



A  
Mist Point  
Publication

Navigate with arrow keys. Use Esc button to exit.

[www.sculptorsam.com](http://www.sculptorsam.com)

# ***Birth of a Sculpture***

*Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Process*



fabricated cor-ten steel sculpture and text  
by  
Sam Spiczka





Each sculpture I create is the culmination of a complex process executed with great care and attention and demanding physical labor. To demonstrate this, I will use my sculpture entitled **Nexus**, though its name came late in the process. Occasionally I will insert images taken during the creation of other works as well if they help describe visually the steps taken to complete my work.

Ultimately, a sculpture is the physical result of intuition, thought, material, and technique converging at one point in space and time. As such, it is rather difficult to describe properly. I will do my best to remain concise, but I do think a good tangent is indispensable for conveying the full nature of such a fluid process.

For instance...

Behind my shop, a pair of flycatchers build a nest every year. Starting from scratch, they build up their structure with mud, twigs, and found scraps over a course of weeks. Slowly and deliberately. Each time I step out back, the attendant bird perches on a nearby wire or upturned pail, staring at me indignantly, bobbing its tail. I can only assume it quickly returns to its task the moment I leave.



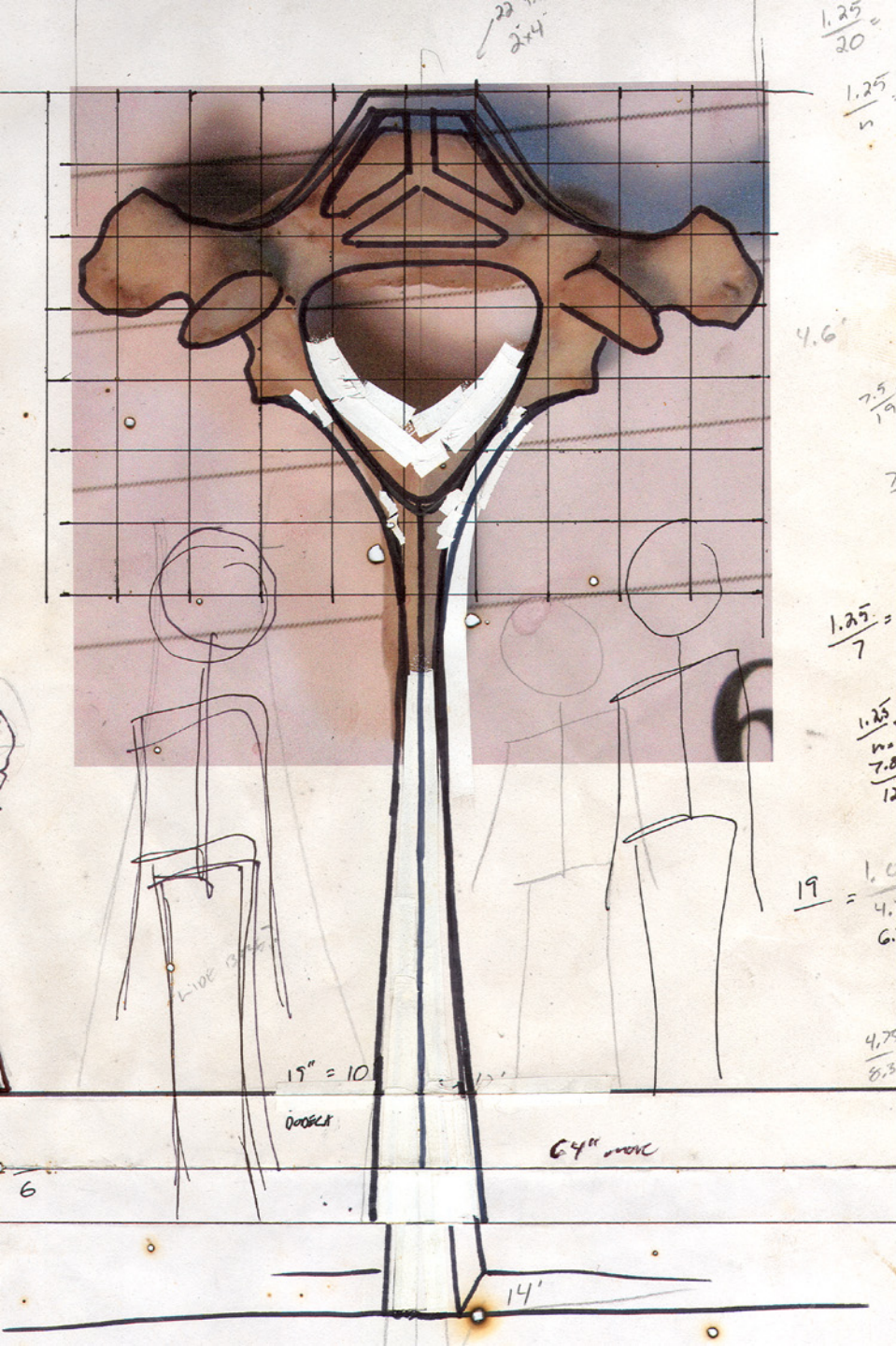
On the surface, the labor those birds are engaged in would seem utterly unconnected with my work inside the building. After all, I'm making Art, with a capitol A, while they're constructing a mud home for their future family of four. But I do not believe they are unrelated at all.

I find it interesting to wonder if a bird's nest, or a beaver's dam, is "natural" in the sense that we normally mean. "Of course they're natural," you might say. "They're found in nature." But is the human-constructed tract home I pass by on the way to work "natural"? After all, aren't we a part of nature as well? Isn't everything we make, from jet planes to motorcycles, in some sense "natural"? Is it possible that the bird's nest is as much a "sculpture for living" as my work is an instinctive expression of nature?

There is plenty of time for such reflection amidst the flow, frustration, and fatigue of making sculpture.



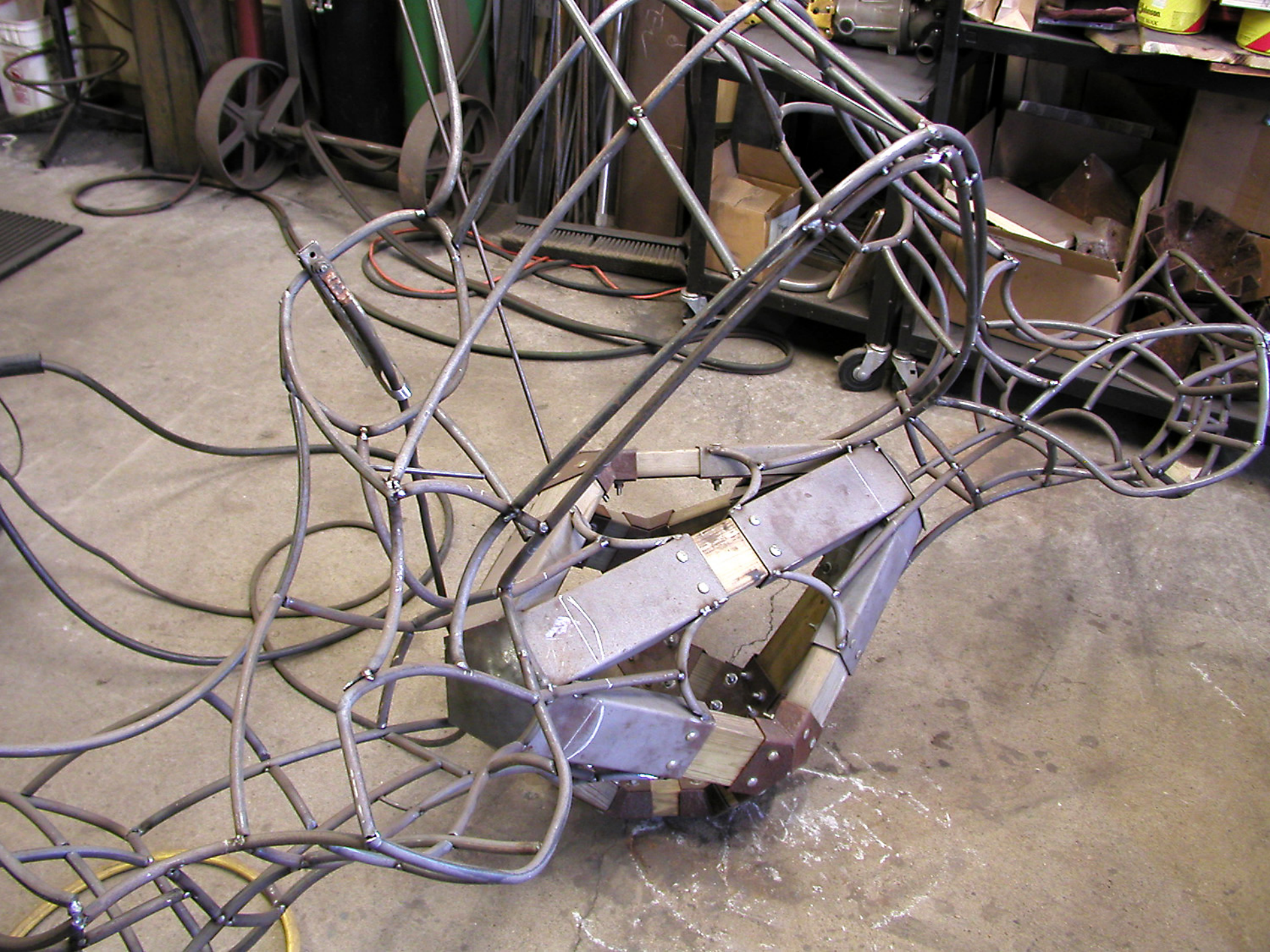




But first comes an idea. Most often I get mine from nature – whether by indirect inspiration or outright theft. When one strikes me, I jot it down on whatever's handy, ideally in my sketchbook; a hardcover, grid-lined chemistry lab book. Often, there are more written notations describing the idea or the fabrication process than graphic drawings. Over time, I accumulate a large number of ideas. Most of them are disappointingly mediocre, the rush of inspiration giving way to a harsh reality. But some of them are beautiful and disturbing, even inspired. Those are the ones that stand out, that I keep returning to.

Every now and then, when I'm feeling barren, I will page back through my sketchbooks like a miner panning for gold. Sifting through the rubble in search of an overlooked nugget. Occasionally, I even find one. In that case, I will readily steal from myself as well.







In order to discover if an idea will lead to a successful sculpture or not, I visualize it in my mind's eye. In the beginning, the edges of an idea are very fuzzy and indistinct. By visualizing it, as well as the processes for making it, I attempt to fill in those fuzzy, hope-filled edges with hard lines and firm steel. If the idea dissolves under reflection, it will be abandoned. If it matures into something with the feel of reality, I will begin construction. All during the fabrication process, this visualization with continue, down to ever-greater detail. For me, each day in the studio is like an athletic competition where I have completely prepared myself mentally and physically in advance. When it's game-time, I am alert and prepared to perform.

When I've decided on a work, I use the sketch to create a simple cartoon, a drawing of the sculpture in its full scale. These are very rudimentary line drawings meant to convey just a basic profile of the sculpture. The work of "fleshing out" the sculpture in three dimensions will be accomplished by merging the visualization with the physical manipulation of metal. The magic happens at this intersection of mind and material. Without the vision, the steel is inert. Without the steel, the vision is a castle in the sky.



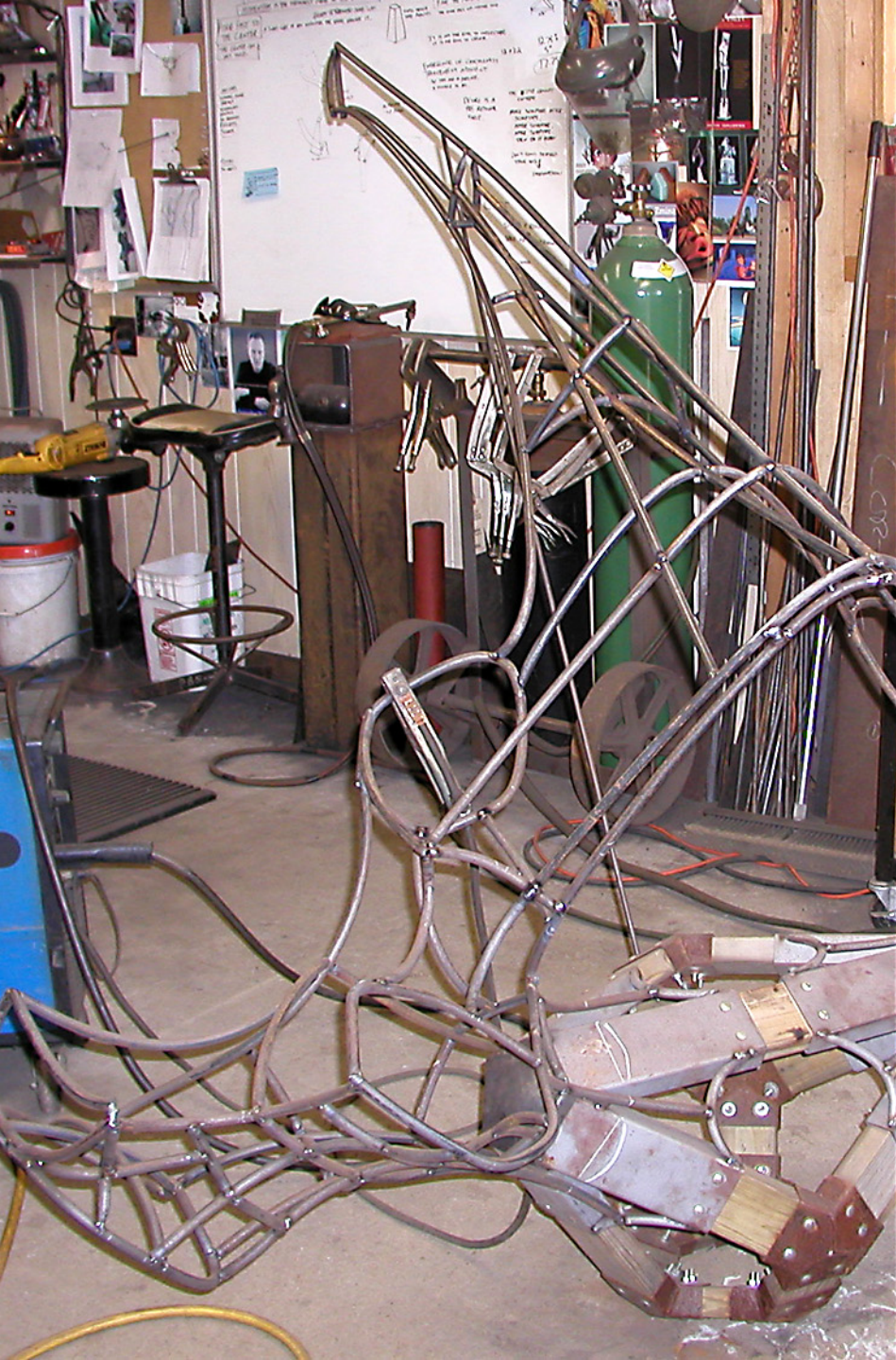




From the simple cartoon, I create a framework of half-inch thick solid steel rod. I bend it by hand and cut it with an oxy-acetylene torch. From the broad strokes of the outline, I slowly fill in the structure of the form. Though labor intensive and requiring a lot of concentration, it is actually a rather efficient and direct way for me to work. I think it must not be all that different from how a beaver builds a dam – one piece at a time, each piece in its place. You work according to the needs of the structure you are attending to, according to the blueprint in your imagination. It may sound strange, but it's actually possible to empathize with the form, to feel the proper movement of the composition. When I'm done, I have an incredibly strong and surprisingly lightweight structure. And when the beaver completes a dam, its structure is so stable that often the only way to get rid of one is to blow it up with dynamite.

But even with such forethought, a sculpture may become radically altered in the course of its fabrication. In the case of **Nexus**, my initial design actually had the sculpture turned upside-down from what it eventually became. I felt it was just too static; a change was needed. Sometimes, especially when you're deep into a project, it can take courage to make a needed change.







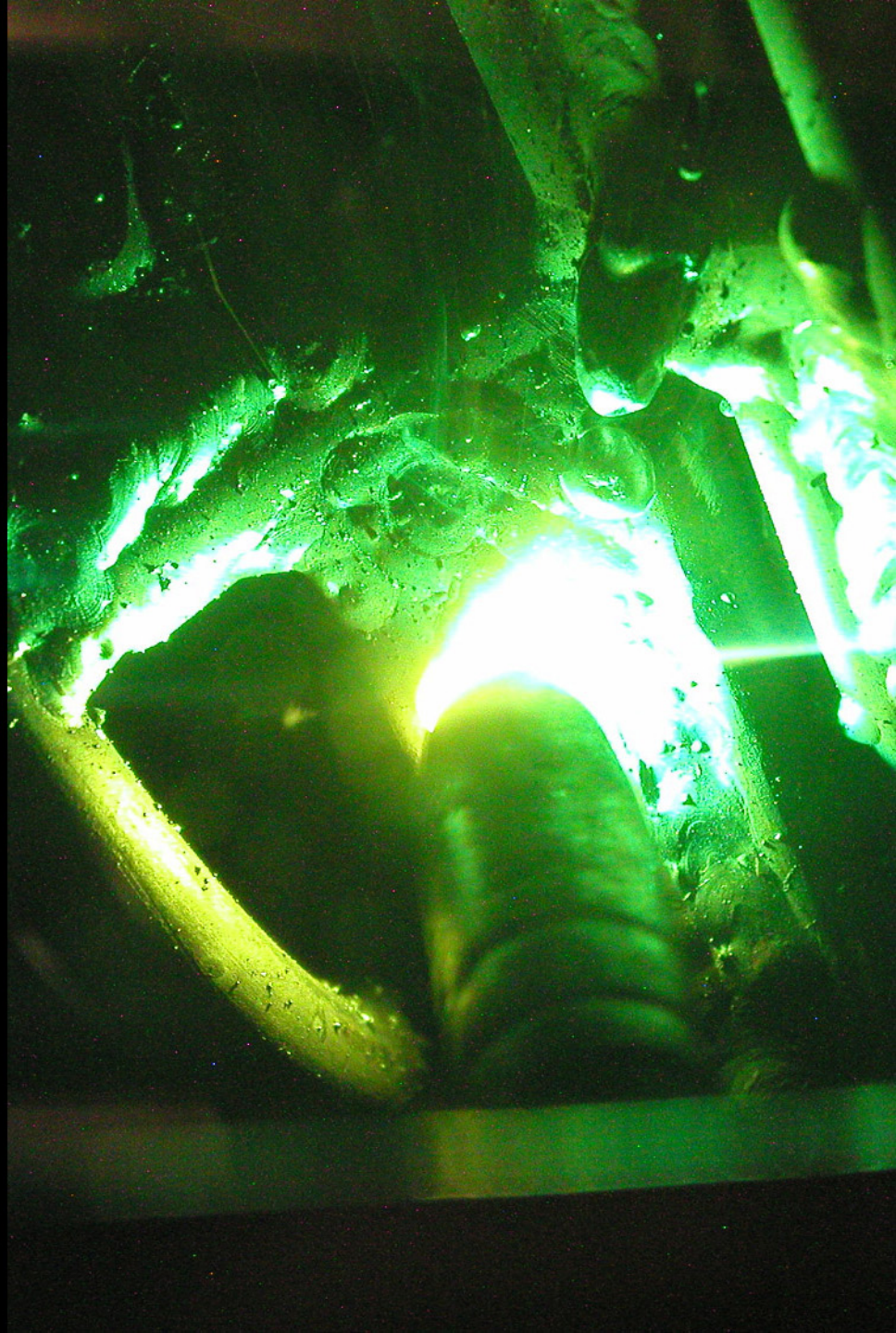




Once the rod form has been completed, I begin the labor-intensive process of covering it with steel sheeting. For each opening, I hand-cut a piece to fit perfectly with a tool called a Beverly shears – the same piece of equipment that old-time airplane manufacturers used to cut the complex, curved forms used to cover their structures. Each piece is then cold-hammered and bent into shape to match the greater curve that it is a piece of. I weld it into place and grind the welds down smooth to reveal a continuous, flowing form. What looks like a large, complex curved surface is actually made up of dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller pieces. Just as some of the most compelling formations in nature are the result of relatively simple processes compounded upon themselves.

I do not believe that in my work I am engaged in a fundamentally unique activity. I aspire to be like the oriole, weaving a nest of hair and string that would humble an engineer, or the spider, spinning a structure capable of snaring insects many times its own weight. My goal is to create objects that exist as perfectly natural creations, taking their place seamlessly within the landscape.

But does natural necessarily mean ordinary, uninteresting?











To come at the question from a slightly different direction, I wonder what it means to be original. Perhaps work that is original is not necessarily novel or bizarre. To be original, in my mind, is to be founded in the Origin, the fundamental force of nature. In that case, my sculpture could resemble another's work, or an aspect of nature, and still be original, so long as it has that integrity. Likewise, an artwork can be anomalous and even bizarre without carrying the strength of originality. It may merely be an affectation, a shallow ruse to gather attention, little more than a grunt or shriek.

Such grand pronouncements seem out of place when there are hours and hours, days and days of grinding to do. I wear down grinding wheels at an unnerving rate. I work my grinders until they burn out – starting on fire in an eruption of smoke and sparks.

I imagine what the vibrations must be doing to my body if they shape steel and destroy machines as they do. I've taken to exercising to strengthen my body for the abuse, but I know I'm simply delaying the inevitable. Old sculptors inevitably hobble.











A couple shop tips to protect yourself: It's a good idea to keep the floor clean and swept. I like a sure footing while I work. Gloves are essential to protect your hands and a fire-retardant jacket is preferred. More than once I've set myself on fire. (You will smell the fire before you feel it. It's best to stay alert.) A pipe fitter's hat is good to wear under your welding helmet. Steel-toed boots/shoes can be nice but not absolutely necessary. Try not to drop steel plate or heavy sculptures on your feet.

When I've finally completed fabrication of the sculpture, it looks mottled and uneven. Where the grinder has passed over the sculpture the metal is polished silver. Otherwise the bluish scale of the steel plate remains. To get an even finish, the sculpture must be sandblasted. After disassembling and removing the wood components (if needed), I take the parts to a local shop to be blasted. When I get them back, they are matte white – a clean palette for rust. I spray the sculpture with a simple solution of salt water to accelerate the rusting process. I'm not interested in working with corrosive chemicals or acids of any sort. Simple salt is enough to get the job done and doesn't cost that much either. It just takes a little more time and attention, two things I love giving to my work.











I use Cor-ten, weathering steel almost exclusively. It is a wonderful, industrial material most often used to make bridges and highway overpasses. Copper and nickel are added to mild steel to create a naturally weathering, abrasion resistant, and overall stronger material. As the metal rusts, the mild steel component flakes off, leaving behind the copper and nickel to create a resilient surface. I hate the plastic feel of paint. Besides, you can't fight rust; it will always find a way. So I chose to work with it instead. As a result, I end up with a natural finish that feels timeless, the inevitable patina of the artifact or fossil.

After rusting is underway, I reassemble the sculpture and display it outside for further aging. **Nexus** is out of my hands now. It is part of the world.

A successful sculpture requires more than wishing to make it so. The skills to form difficult materials into complex, compelling forms requires years of diligent study. Luckily, I had my father, who is an outstanding metal fabricator himself, to teach me from a very young age. But more importantly, from him I learned the discipline and craftsmanship required to coordinate the complex aspects of work and life into a coherent vision.

















Born and raised in rural Minnesota, Sam Spiczka became captivated by metal early on through the experience of working at his family's welding shop. Though he briefly studied art and philosophy at Gustavus Adolphus College, his true education has come from Nature, the example of past sculptors, and the craftsmanship of his father. His award winning sculptures have been exhibited nationally, including at DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, the Convergence International Art Festival and Franconia Sculpture Park.

To learn more, visit: [www.sculptorsam.com](http://www.sculptorsam.com)