

THE ART OF THE IMPERFECT

By John C. Bruening

Matt Retzlaff's modest two-car garage at his home in Buffalo, New York, is more than just a place to park the family car. It's the space where he turns scraps of found metal into replicas of the animal kingdom and other aspects of the natural world.

His fascination with this particular subject matter may have started when he rode horses and communed with nature at the summer camp he attended as a kid. Whatever the source of inspiration, Retzlaff is committed to building something out of nothing and minimizing waste in the process.

"It's satisfying to take something that someone has thrown away - maybe something I just picked up from the side of the road - and make it part of a sculpture," he says. "I've been known to express displeasure if my wife is driving and won't stop for a pile of metal that's been left on the side of the road."

More specifically, his discarded raw materials of choice are metals that have already been weathered by nature. "They're small pieces of art in and of themselves," he says. "I just need to figure out how to fit them together and use each piece wisely."

Considering the quality and complexity of his work, it might come as a surprise that Retzlaff has only been fabricating and sculpting for five years. He admits that he still has much to learn, but he considers the occasional flaws and mistakes that make their way into the work to be part of the overall expression.

"I consider myself more of an artist than a metalworker," he says. "My welding has improved greatly over the past few

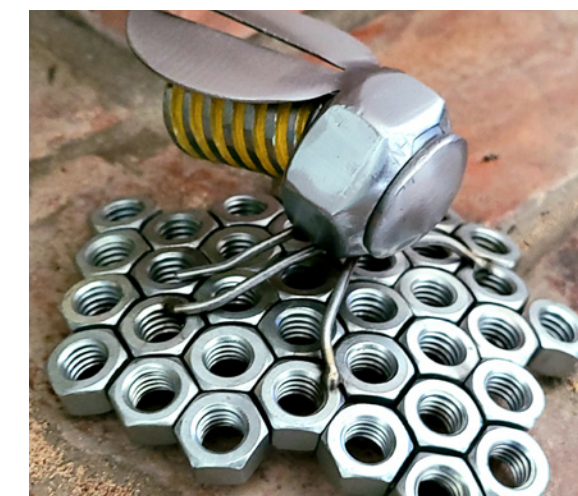
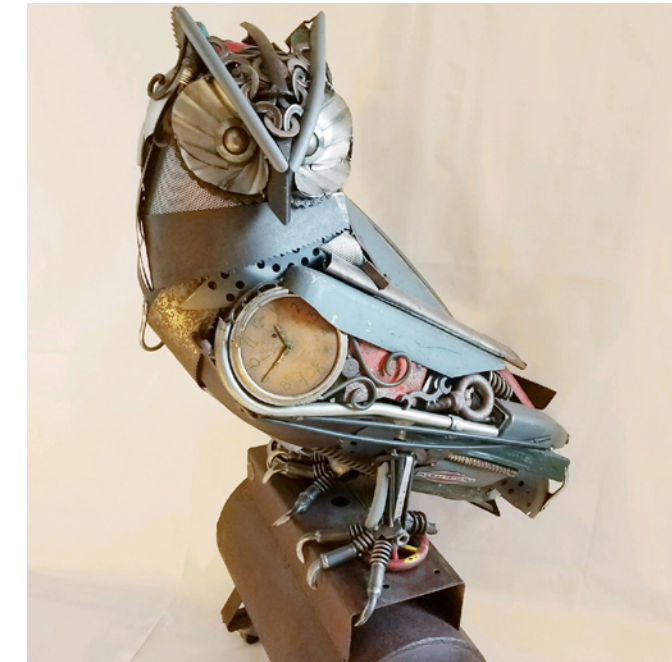
years, but my imperfect welds have also helped develop my style. In a sense, it's part of the art. However, I have come to appreciate having quality equipment that I can depend on every day. It pays to spend a little more on equipment and tools that will help you produce better quality and be more time-efficient."

Based on that premise, he appreciates the consistency of the Lincoln Electric Pro MIG 140 that he's been using for more than two years.

His favorite project to date is a sculpture of a horned owl that he calls "The Watcher." It was several months in the making, but he takes pride in his ability to persevere and finish.

"I had put some time into it, but then I stalled for about nine months after I hit a creative block," he recalls. "I really had no plan or drive to go any further with it. Then one day I said to myself, 'What the hell is wrong with me? I have to finish this thing.' I guess I had to prove to myself that I could do it. I changed his perch and it all started to come together. He gets the most attention whenever I share him on social media."

Given his current combination of passion and pace, Retzlaff expects that he will eventually outgrow his two-car garage. Ideally, he'd prefer a space dedicated to building and showing his work. He currently sells it online and through vendors, and he looks forward to getting back into the art show circuit once Covid-related restrictions on public gatherings have been lifted. If it all continues at a robust pace, it could become a full-time alternative to his day job as a manufacturing supervisor.



Until then, he'll keep tinkering in the garage on projects both large and small.

"I get comfortable being able to knock out a smaller sculpture in a few hours," he says, "but I always find the larger projects to be the most rewarding in the end. I always hit a sweet spot somewhere about halfway through a larger sculpture when my creative energy starts to flow. When I start to get excited about what I'm making and I can't shut my brain down - that's when I know I'm doing something right." **ARC**