



Light Industry

A retrospective profiling sculptor Forrest Myers, creator of “The Wall” in SoHo, displayed a vast range of works—from kinetic to minimalist, from political to musical.

BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL

At the forefront of contemporary art practice for over 40 years, Forrest Myers is known for his innovative work in light and with metal, woven wire and bent pipe, and also as a maker of idea-driven sculptures that commingle form and function; he was an early associate of the cooperative E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology).¹ Myers's recent exhibition “Right Brain/Left Brain” focused on the intuitive and analytical aspects of his creative thinking, surveying adventures in the making of art from 1959 to the present.

The exhibition was presented at Yellow Bird Gallery, a 13,000-square-foot exhibition space located in a repurposed industrial building on the Hudson River waterfront in Newburgh, N.Y. It coincided with the resiting of two of his geometric abstractions in metal and concrete, which have long been in the collection of the Storm King Art Center in nearby Mountainville, and with the June 2006 dedication of *Chinatown* (1974), a seductive sculpture of entwined stainless-steel and brass pipe acquired by New York's Museum Tower residential building and installed



Above, Forrest Myers: *Searchlight*, 1975, four carbon-arc searchlights; at Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y.

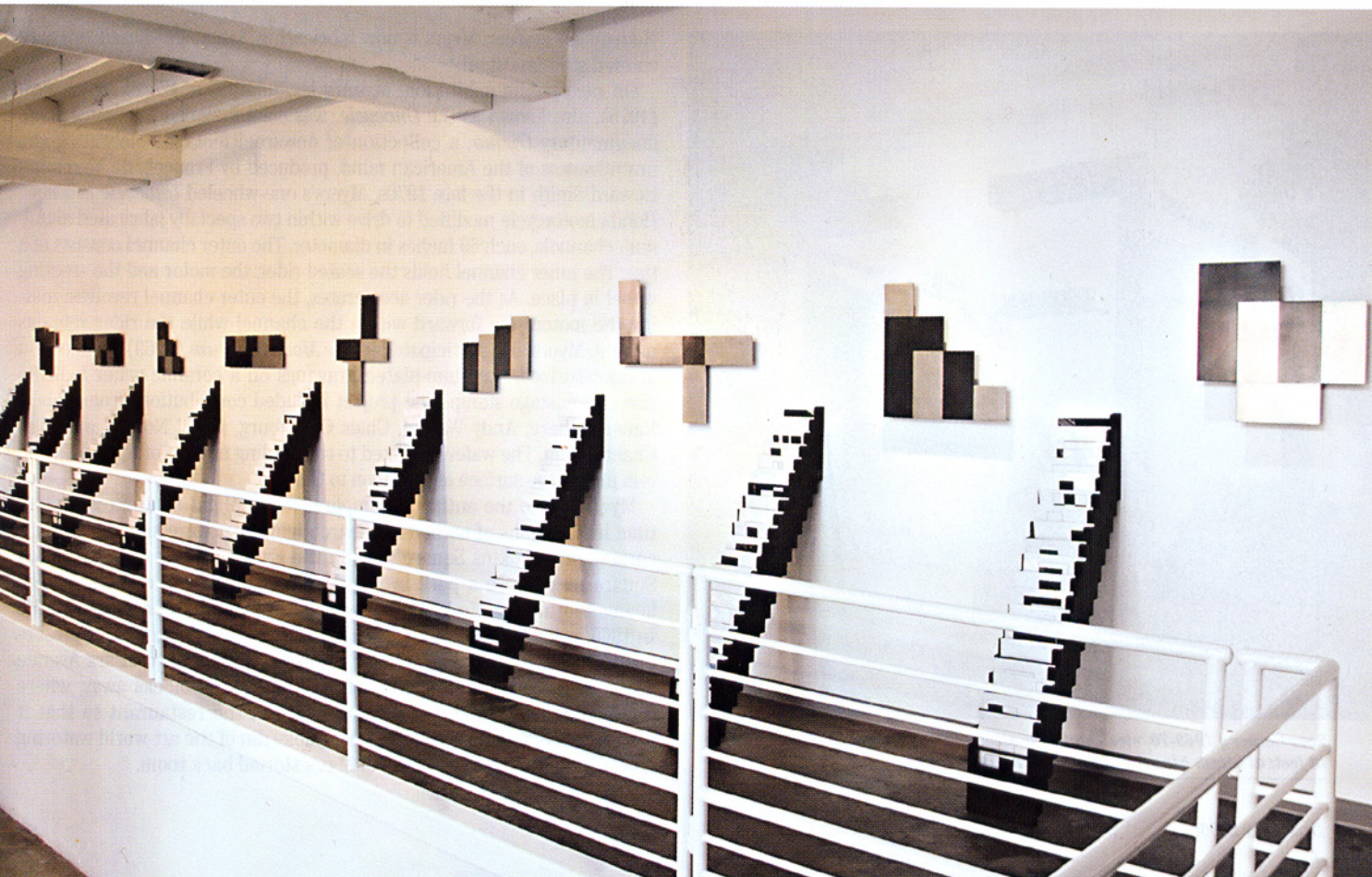
Opposite, Ashram with Peace Table and Chairs, 1996-2006, camouflage netting, steel, rusted steel, 12 feet high; at Yellow Bird Gallery, Newburgh, N.Y.

Below, *The Language with the Park Place Drawings*, 1970-90, steel, stainless steel, laminated computer drawings; at Yellow Bird Gallery.

on a stone-paved terrace designed by architect François de Menil on the adjacent roof of the Museum of Modern Art.² Myers is popularly known as the creator of *The Wall* (1973), a monumental public sculpture sometimes called the “Gateway to SoHo,” whose threatened existence has galvanized the support of artists and a concerned public for several years (see below).

As a point of reference for Myers's work in wire to come, the earliest objects included at Yellow Bird were evocative volumetric portraits of *Charles de Gaulle* and *Igor Stravinsky* (both 1959), the former in galvanized wire with white paint, the Stravinsky portrait in steel and aluminum wire. Modeled in the round, they are informed by their famous subjects' decisive features, and were made in San Francisco, where Myers studied sculpture at the Art Institute. Two years later he moved to New York during a period of change and growth in the field of sculpture as it expanded beyond the traditional gallery setting. In 1962 he was a founding member of Park Place Gallery, the downtown Manhattan artists' cooperative. There he exhibited large-scale sculpture with colleagues Mark di Suvero and Robert Grosvenor, among others. The Yellow Bird exhibition included his first wall pieces made in New York, *Flag for J.J.* (1961), a work in steel and stainless steel abstracted from Jasper Johns's iconic flag paintings, and *Lost* (1961), a small, black-painted wood sculpture of 16 modules with one of them removed, a visual gesture that anticipated the modular “Language” works to follow.

The sculptures at Storm King were represented at Yellow Bird by two models in steel and stainless steel dated 1975, neither more than a foot high. The large-format *Four Corners* (1969-70) and *Mantis* (1968-70) were acquired by Storm King's founder, Ralph Ogden, in the early 1970s. *Four Corners* is a twice bisected cube framework of rectilinear elements, made of stainless and Cor-ten steel, patinated bronze and concrete, measuring 12 feet on a side. It is a large-scale model for a never-realized monumental version that was to be composed of 100-foot pylons placed at



**Installed at Storm King is
Four Corners—a 12-foot-tall model
that Myers envisions at 100 feet,
sited where four western states meet.**

some distance from each other at the convergence of the states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona. At Storm King it rests on a modest promontory, reached by a gravel path, with a view of the wooded hillside and rolling meadow below. Overlooking a Ronald Bladen sculpture from a glade of second-growth trees, the massive pyramidal, bisected tetrahedron of *Mantis* is named for its prayerful posture. Of weathered steel and burnished stainless steel, it measures 9 by 10 by 10 feet.

The Language" (1970-80) consists of 200 drawings making a handsome, open-ended alphabet of rectilinear forms, presented in nine metal racks of the sort used by magazine vendors. Each drawing proposes a steel and stainless-steel wall work based on the alternating displacement of solids and voids. Sculptures based on the drawings consist of shifted and recombined rectilinear tiles configured in two-to-one steel and stainless-steel elements, some blued, others burnished in the manner of David Smith's "Cubi" sculptures. At Yellow Bird, drawings and sculptures together made up *The Language with the Park Place Drawings* (1970-90), 6½ feet high and 45 feet long including nine 20-by-20-inch sculptures mounted 2 inches from the wall above the drawing racks. For Myers, the point of the work is not the rigorous geometry or the narrative arc of the history of its making or even the nostalgia of the title, but how the sculptural elements look. Two related wall sculptures titled *From the Large Language Series* (1976), 6 feet on a side, were bent out of thinner steel and assembled like the other works in the



Four Corners, 1969-70, steel, stainless steel, brass, cast concrete, 12 by 12 by 12 feet; at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, N.Y.

"Language" system. Myers is now fabricating "language"-based works in colored stainless steel.

On rare public exhibition, Myers's legendary *One Wheel Motorcycle* (1975), also known as the *Unocycle*, was commissioned for the comedic documentary *Gizmo*, a collection of newsreel footage celebrating the inventiveness of the American mind, produced by François de Menil and Howard Smith in the late 1970s. Myers's one-wheeled *Unocycle* is a 90cc Honda motorcycle modified to drive within two specially fabricated aluminum channels, each 69 inches in diameter. The outer channel consists of a tire. The inner channel holds the seated rider, the motor and the steering wheel in place. As the rider accelerates, the outer channel revolves, moving the motorcycle forward within the channel while the rider remains upright. Myers also participated in *The Moon Museum* (1969), a collection of miniaturized, tantalum-plated drawings on a ceramic wafer half the size of a postage stamp. The project included contributions from Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, David Novros and John Chamberlain. The wafer was fixed to the landing module of Apollo 12, and remains on the surface of the moon to this day.

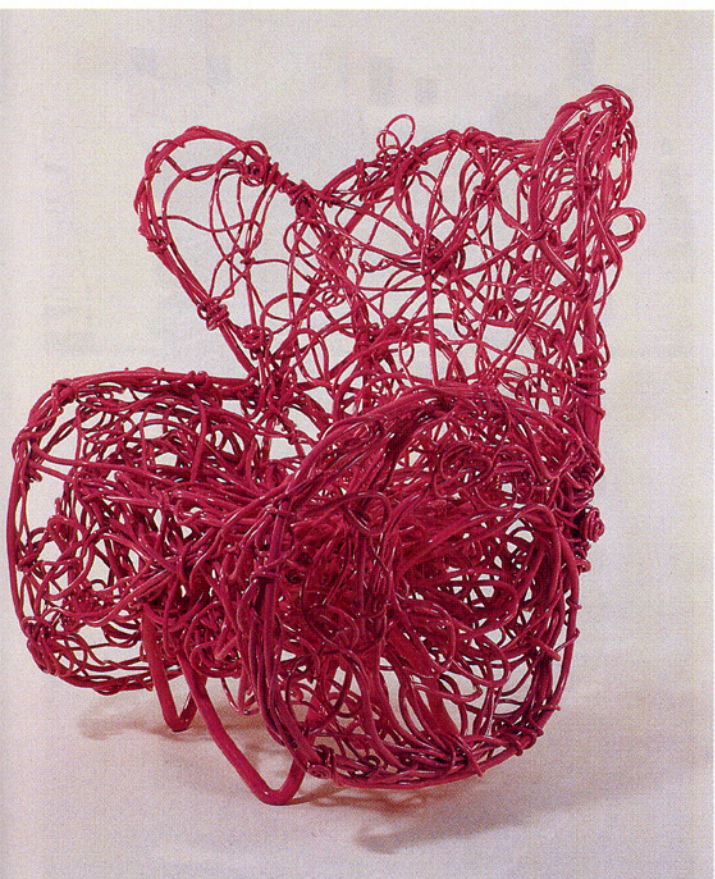
Myers is also the author of temporal "Searchlight Sculptures," nighttime installations of carbon-arc searchlights that were sited at the four corners of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village in 1966, in Union Square in 1969, in a park in Fort Worth in 1979, and elsewhere. The beams tent upward to join at an apex in the manner of a vast pyramid. In 1966, using laser equipment made available by a trade sales representative, Myers projected a red laser beam from his studio on Park Avenue South to the outside of Max's Kansas City several blocks away, where a mirror redirected the beam the length of the restaurant so that it completed its trajectory through the smoky din of the art-world watering hole, concluding at the far wall of Max's storied back room.

Opposite, King and Queen Chairs, 1986-2006, $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch rusted plate steel, 42 inches high and 8½ feet high.

Right, Unocycle, 1975, one-wheel motorcycle, 69 inches in diameter; with the artist seated.

Below, War of the Worlds Table, 1989, steel and stainless steel, 30 by 32 by 120 inches.

Bottom, The Pink Chair, 1994, powder-coated aluminum wire, 39 by 29 by 29 inches.



From 1968 to 1970, Myers collaborated with his E.A.T. colleagues on a celebrated state-of-the-arts interdisciplinary project for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan, in which more than 60 distinguished American and Japanese artists, engineers, scientists and architects constructed a high-tech domed light-and-sound environment for the Pepsi Pavilion. Myers placed high-intensity xenon lights atop each of four black towers of different heights configured as a square at the corner of the pavilion plaza, 130 feet apart. The pencil-thin beams of light were directed to each adjacent tower, framing the pavilion in a tilted square of light.

Long associated with light, Myers showed only one light sculpture in the Newburgh exhibition, the hilariously referential *Sperm Lamp* (1979) in painted steel and anodized aluminum with electric light. It plays on Achille and Pier Castiglioni's Arco floor lamp, the curve of its arc thrust up from an abstracted phallus and culminating in a globe. Myers continues to be interested in light sculpture; he is working on a diptych of flat, upright LED screens programmed to run through the spectrum from one screen to the other, slowly changing color in barely perceptible ways to achieve its complement, a project he's pursued since his early experiments with light boxes in the 1970s.

By the early 1970s, Myers had begun to work with a hydraulic pipe bender, folding steel and stainless-steel pipe in lengths up to 21 feet and in diameters up to 4½ inches, creating forms scaled up from wire drawings. Included here was the steel and stainless-steel *War of the Worlds Table* (1989), in which a corkscrew base supports a steel tabletop on its upper curves. The exhibition surveyed a number of Myers's furniture sculptures, which are made without welding. His formidable *King and Queen Chairs* (1986-2006) are torch-cut and bent $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch rusted steel plate. The 42-inch-tall "king" chair is the lower of the two, a central bent

For Miles, named for Miles Davis (a favorite of Myers, a musician himself), is a 55-gallon stainless-steel drum that actually functions as a horn.

flap of steel making a seat against the broad expanse. The back of the "queen" chair is 8½ feet tall and quite narrow; the seat is formed by side flaps bent down. *Ashram with Peace Table and Chairs* (1996-2006) consists of a domed 12-foot-high shelter of Vietnam-era camouflage netting supported by steel tubing that arches over a pair of parlor-sized stools and a table, each cut in the form of a peace symbol and patinated by exposure.

Myers continues to produce colorful steel, aluminum and woven wire chairs traceable to his early wire portraits. Named for the pope's miter that it resembles at its apex, the elegantly funky *Pius* (1988) consists of black powder-coated steel wire woven onto an upright discarded bedspring. In the production of such works, Myers weaves several sizes of wire together until they achieve sufficient mass and then bangs them into shape with a hard wooden or rubber hammer, sometimes using a hydraulic press. The woven, brightly hued anodized aluminum sculptures *Medium Blue Cube* and *Medium Red Cube* (both 2006) are about 14 inches on a side. *The Pink Chair* (1994), in glowing, powder-coated woven aluminum, stands 39 inches high, a cartoon of a wing-back club chair that appears to have been dipped in hot-pink liquid lipstick. Hanging like a painting on a wall nearby, the black-painted *Saw Blade* (1995) reconfigures the round blade of a mill saw as a roughly 16-inch square of saw-tooth steel, an effect that brings to mind the wacky, pseudo-folk fabrications of H.C. Westermann. *The Big Cheese Chair* (1989), an intensely bright powder-coated yellow, is a single piece of bent aluminum riddled with holes cut by a milling machine.



Above, exhibition view, showing steel and stainless-steel models with photo of The Wall; at Yellow Bird Gallery.

Right top, For Miles, 1996, steel and stainless steel, 49 by 40 by 26 inches.

Right, Cartel (For George W. Bush), 1996, 55-gallon oil drums, 6 feet high. All gallery photos this article Angelika Rinnhoser.



Among other works of particular interest is *For Miles* (1996), in honor of Miles Davis, who, along with Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman, is much admired by Myers, a musician himself. It is a 55-gallon drum of polished stainless steel that functions as a horn. Its upper end pouches outward to simulate a trumpeter's air-filled cheeks, its circumference penetrated by a mouthpiece from a trumpet, the whole tilted on a base made of a rusted oil drum. In a configuration often employed by sculptors, *Cartel (For George W. Bush)*, 1996 but named later, consists of 17 layers of oil drums, ends removed, smashed flat and placed in alternating directions.

Myers remains the subject of much press for his long battle to restore *The Wall*, a 75-by-100-foot, 13-story grid of green-painted aluminum beams dotting a blue-painted square and projecting over the sidewalk from 42 existing support brackets [see "Front Page," Nov. '04]. Mounted on a windowless section of a north-facing wall of a building on the southwest corner of Houston Street and Broadway in New York City, *The Wall* was commissioned by City Walls, a public art organization that in 1977 merged with the Public Arts Council to become the Public Art Fund. A product of SoHo's former position as the art world's mecca, Myers's sculpture today pits the imperative of art against the demands of commerce. *The Wall* found favor with the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the City of New York. The only minimalist relief public sculpture in the city, it is presently removed for building repairs and was expected to be restored, ending a years-long battle with the building's owner. In May 2005, however, U.S. District Court judge Deborah A. Batts ruled against Myers and the Landmarks Commission, contending that *The Wall* is the property of City Walls, and the city must compensate the building owner if the artwork is to be restored. Although Myers and the Landmarks Commission lost the case, the landlord has agreed to restore the artwork if the city will agree to let him run advertising below *The Wall*. The artist, the art community and SoHo in particular anxiously await the outcome of these decisions. □

1. At the invitation of scientist and engineer Billy Klüver (1927-2004), in 1968 Myers became a member of the nonprofit E.A.T., established in 1966 by Klüver, engineer Fred Waldhauer and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman.

2. *Chinatown* is installed on Museum Tower's 2,600-square-foot Philip Johnson Terrace. The area was acquired by Museum Tower after agreeing to MOMA's use of its loading dock during the museum's expansion. The two elements of Myers's graceful, upward-tending sculpture were visually inspired by the Art Nouveau-style swirls of cigarette smoke for the poster of the film *Chinatown*. The pavilion overlooks the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden.

"Forrest Myers: Right Brain/Left Brain" was on view at Yellow Bird Gallery, Newburgh, N.Y. [Apr. 28-June 18]. Myers is currently working on a sculpture garden in Damascus, Pa., with his wife, Debra Myers, who is a landscape designer. He will show new work at Barry Friedman Gallery, New York in fall 2007.

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Chinatown, 1974, steel, stainless steel, brass pipe, 14 feet high; on Museum Tower's roof terrace, New York. Photo © Paul Warchol.