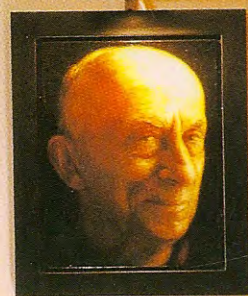


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JULY/AUGUST 2000

ARTISTS' WORKSHOP

By Elizabeth Train Photography by Don Mitchell



Metallica!

Joy and optimism

define the playful forms
of a Littleton sculptor

Littleton metal sculptor Don Mitchell creates outdoor art with "an animated feel," such as "Ponder Place," *left*, and a work in progress, *right*.

DON MITCHELL'S SCULPTURES AREN'T SHY. THERE IS NOTHING restrained about the vibrant colors he chooses, or inhibited about his use of space. His metal sculptures are dynamic and fun—full of whimsy and creative license—and you just can't help but smile at them. "I am a positive person," Don says, "and I believe most of my work reflects that."

Don Mitchell and his wife Marilyn have lived in Colorado for over 30 years. They picked up and moved here from Michigan in 1969 seeking openness, dry air, and sunshine. "We love the light here," Don notes. Trained as an engineer before becoming an

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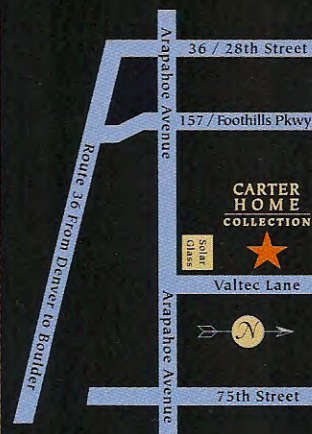


The influence of Calder, Kandinsky, Miro (and even a bit of Dr. Seuss) is evident in Don's work, as seen in "Imagination Machine."

artist, Don calls himself a "problem-solver" with a "product orientation...I have to make things," he says; "that's what I do." He began as an apprentice, designing prototypes in the experimental engineering group at General Motors, and moved on to stress testing, machining, and manufacturing. These jobs laid a strong and practical foundation for Don's career as a metal sculptor, and gave him a working knowledge of machinery, which he incorporates into his art.

His first pieces appeared in Vail at the Arnesen Fine Art Gallery, where he got his start as a full-time artist 10 years ago. Don attributes his current success to the confidence and support of Marilyn and Arne Hanson, the art historian and museum curator who first represented Don's work and encouraged him to pursue an art career in 1985. Arne believed there was a place in Colorado's dynamic art scene for Don's lighthearted pieces. Now, Don's large outdoor sculptures grace public spaces from Pebble Beach, California to Boston,

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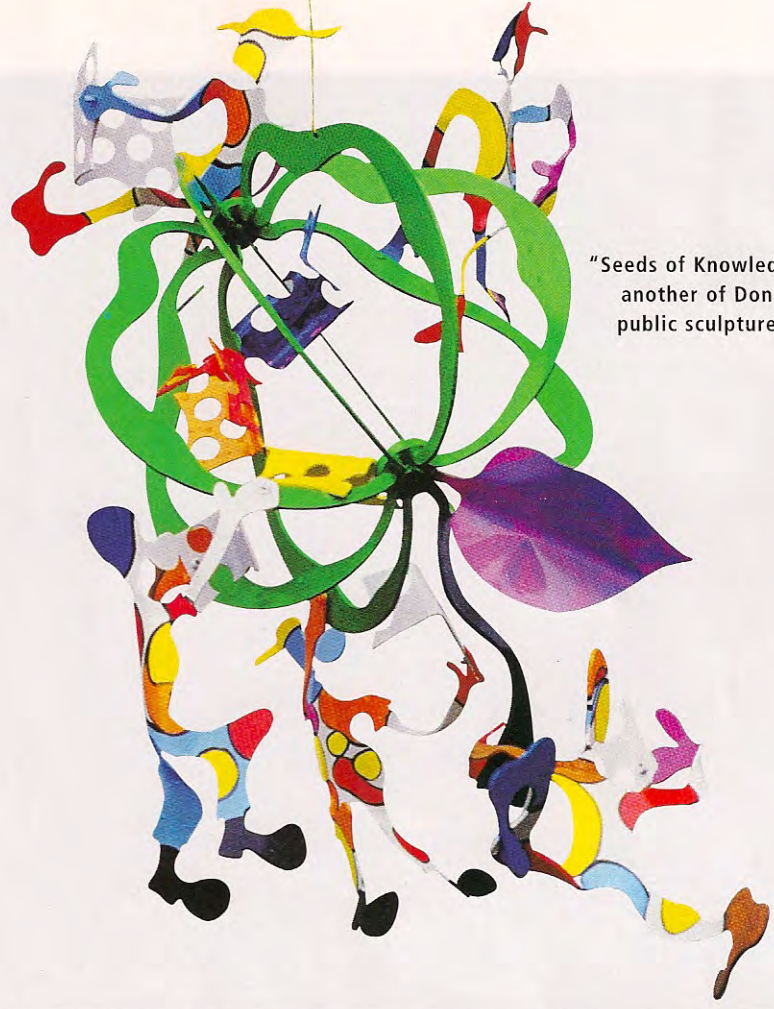
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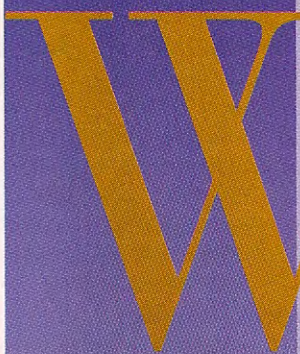
Massachusetts, and several places in between. His small pieces are featured in museum stores in most major cities, and one still rests on a desktop that was on the set of the former television series, "Murphy Brown."

Don also has been hired to do numerous outdoor sculptures throughout the state, and feels he has found his niche in these pieces commissioned for cities, museums, gardens, and shopping areas. Six sculptures with names like "Stilt Shoppers," "Cat Walk," and "Blue Tailed Mall Dog" frolic around the Stanley Lake Market Place in Westminster, while an older piece, "Is Anyone Listening?" calls out from a grassy area in Vail, and is a memorial to the late Arne Hanson. The city of Fort Collins features "Picking and Planting" in their Xeriscape Demonstration Garden next to City Hall. The piece is part of the "Art in Public Places" program, in which cities allocate one percent of their funds to bringing art into the community. All the pieces have become lively landmarks in their areas, and make sculpture avail-



"Seeds of Knowledge," another of Don's public sculptures.

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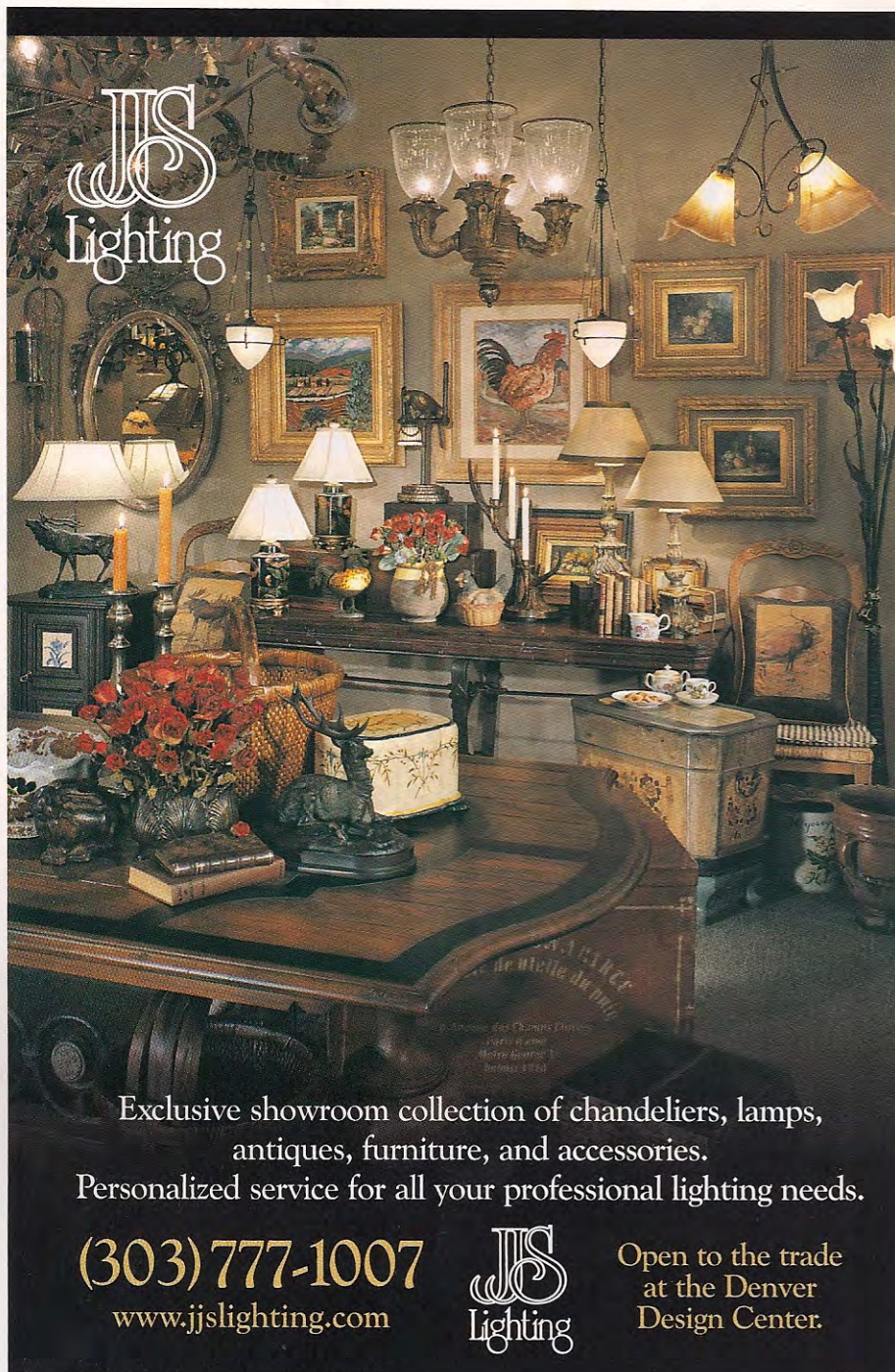
The size of Don's outdoor pieces mandated a change from wood—which he used in his early pieces—to metals, primarily aluminum and steel. The pliability of metal mediums gives his sculptures an animated feel different from the marionette-like movements of some of his early wooden pieces. "People see a lot of movement in my work," says Don, whose creations often are referred to as "anticipatory kinetic sculpture." The sculptures look like they are about to move, even though many of them are actually static pieces. Some of his recent work does move, and he admits to being influenced by Calder as well as Kandinsky and Miro...with a splash of Dr. Seuss.

Don's work is definitely his own, however. He always has several ideas for pieces in the back of his mind: "I'm on duty all the time," he says. Most of his pieces are 85 to 90 percent complete as images in his head before he even begins to cut and work with the metal forms. This "mental building" is one of his favorite aspects of being a sculptor, for it allows for the most spontaneity and creativity. "The creative process self-feeds," says Don; "the more you create, the more you have to create."

He begins his sculptures by designing aluminum "*maquettes*," miniatures as intricate and colorful as their finished counterparts. Surprisingly, size is not a defining factor for Don, for when he visualizes a piece he doesn't see it as large or small. The idea can simply assume whatever size he needs to fill the space or serve the purpose of the sculpture. Sometimes, a *maquette* will turn into a 15-foot steel piece, while other times it will become a small aluminum series for museum shops.

Once Don has created a *maquette*, he draws and cuts the forms for the actual sculpture, and prepares each metal piece for the welding process. "I know enough about welding to be dangerous," Don laughs, so he works with professional welders to fuse the forms. His background in metals affords him the opportunity to oversee and facilitate the construction of each piece. "I get just as dirty as the rest of them," he assures.

After a sculpture has been assembled, Don begins to color it with powder coat, a bake-on finish that is very bright and durable. The color is the only part



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of the piece that Don doesn't always see in his mind's eye from the start, and he often lets a sculpture sit with its white primer coat until a color scheme inspires him. His pieces don't sit unfinished for long, however. "I'm a completer," he says "partially because I can't wait to move on to another piece!"

Excited by the growth and evolution of his work over the last few years, Don finds his work getting larger and more prominent; he is being commissioned to do exciting pieces and large-scale wall sculptures that will add color, humor, and fun to spaces throughout Colorado and the U.S. He loves the challenge of doing what hasn't been done. "I am never afraid of someone taking an idea," he says. "There are always more where that came from!"

Don has great visions for stimulating and interactive future pieces. He would love to design an entire playground someday, with pieces that move and bright colors that invite children to come and play. He also hopes to design an interactive sculpture for a children's museum that incorporates physics, sound, and imaginative fun. Don enjoys working with young people, and holds school demonstrations and interactive workshops in his community.

The energetic and delightful tone of his work touches the child in every adult as well. Don dreams of turning the *maquette* "Ponder Place," a sculpture of a fanciful chair set upon revolving, blue wheels, into a large outdoor piece where people of all ages can literally sit and think. He hopes to turn "Tambo," currently a small, museum-store piece, into a giant, interactive "gong" that passers-by can pound on to their hearts' content. And he would love to see an opera staged around his piece, "Life is a Leaky Boat," a colorful metaphor for the constant ups and downs of day-to-day life. "I like stimulating people's creativity and helping them see things from a different perspective than they normally would," explains Don. He is pleasantly surprised by the way people interpret his sculptures, and he is interested in the meaning other creative minds lend to his pieces.

He feels that he has a responsibility to provide future generations with inspiring art and to "give people a boost—something different to think about...I like making people smile," he says. Per-



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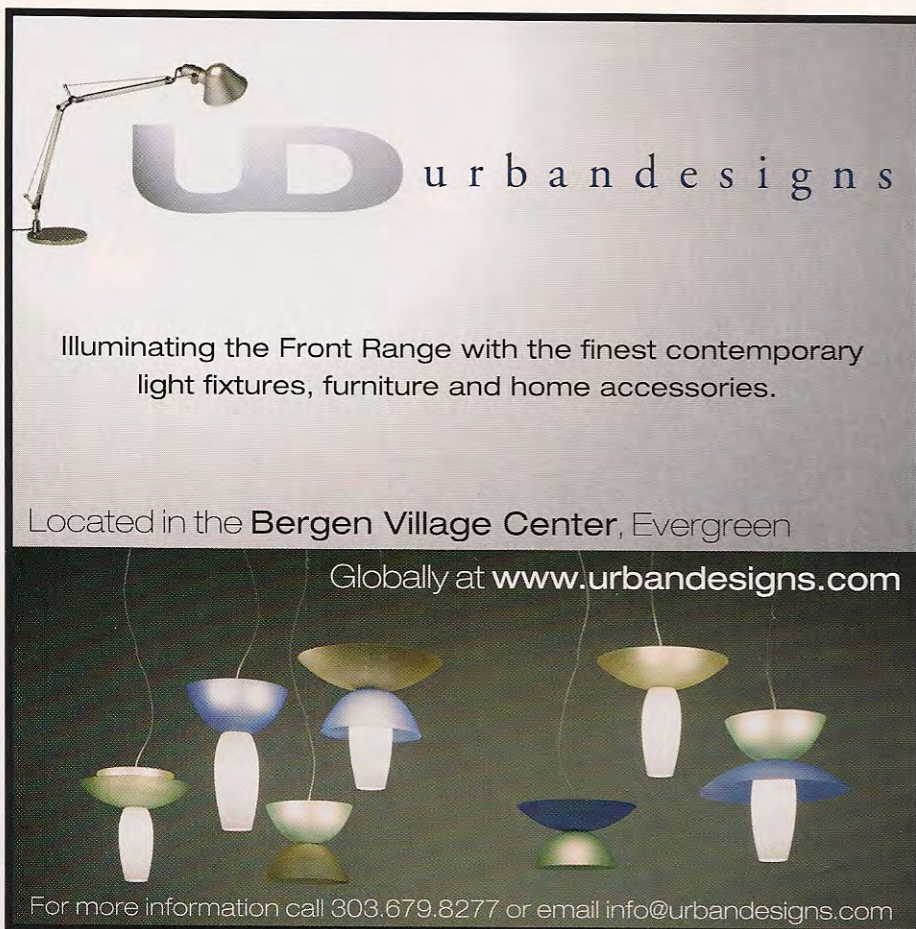
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haps this is Don Mitchell's true role as an artist—to touch people's imaginations with the positive exuberance and joy that shine through his sculptures, and indeed to make them smile.

Don Mitchell's work can be seen at the Highlands Gallery in Breckenridge and the Sandy Carson Gallery in Denver, or visit his website, www.theedge.com/hardart. ■

Public Peeks

In addition to the abundant private collections from coast to coast and points in between where Don Mitchell's works reside, his art graces the grounds and portals of numerous cities, towns, and private companies. A partial listing follows.

- The Town of Vail, Art in Public Places Program, Vail, CO
- City of Fort Collins Art in Public Places, Fort Collins, CO
- City of Lakewood, Lakewood, CO
- Cleveland Marriott Society Center, Cleveland, Ohio
- Gold Lake Mountain Resort, Ward, CO
- Barnes Packaging Machinery, Inc., St. Louis, MO
- Angeles Group, Pacific, MO
- Ernest Ulberri and Associates, Albuquerque, NM
- Intertrade Limited, Cedar Rapids, IA
- Amoco Oil Company, Chicago, IL
- KN Energy Inc., Lakewood, CO
- Wanco, Inc., Arvada, CO
- Safeco Insurance Co., Lakewood, CO
- S/S Landholdings, LLC Stanley Lake Marketplace (6 sculptures), Westminster, CO
- Longmont United Hospital, Longmont, CO
- Knowledge Workers, Inc., Englewood, CO



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