even when turned into a shield or a spear, a mask or mother goddess, remains a piece of street stuff. A bit of steel cable may seem, to Love, a tendril or a dreadlock or a spiraled twist of DNA, but it's still a bit of cable. He wants his work to be mythic, modern, musical, personal, political -- perhaps he wants too much. His show closes Nov. 26.

