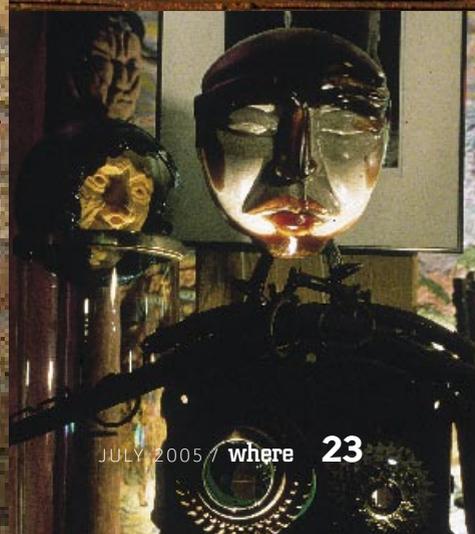
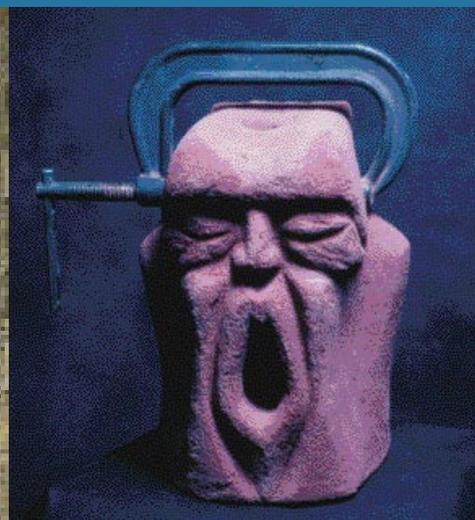


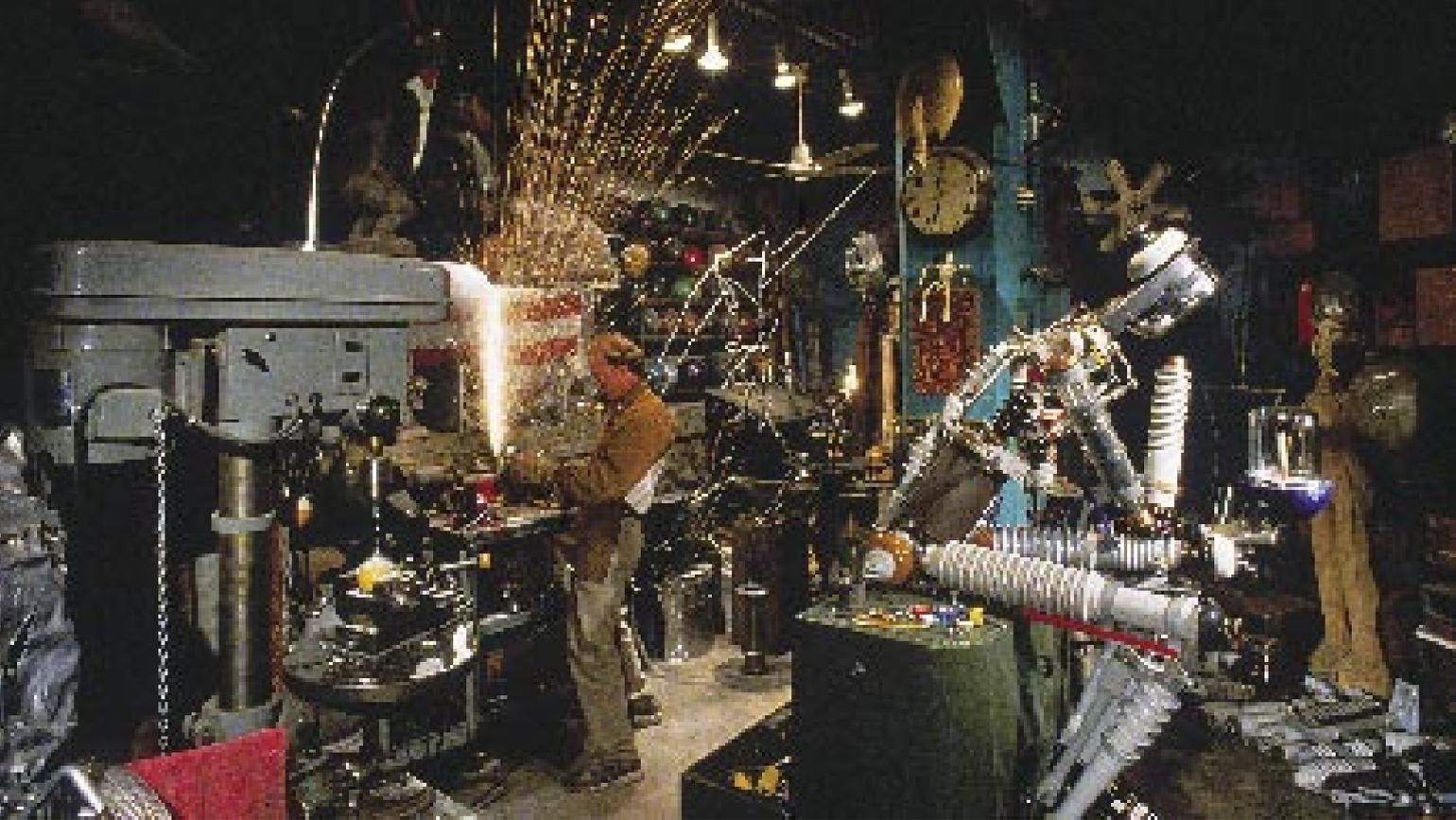
ODDBALL

By Eve Daniels

EMPIRE

STRIKING SCULPTURES
FOR ALL. THAT'S THE
SOUL OF THE HOUSE
OF BALLS.





ALLEN CHRISTIAN IS THE WORKINGMAN'S ALCHEMIST. He grinds and melts life into everyday instruments like Dr. Frankenstein with a sandblaster and a high-volt plasma cutter. From his second home in the Minneapolis Warehouse District, Christian builds gods, saints and unlikely heroes from the stuff of garage sales, swap meets and factory dumpsters. He etches a mother's warm face into a charred skillet. He crafts a shaman from spare electrical parts. He carves an ancient warrior from a retired bowling ball.

From the basement of The House of Balls, Allen Christian masters his daily grind, while "Transformation," his Science Museum of Minnesota commission, contemplates (above).

The sixth of nine siblings born and raised in North Minneapolis, Christian served a brief stint as a Seabee before attending the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. There he studied the basics of woodcarving and played with found materials but, after a year and a half, decided the fine arts department was too conceptual for his taste. "It didn't make sense to me to pay them so I could teach myself how to make things."

During art school, Christian began to pursue an electrician's license, and once he dropped out, spent the bulk of his days installing circuits and wires and his nights assembling sculptures. Within five years, his reputation as an artist afforded a move from his basement workstation to a storefront studio in the old Berman Buckskin factory. His one-room atelier at the corner of First Street and Hennepin Avenue offered a real-time view of the shifting Minneapolis skyline. He watched bulldozers level landmarks like the Nicollet Hotel, while the City Center, Wells Fargo Center and Opus buildings went up. As the urban landscape changed, so did Christian's creative process. "I didn't have anywhere to go privately," he says. "I felt like an animal in a cage in some ways." It was during these eight years of inescapable exposure that he began experiments to engage the public, setting up interactive window displays and elaborate voice recording systems.

He first noticed a bowling ball with a sculptor's eye in the early '90s. A prop shop had just leased the empty All American Bowl building in St. Paul and hired him to install their electrical systems. Before he wrapped up the contract job, Christian salvaged a few bowling balls from the debris, hoping to turn them into gifts. At that point, he had neither adopted a favorite material nor an official moniker for his art business. "I carved two balls and immediately, I just knew..." When the Federal Reserve Bank took over the Buckskin site in 1994, he moved into his current space in the Warehouse District, a split-level studio on the north end of a former railway repair station, and named it after his newfound medium of choice. Enter the House of Balls.

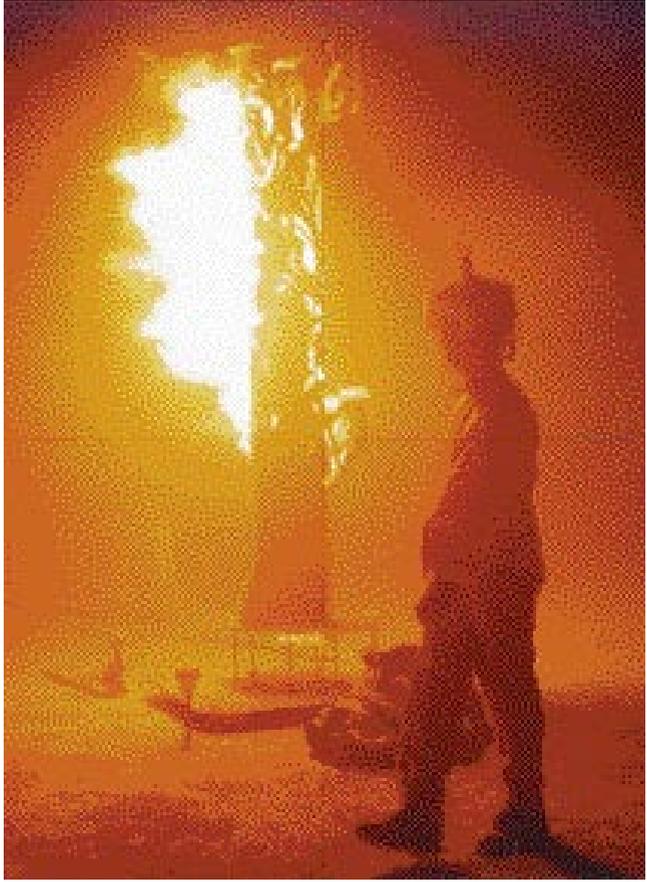
Some 5,000 years before Christ made the scene, the Egyptians rolled a primitive form of the bowling ball. German monks later introduced the game to the masses as a religious ritual. In 1611, Captain James Smith returned to Jamestown, Virginia, to find the colonists starving, but blissfully bowling. Over the past six decades, bowling has suffered financial scrapes, undue regulations and passé labels, but the game has made an international comeback in recent years. Today, more than 100 million people in 90-plus countries practice the game, making it one of the oldest, most popular pastimes on earth.

That's the beauty of this ordinary sphere, Christian explains. "Everyone knows what it is. It's a global phenomenon." Typically made of urethane, bowling balls include three layers: a shell, a core and a weight block. Christian begins by subtracting the resin, then slowly grinds the ball down to reveal a radiant human face or figure. Once he has finished a sculpture and has washed the dust away, it shimmers with naturally opaque colors. His last step is to sand and seal, yielding a high-gloss finish.

Since Christian's assemblages are primarily constructed from found objects—balls and pins, pots and pans, augers, holding tanks and steel eye beams—he believes that each item comes invested with its own handprint; call it his version of animism. This unique history is indelibly tied to what the finished sculpture will look and feel like. "From the woman who designed the ball, to the guy who worked the machine that made it, to the truck driver who hauled it, to the salesperson who sold it, to the person who rolled the ball down the alley—all of those energies are transferred into the object. What I'm trying to do is sort of tie it all together."

When asked why his sculptures had simplistic titles or no titles at all, the late British sculptor Henry Moore replied, "All art should have a certain mystery and should make demands on the spectator." Christian is of a similar mindset: He leaves his sculptures untitled or roughly titled until somebody buys them, allowing for unbiased interpretation. "People like to have a story to help them understand what a piece means," he says. "So I'm caught between giving them that story and letting them come up with their own."

With no tags posted on any of Christian's artwork, prices remain a mystery as well. "I don't want people to walk in and see a price tag on the wall before they embrace what they're seeing." Nevertheless, the 47-year-old homeowner, studio tenant and father of two girls—one on her way to college—has to pay the bills. Over the past two decades, he's sold thousands of sculptures to customers around the world, sealing the deal at \$50 to \$5,000 a pop.



Though they spent more time raising and supporting a family than producing fine art, Christian credits his mother and father, both of whom recently passed away, as creative influences. While he was living under their roof, his devout Catholic parents made him attend mass each Sunday. In all corners of his studio, Christian's art reflects spiritual themes: hands extended in welcome, arms outstretched in sacrifice.

From the outside in, the playful inhabits as much of his studio as the sacred. At the front window, he has rigged up an interactive feast for the senses. Approach the door and a motion detector sets off a strange medley of voices, young and old, sober and high; anyone who presses the lever and speaks into the mic leaves a permanent record for future playlists. Via pushbuttons, casual observers can control the sculptures inside, making bulbous heads spin, rusty arms swing and faces light up. Through the glass it's clear that this artist draws on both sides of the brain; such complex circuitry might blow a major fuse without some technical savvy.

Christian urges everyone to enter his studio with a child's perspective. In other words, don't try to hard to get it. "I've never liked abstraction and things I can't connect with." More than self-expression or recognition or making ends meet, he wants to create something accessible that helps the public see everyday objects in a different way. So, over the years, the House of Balls has come to mean more than just a game or a medium. "We all possess the creative impulse and owe ourselves the balls to express it." W



Christian's inferno (above); A random nook of his studio (left): Lost and found (right).

I N F O **House of Balls** / 212 Third Avenue N., Minneapolis, near The Monte Carlo Restaurant, 612-332-3992. Wander in when the open light is on (there are no official hours) or better yet, call ahead to schedule your visit.