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## 'Left' to his own devices

The Boston Globe

As an inventor and a sculptor, Steve Hollinger is constantly experimenting to feed his curiosity



"I try to resist technology for technology's sake," says Steve Hollinger (pictured in his Fort Point Channel studio). (Dina rudick/globe staff)

By Cate McQuaid  
Globe Correspondent / September 20, 2008

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Steve Hollinger's studio in Fort Point Channel is filled with strange treasures. There's a two-headed bird with three eyes and two beaks, stowed in a glass jar. There are antique hypodermic needles, a crocodile skull, magic lanterns, and an old aluminum prosthetic leg, polished to gleam. On one shelf, there's a 3-inch-tall house that Hollinger made out of spider webs, still intact after four years.

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A soft-spoken, bearded man who pads barefoot through the light-infused space, Hollinger is more than a collector of odd items. He's an inventor and artist whose unusual sculptures - many of them kinetic and powered by solar cells - are on view in the solo exhibit "What's Left" at Chase Gallery through Sept. 27.

As an artist, Hollinger, 45, conducts experiments for his own delectation. "You're surprised by the outcome," he says. "I make an experiment, tapping into a certain feeling, and see if this

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**Hollinger's mad science** thing captures or houses that certain feeling."

At Chase Gallery, many of those experiments hinge on life's fragility. "Heart #4" is an astonishing assemblage of glass tubes and vessels with blue liquid pumping through them, powered by the sun. "Skeleton Leaf Boxes" consists of translucent boxes that are indeed made out of delicate leaf skeletons, and "Born on the Drop of Truckee" is a living-room tableau in an old wooden explosives box, with a solar-powered mini TV brightly broadcasting images of atomic-bomb tests.

Technology is a specialty of his. Hollinger makes his living as an inventor. He started out as a software engineer, and in 1989 he developed a successful product for large-format printing that, among other things, pioneered the wrapping of advertising on city buses. He has invented an aerodynamic, teardrop-shaped umbrella designed to manage water flow and improve control on windy days. (A prototype is being tested before manufacture in China, and Susan Orlean chronicled the umbrella's development in a New Yorker profile of Hollinger last February.)

Hollinger has an array of other inventions, some more successful than others. They include software for turning videos into flip books and a program for microprinting text and images into a space as small as the head of a pin. Now he's at work on an aerodynamic insulated tent and a device to stop the smell of mildew rising from drains. His inventions have enabled him to buy his condo, where he makes most of his art (larger works he fabricates at a studio in Allston) and to take time for other creative pursuits. Last year, for example, he spent nine months writing a screenplay, an adventure/mystery based on a theory he has that ice can capture images as it freezes.

Both his inventions and his sculptures are creative efforts and can take months of work, but they follow different paths.

"The invention comes into my head as a concrete idea," Hollinger says. "I'll feel a certain sense of excitement that it hasn't been done yet. With artwork, it comes from a completely different feeling, and there's a really long stewing process before I even tackle how it's made. . . . If I have a sculpture that requires a view into a window, I'll get out a drawer full of optical devices, from fiber-optic cables to small LCD displays, then I start playing with those things."

The inventions start with research, online and at the library - into the valves to prevent the smell of mildew, for instance. "I have a goal, I want to make this thing," Hollinger says. "I figure out where the laser cuts would go, how the plastic bends." He designs the valve on his computer and builds prototypes in his studio.

"The main difference is that with sculpture I'm uncompromising," he sums up. "With the commercial projects, I'm tuned into what other people want, and willing to make changes."

As a sculptor, Hollinger tinkered and made things for many years, showing them sporadically but not ambitiously. Then Stephanie Walker, the former gallery director at Chase, met him; she was living in his building at the time. She invited him into a group show at Chase in 2002. In 2003, he showed in the DeCordova Annual at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, and he has steamed along since then, participating in several exhibitions each year.

Curator George Fifield, who tapped Hollinger for the DeCordova Annual, calls Hollinger's work "retro high tech."

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"He takes these soft forms - old wood, old boxes, objects that look Jules Verne-like, and he builds these machines that work so well as high tech, but don't look it," Fifield says. "And they're all off the grid, somehow."

Hollinger shrugs off the technology. "I try to resist technology for technology's sake," he says. "At some point, the technology will be passé. Everyone will have solar cells. It's important for the pieces to stand on their own."

Hollinger sits at his kitchen table, which he built from barn wood he found at the Brimfield Fair - the sort of place he finds materials for his art - and offers a visitor a cup of fresh-brewed iced tea, his own recipe of red zinger and Earl Grey, with a little honey thrown in. On the table, he has set a sculpture made of the same green-painted wood as his table. Like many of Hollinger's works, it's a scuffed box with a window, which the viewer must lean in close to see through.

"It's called 'Father Dance,' " Hollinger says, and turns a light on behind the piece to solar-activate it. Inside, an image flickers of a man dancing, arms waving. The images - prints made from a video - flicker thanks to a strobe light that turns on just as it hits the center of each frame.

Morton Hollinger, the dancer and Hollinger's father, is a painter; many of his works perch on Hollinger's shelves, among the animal skulls, pigeon eggs, and magic lanterns. The sculptor's mother, Myrna, makes wearable art out of dried fish. He offers a snapshot of one of her works, "Lobster Carapace."

"The lobsters and spines she gets herself," Hollinger says. "The dried fish I ship her from Chinatown."

Myrna was his art teacher growing up in Stamford, Conn. "I was building contraptions and inventions, similar to now, always tinkering with whatever I could find around the house," Hollinger says. He later went to SUNY Albany, where he studied computer science, and out of college worked as a software engineer in image processing and optics.

He says he and his mother bonded while he was making "Pods," a series for the show at Chase in which tiny copper leaves flicker inside buoyant glass pods, tethered to solar cells inside tanks of clear oil. The solar cells make the copper leaves turn. The work was intricate and repetitive, like his mother's. "I could call her up and talk about it," Hollinger says. "We developed an even stronger relationship.

"There are independence and isolation in each of these pieces," he says. "I guess that's a reflection of me: Independent, fiercely guarded about my independence. Also, isolated."

Hollinger has lived in Fort Point since 1990. He works on the neighborhood landmark commission, and has many artist friends there. He is single, and lives by himself.

"I have a handle on what it means to be alone," he says. "I know people have a sense of aloneness, even when they're with people."

A light comes on in a painter's studio across the alley from Hollinger's, like a copper leaf flickering in a neighboring tank. "Oh, look, that's Dorothea Van Camp," he says. "It's nice to have a symbiotic relationship with people across the way. When I'm working here, going crazy, these connections make you sane. That makes me like this neighborhood a lot."

He titled the Chase show after a work called "What's Left of Her House," a glass box he filled with remnants of a woman's home he found while wandering at low tide around one of the Boston Harbor Islands. The contents of this box make a connection for Hollinger to the woman and her home like the one he feels for his neighbor - only across time, rather than across space.

"They're a woman's things. I started telling myself a story about her. A protractor, a piano foot pedal, garter clips, all washing into the sea. They're delicate, fragile, remaining things, on their way to being gone," Hollinger says. "Yet they provided structure and strength to the original." ■

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