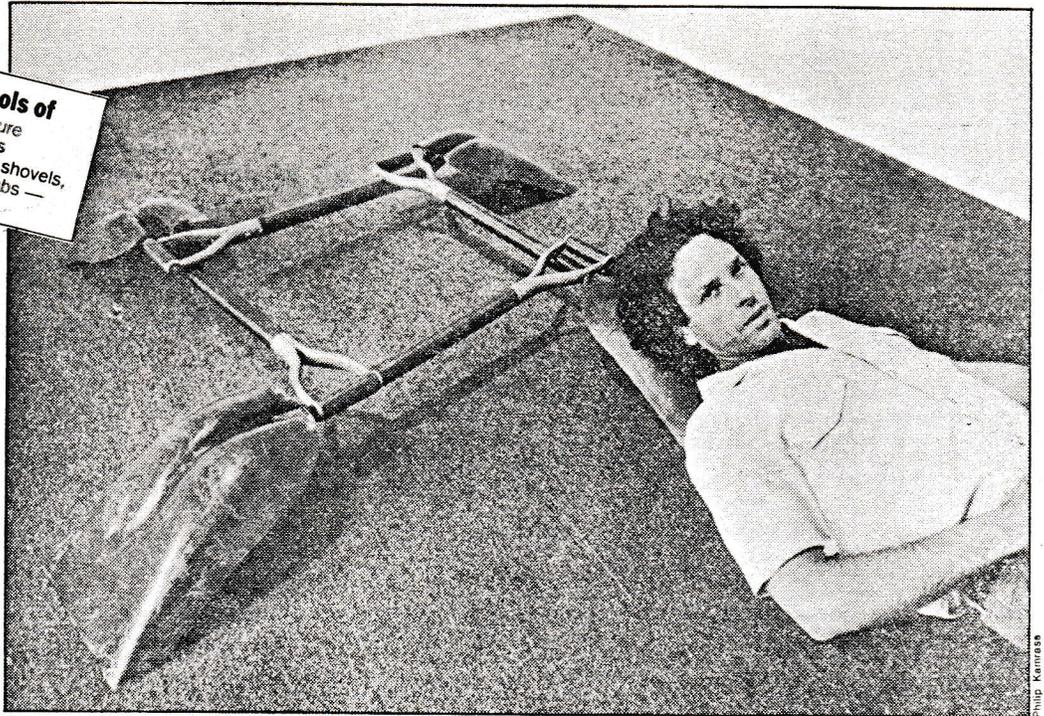




He digs the tools of the trade
 Sculpture
 Donald Lipski utilizes industrial objects — shovels, cultivators, even bombs — for his work.



Philip Kennas

Donald Lipski's career in sculpture moves full-steam ahead

By Hunter Drohojowska

Donald Lipski looks like the archetypal eccentric inventor, with his bushy black hair and wild blue eyes, still sporting a day's growth of beard. But Lipski is an inventor of art — sculptures that look as though they were discovered in Frankenstein's laboratory — or maybe his attic.

The sculptures that adorn the walls, the floors and even hang from the ceiling of the Margo Leavin Gallery through April 28 are commonplace objects found by the artist and rendered odd. On a shelf, there rests a black rubber glove filled with rice and attached to a glass porthole. Mounted on the wall is a fat paintbrush bound to a green rubber device to measure blood pressure. A copy of a thin brown book, "Art and Pharmacy III," sits atop four wheels, all pointed outward, on the floor. Anyone might wonder about the history of this conglomeration of hardware and junk which is collectively titled "Building Steam."

Dressed in baggy green jeans and a black T-shirt, Lipski, 36, paced about the gallery explaining the origins of this work. He took a visitor into the office of the gallery where an entire wall is covered with minute bits of flotsam and jetsam — snippets of business cards, the nubs of pencils, woven matches, broken straws, bottle caps — pinned in a grid pattern. This is called "Gathering Dust."

"This is the sort of stuff I've been making all my life," explained Lipski. He twisted a piece of Kleenex into a little spiral cone to demonstrate. "When I was in graduate school in 1971, that's when I started putting them in my pocket and keeping them. Gathering dust."

After getting a degree in history at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, Lipski attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Detroit, where he received his MFA in 1973. "I

started thinking that everything I was learning was bull.... Everybody was reading art magazines and that seemed like bull.... It was striking me as important but secondary to something else. The fact that I had been making these all my life — twisting a straw, playing with matches, whatever — made me think that this was important somehow. I was deciding that there was something more basic to what artists did than anything anyone was verbalizing."

Lipski said he's been fascinated by such alterations ever since his youth in Highland Park, a suburb of Chicago. "One of the earliest memories of my life is in my parents' apartment on the shag-rug carpet, pulling up a shag, one loop, and finding out it just got longer and longer and made a line in the carpet."

The products of Lipski's fidgeting were first shown as sculpture in 1974 at the Wichita Art Museum. He pinned a selection to the wall and "it was like I'd been hit by a bolt of lightning. It was very exciting for me."

Lipski spent the next four years teaching at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman, and experimenting with video, photography and environmental work. But "Gathering Dust," prevailed. In 1977, he moved to New York, where he still lives, and by 1979 he had an exhibition of more than 2,500 of the little sculptures, as he calls them, at the Museum of Modern Art.

That event proved to be a turning point. "A lot of people were inviting me to show "Gathering Dust," which wasn't very satisfying. The International Communications Agency asked me to go to Bulgaria with a show, and hang out with the artists' union for a couple of weeks. I had an interpreter and we just drank and talked every night. They're these romantic, intellectual, dedicated, wonderful people and they make really boring art. I had a feeling they were also bored with what they were doing and didn't know how to break out of it. They operate under so many rules. It's a good job being in the

artists' union and you get in by going to the art academy, then getting into three juried shows. That's what I meant by rules because you really have to toe the line there. So when I got back I unloaded all my rules."

The decision brought on a transitional body of work titled "Passing Time," larger objects still gathered at random, and often the result of literally passing the time from 1980 to 1982.

The artist considers "Building Steam," to be his most "substantial and considered work." It is still gathered from the streets in a tradition of sculpture from found objects that dates from Dadaists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. But Lipski's objects are chosen as much for the seductive quality of their materials, and are less absurdist.

A spiral of chrome and yellow plastic on the floor turns out to be a chain of three-pronged garden cultivators. "I got these from a place in New York that did packing for export. Their rent was raised and they were closing up. These were overage on a shipment of earth cultivators going to Egypt." He gestured toward a pillar of paper bound by copper straps. "On my way to breakfast, I walked by this warehouse where they shred old paper and asked the guys if I could take some things."

An object that has gained considerable response is a 2,000 pound demolition bomb, leaning nonchalantly on its nose in a corner. Lipski had set two flimsy plastic dials into the metal casing. According to Lipski, NATO troops are given these dials. "You're sitting in a bunker and a nuclear explosion goes off. If you're a good soldier, you start your stop watch and mark the time from when you see the flash till when you hear the boom, just like measuring the distance of lightning. Then you estimate the width of the mushroom cloud with a special device. This dial will then give you the yield. Then you call headquarters and tell them it was a two kiloton bomb or whatever so they can figure out how to respond. The dial at the top helps

Where	Margo Leavin Gallery 812 N. Robertson Blvd.
How much	Free
Info	273-0603

figure how much radiation you've had."

Many of the objects began as tools such as shovels and saws, or as books, but they are often altered to a state of helplessness. This lends the exhibition a threatening aura of forced inactivity. Steel conveyor belting is coiled around a stainless steel rod, held in place with a leather restraint cuff. Each object serves as a metaphor. Lipski says, "I don't think about metaphors consciously but I'm honest enough with myself to know I'm not choosing these materials just for their look but what they imply or stand for. Part of people's response is because something is a tool and synchronous with something in the mind."

When Lipski was in high school, he worked as a magician, doing sleight of hand and escape acts for "birthday parties and rotary clubs." He admits there must be some connection to his need to be an artist. "It's wanting to do something in public. Whatever anybody tells you, artists all have a certain ego need that comes from putting the stuff out in public and seeing if there's a response to it."

He doesn't need to get on a stage anymore but he needs to continue his "Building Steam." "I think of when a train is building steam, it's not going anywhere yet. It's sitting in the station and they're throwing coal into the firebox and the steam is building more and more pressure. At some point you have to pull a lever and have that steam transferred to the pistons and the wheels so the train starts moving, or the steam chest explodes. That's the image I think of in "Building Steam." It's highly energized and at the same time, pretty static." Perhaps, Lipski's next series will be titled "Full Steam Ahead."