

John Ruppert

by Tom Collins

John Ruppert's human-scale vessels of cyclone fencing float like ghostly, woven cocoons in the landscape. The webs of industrial strength lace — a "Gourd" a "Sphere" — look tethered to the earth only by the shadows that they cast upon it. These look more substantial than the objects themselves, at times. Indeed, the hazy apparitions of iron and air appear as insubstantial veils of light and shadow; while they "hold" everything in their semi-transparency, they "contain" nothing, presenting a neat, minimal paradox.

For several years as a young boy in the early 1960s Ruppert lived with his family in Amman, Jordan. During this time, he became interested and active in archaeology and traveled throughout areas of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus visiting sites and participating in several archeological digs. By his own account, "Experiencing the remains of ancient cities and civilizations in the barren landscape has had a lasting effect on my artwork and me."

Over the years, Ruppert has expressed this "lasting effect" in diverse works that, directly and obliquely, have articulated themes surrounding the material remains of past cultures — how they came to be, and how they came to vanish leaving such pregnant traces.

In these emanations of air and steel mesh we may sense reflections of everything from ancient basket weaving to a desert mirage. Now, however, set in the landscape of the Digital Age, they become more real, more visible, as does the cluttered environment that surrounds and passes through them. Also, as the shimmering silver matrix beckons with its illusion of shelter, we are reminded that this medium is, and has been for some time, the preferred choice of fencing for borders, detention camps, and prisons.

In contrast to the lyric, metaphorical nature of these diaphanous wire vessels is the literal physicality of Ruppert's super-sized, partially deflated pumpkins cast in aluminum. These huge, bulbous fruits of ash-gray metal flesh seem to sink into the earth under their own overripe overweight; yet, at the same time, they seem like hollow, lighter-than-air paper-thin shells.

Ruppert, who received his MFA from the School for American Craftsmen, Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, has always been keen to reveal the manner of his sculpture-making and he makes no effort to conceal the fact that these replicas of nature, with their obvious seams and flaps, are fabricated. It is difficult to say, at times, what they are made of — welded metal or stitched fabric — but they are obviously constructed and resemble everything from a giant sleeping armadillo to a big stuffed pillow.

In the end, Ruppert's large-scale, metal-skinned homages to the vegetable world, like his chain-link vessels, create and maintain a delicate balance between the organic and industrial, the made and the grown, the actual and virtual, the lost and found. The myriad contradictions and conundrums conjure a nagging tension of perceptions and illusions that are resolved in the meticulous craft and artistry of their making.



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