

## Art

Curator James Surls cites his wife, artist Charmaine Locke, and their seven daughters as inspiration for the exhibition *Finding Balance*. He stands in the shadow of his wife's bronze sculpture *Open Book*, symbolic of feminine gifts.

SHARON STEINMANN: CHRONICLE



Oct. 13, 2006, 4:54PM

### Surls curates an exhibition that questions patriarchal power

By EILEEN MCCLELLAND

Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

If artist James Surls were not the father of daughters - seven daughters, in fact - the exhibition *Finding Balance: Reconciling the Masculine/Feminine in Contemporary Art and Culture* might not have occurred to him.

"In seeing how my daughters have been dealt with and expanding it to a worldview, it's scary," Surls, 63, says.

Curating the show for the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Surls says he aimed to spark discussion about the balance of power between the sexes, which leans heavily toward the patriarchal, even in the U.S., even after decades of progress. It's a tall order, he admits: "How do you put that into an art exhibit?" He reinforces the point in the companion book (*Finding Balance*, University of Texas Press, 101 pp.), which includes an essay by Leonard Shlain, author of best-seller *Sex, Time and Power: How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution*.

"The theme was more personal to me than to the other artists," Surls said. "I went for the best artists. I didn't go always for the artists who fit snug in the concept. Some of the work was melded to the theme."

Surls, a Texas native best known for his wood and steel sculptures, moved from Splendora to Carbondale, Colo., in 1998. Eleven artists from the Aspen, Colo., area are represented in the show, including Surls, who chose to showcase artists from his region as well as his wife, Charmaine Locke.

Locke's large bronze sculpture *Open Book* is both an image of the feminine and a call for peace. Surls' *From the Heart*, 1987, is a self-portrait — a mahogany, oak and steel sculpture representing his interest in the female as life source.

Each work represents a hands-on process involving the artist's hand and eye — even when digital images are incorporated. In his selections, Surls also set out to blur the boundary between art and craft.

"I really love curating," Surls said. "It's using art as your palette."

The artists said they were impressed by the visual harmony of the whole. Each has a story related to his or her piece of the palette. Here are a few:

- Pamela Joseph created *The Hundred Headless Women*, a tribute to Max Ernst's 1929 collage novel of the same name. Joseph created an installation wall of wood-burned kitchen cutting boards as part of a larger project, *The Sideshow of the Absurd*. The cutting boards came from family, friends, flea markets and garage sales. Some were simply carved from plywood. From a distance they look innocuous — domestic and folksy — but vivid images of horror and humiliation spring forth on closer inspection. Each of the women depicted on the boards' surfaces is marginalized, tortured or killed.
- Robert Brinker was studying in Italy when he began collecting art posters of old masters William Bouguereau and Duccio di Buoninsegna. He cut hieroglyphic patterns in the angels and biblical figures, then superimposed nude photos from adult magazines on them, creating a paradox among the layers. Brinker said the work reminds him of the contrasts of Rome: graffiti among architectural marvels and ancient piazzas.
- Brian Reid, a furniture maker, created *Hourglass*, a canopied bed, specifically for the show at Surls' request. Surls envisioned a bed as a centerpiece, representing a location where men and women ideally can and should be equal. Reid approached the project as an opportunity to consider the meaning of men's and women's work. First, he found a Depression-era quilt crafted from about 6,000 triangular scraps. Then he simulated the pattern in marquetry, with tiny hand-cut triangles of wood assembled to form the bed's wide platform. Though the process was tedious — it took 1,000 hours over six months — he found the work meditative as

#### RESOURCES

#### ***Finding Balance: Reconciling the Masculine/Feminine in Contemporary Art and Culture***

**Artists:** Jim Baker, Robert Brinker, Monica Chau, Linda Girvin, Jody Guralnick, Pamela Joseph, Charmaine Locke, Brad Miller, Brian Reid, Barbara Sorensen and James Surls

**Where:** Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, 4848 Main; [www.crafthouston.org](http://www.crafthouston.org)

**When:** Through Jan. 14

well. "It's all about me trying to step into that realm of what is known as women's work," he said.

•Monica Chau, a second-generation Chinese-American, learned while researching her genealogy that in ancient China her female ancestors were not mentioned by name — designated merely as "wife of second son," for example. Chau created *I Ching, Forest of Steles* by transferring 1,000-year-old lettering representing her family tree onto fabric using silkscreen, a computer and a dye-sublimation printer. The effect is transparent, seamless and ephemeral, a wispy, curtainlike counterpoint to the original *I Ching* and to her ancient family tree, which both were carved into stone.

[eileen.mcclelland@chron.com](mailto:eileen.mcclelland@chron.com)



**ADVERTISING:** [Contests](#) | [Fraudulent Ads](#) | [Information & Rates](#) | [Place An Ad](#) | [Singles In Houston](#) | [Yellow Pages](#)

**CHRONICLE:** [Subscribe Now](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Buy Photos](#) | [Chronicle in Education](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Public Affairs](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)  **RSS**

**SERVICES:** [Copyright Notice & Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Registration](#) | [Report a Problem](#) | [Site Map](#) | [News Alerts](#) | [Newsletters](#)

