

Surls carves wood in his own image

Texas artist's work is now on display at L.A. Louver

By Hunter Drohojowska

"One thing I don't like is when journalists write about my personal appearance for most of the article and barely write anything about my work," says Texas artist James Surls. "It just seems weird to me."

(OK, Jim. We'll just quickly mention your long hair held in place by a barrette, your graying beard, your earrings, the amused glint in your green eyes, your large, muscular physique, your drawl, your age: 42.)

But it must be said that James Surls' appearance often draws comments because it seems an extension of his rugged, idiosyncratic sculpture. In fact, a few of his latest works, now on view at the L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice, even incorporate the artist's profile molded in black wire. Surls — psychologically and to some degree physically — needs to become one with his sculpture in order to create it. "My person is in every one of (my) sculptures. In fact, I would go so far as to say that all my pieces are self-portraits."

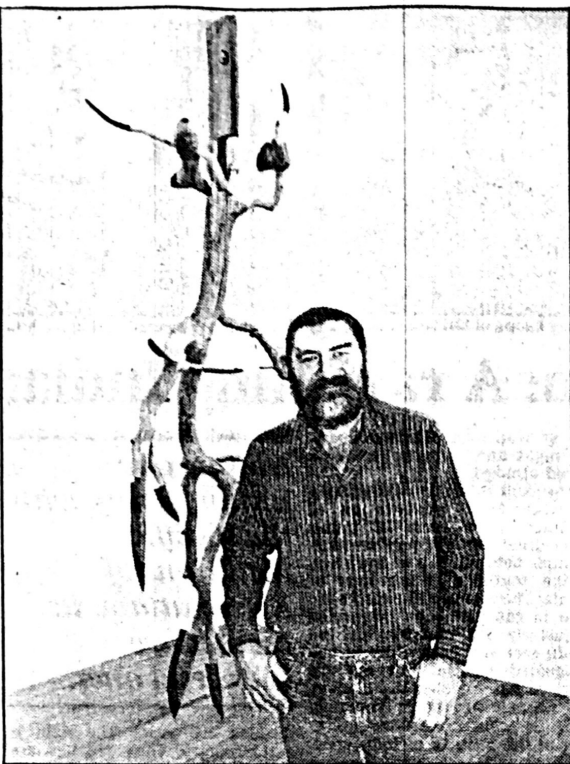
Wood is his chosen material. Surls selects tops and trunks of trees and allows the twists and angles of each organic form to suggest the eventual sculpture. "On Being the Wind," the largest sculpture in the show, consists of a house hewn from the trunk of a 1,000-year-old cypress tree. The inner core forms a spiral doorway, and from the roof the treelike figure of Surls grows. Bent black wire defines the facial features. Small pointed tips, charred black from fire, bristle around the edges. Although home-grown in appearance, it is clearly a work of technical sophistication.

Surls developed his sculptural skills during childhood in Malakoff, a town in rural East Texas, while clearing his father's land with an ax and building small wooden toys from wood. Surls' father was a carpenter, his mother tinted photographs, so both had artistic instincts. "I came from a make-do idiom," he says, "and it was a natural step to make art from what was available."

Surls discovered art as a career in 1964 when he needed a second academic major to go along with physical education at Sam Houston College in Huntsville, Texas. His talents were honed during graduate school at the respected Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield, Mich., but after graduation Surls refused to make art for three years. Instead he held a variety of odd jobs, from oil pipeline assembler to foundry worker. He learned more skills that would later turn up in his sculpture.

Seeing a Lucas Samaras exhibition in New York in 1972 convinced Surls that it was possible to wed content with a form that was not traditionally beautiful, and he regained his interest in sculpture.

He calls the formal art of the 1960s an "anti-influence." "Sculpture from that period was minimal, geometric components arranged in relation to one another," he says. "Their purpose was to sit there and look good. The



Sculptor James Surls poses with "Meatman and Bait Fish" at L.A. Louver in Venice.

topic of conversation among sculptors was always that physical process kind of jargon about weights, hoists and pulleys. I swear I never heard anyone discuss philosophy, message or what a sculpture means."

Surls wanted his art to convey a specific message about spiritual power rather than the academic riddles of art history. His first sculpture after his hiatus was a delta symbolic of "A" for art and alphabet — i.e., literal content. "That was my first shape with meaning behind it," he says. "I started making sculptures of things I saw, like the one from 1974 titled 'I Saw a Spotted Lady Whose Belly Was Round Like a Ball.'"

Surls' intuitive musings and philosophical inclinations are most apparent in his drawings — a combination of doodle and automatic writing, plus loosely rendered images and poetry. He points to one called "In the Jawbone" and explains its symbols: "My body is the house, the stairway in my head leads to the intellectual doorway. The drawings evolve into three-dimensional objects."

Surls admits influences from Mexican folk art. "I didn't grow up with influences from Europe, from cafes and that Italy-Paris-New York tradition. I grew up with Mexican folk art and the surrealists." His religious background as a Baptist also played a part. "We live as humans in search of explanations. Take a pure logic class at a university and someone can justify the phenomena around them in a logical way. But I choose not to deal with the phenomena of life that way. The things of mind interest me. I call it the 'eureka' state. That's when you step into the subconscious, where you start to create. All human beings share the capacity to do that. I just

exercise it. I like to think about my reason for being on the planet. It always amazes me that to get a degree in art, you don't have to take any courses in philosophy."

The words and symbols in Surls' art are frankly spiritual, like the drawing titled "Talk to the Devil" (1981). A new hanging figure titled "Meatman and Bait Fish" (1985), with its meat-cleaver head, pointed, knifelike feet and tentacles grasping plump little fish, is about "a nasty part of our character," explains Surls. "You've heard the word 'inhumanity,' but if 200 million were killed since 1900 in wars, that's not inhuman, it's human. Animals don't do that. This character dangles the bait to draw you in, like advertising gimmicks."

As an example of how jaded our society has become, he recites the promising words: "Merit, True, Real, More." All are brand names for cigarettes.

"It's almost like the gauntlet you have to run through in society in terms of spiritual things."

Images and writings about God, angels and the devil don't figure prominently in much contemporary art, but that doesn't daunt Surls. He recalls a university panel discussion when he declared his belief in God and the Bible: "I could hear the gasps of the audience. But if we were made in some godly fashion, body and soul is like form and content. We were meant to create. That's what separates us from the lions and the tigers. We can create and they can't," explains Surls. "Somehow I would like to write my own Bible. I'd change the first word. Instead of 'In the beginning ...' I'd put 'From the beginning, God created ...' Then I'd put a period. That'd be it."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.