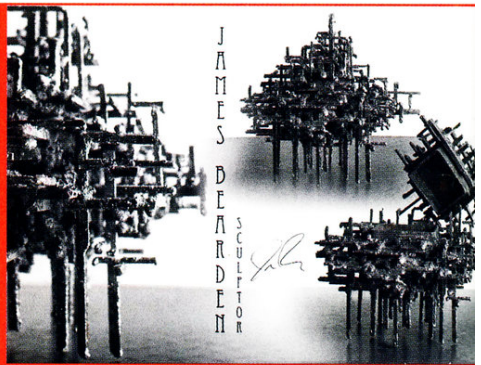


**The hardest-working**

American artist may well be James Bearden—with a blowtorch and a plasma cutter, no less. The Des Moines native was 42 when he began making brutalist steel sculptures. It wasn't until years later that he branched out into functional objects at the behest of the Rago Arts and Auction Center's David Rago and specialist Jad Attal, who saw in Bearden a potential successor to Paul Evans as modernist blacksmith. In a short period of time, Bearden has gone from a local curiosity to a recognized name in the design market.

I first encountered his

**bold and beautiful**  
Brutalism's resurgence is making a star of James Bearden



work at Rago in 2013 when I purchased a blackened-steel box of his. Instinct drew me to its abstract composition, rough-hewn texture, and architectural bearing. This led to intensive collecting, a friendship with the artist, and now an exhibition that runs until February 28 at the New York Design Center's 1stdibs gallery.

"James Bearden: Life in Steel" features almost 50 works ranging from sculptures to cabinets, tables, boxes, and lamps. Represented are *Star Trek* shapes, lunar-crater landscapes, sea-urchin spikes, fused puddles,

**Clockwise from bottom:** The sculptor in his Des Moines studio. Segment With Blue in blackened steel, fused bronze, copper, enamel, and wengè. A promotional card featuring a steel Dwelling Box seen from different angles.

**Opposite, clockwise from top:** A vignette dominated by Barnacle Shelf With Cleat in blackened steel and fused bronze. The 89-inch-tall Segment in blackened steel, fused bronze, and copper, standing between Pod Box in patinated steel and fused bronze and Colony in blackened steel and enamel. Barnacle Box in patinated steel, fused bronze, and enamel and Orbital Harry Box in patinated and blackened steel flanking a blackened-steel maquette for Shared Treasure.



and barnaclelike encrustations—all more highly collaged and randomly textured and glazed than Evans, more *out there*. About half the pieces were made expressly for the show; the other half are drawn from my gallery, Weinberg Modern.

A Bunyanesque figure in T-shirt, dark jeans, and work boots, Bearden wields steel with a nonchalance befitting a large man. He even has a big dog. He's furthermore an inveterate collector of mid-century design, with a sweet tooth for abstraction, and lists among his influences Pablo Picasso, Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore, and Louise Nevelson. Brutalism suits Bearden, providing an ideal idiom for his artistic leanings and ambitions, allowing him to embrace imperfection and

randomness, limn abstract form and pop-culture references, and indulge a proclivity toward wildness at scales that run the gamut from tiny to monumental.

His earliest boxes, derived from his hollow sculptures, made a virtue of necessity: The highly textured surfaces camouflaged the rudimentary welding technique. For today's sophisticated additive pieces, he logs long hours in his studio, often finishing elaborate projects in one session simply because he can, having achieved an extraordinary level of efficiency

at heating, cutting, extruding, hammering, collaging, and welding steel and fusing it with bronze or enamel for color and texture. With a craftsman's dedication and an artist's zeal, he works literally in the heat of the moment, in a creative rush, then coolly regards, edits, and, if needed, discards. Never completely satisfied, he works exuberantly through a series while continually experimenting with forms and techniques.

It may be tempting to view him as an unpolished, blue-collar product of the red-state hinterland or an outsider artist from the steel industry, knocking on ▶



the door of the cosmopolitan art world. Such a narrative might make an interesting allegory for our populist times, but it misses the mark. He has undergraduate degrees in visual communications and fine arts as well as a voracious appetite for viewing and reading about painting and sculpture. Before quitting his day job as an advertising agency's art director, he won Addy Awards, 52 of them.

Early on, he emulated the masters he admired. Since then, he has been developing his own visual language. To the extent that it is crude, it is intentionally so. And his more polished works feature swooping biomorphic curves that are brutalist in finish only (acid-etched). Both those pieces and the gracefully intertwined, asymmetrically abstract figures that channel the sculptures of Moore have impressed a highly savvy design audience.

Bearden has been evolving and maturing as

an artist—with the help of his muse and manager, Stephanie O'Neal. Witness his flower sculptures, which began as brightly colored, cartoonish eye candy. Whereas in the recent *Sunflower*, organically stylized and subtly colored, the flower is certainly *present* but first strikes the viewer as a complex sculpture. Or consider his small bronze boxes, three-dimensional objects composed of each side's abstract-expressionist composition in two dimensions.

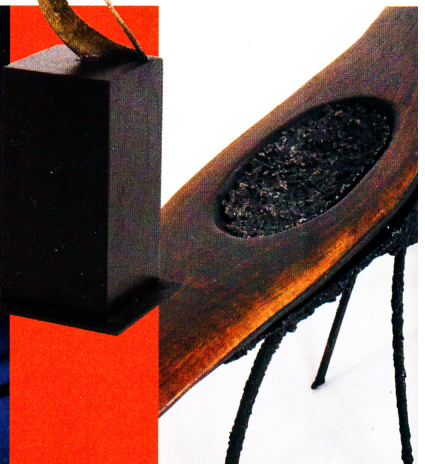
That brings us back to "Life in Steel," which has elicited some of his best efforts. Included in the show are several idiosyncratic new forms, the first examples of potential new series.

The most exciting work, though the hardest to duplicate, is the one-off *Ant Bench*, a free-form piece of wood resting on a blackened-steel legs to convey the overall aspect of an ant—think Architectural Pottery meets Middle Earth. My personal favorite, *Moon Box*, is among a selection of heavily en-

crusted objects with topographical or biological references to sea, land, or space. All evince a burgeoning mastery of form and technique.

With Rago continuing to auction his work and prestigious New York, Wisconsin, and San Francisco galleries representing it, he is poised to ride the wave of interest in hand-wrought brutalism that has seen Paul Evans reach six figures. From here, for Bearden, the moon is the limit.

—Larry Weinberg



**Clockwise from top:** Leap in steel, fused bronze, and enamel. Ant Bench, incorporating a slab of walnut found by Rago Arts and Auction Center specialist Jad Attal. Serpentine Cabinet in steel, fused bronze, and stained sapele and birch. Moon Box in blackened, patinated steel and fused bronze. Sunflower in patinated steel and fused bronze with Allium in patinated steel and enamel.

PAUL GOBRYN