

John Martini: 16 Tons

On View at The Studios of Key West

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There's a quickness to John Martini's rough-hewn figures, a decisiveness that would seem impulsive were it not belied by the materials he works with – large steel plates, a quarter- to five-eighths-inch thick, often given their first coats of paint months before he sparks a cutting torch.

“The formidable sobriety and endurance of the material ... makes an interesting conjunction with the figures,” Annie Dillard wrote. “There's also an interesting friction between nature and culture.”

In recent years his work has grown more layered and physically complex, with multiple plates and replicated shapes, the pieces assembled and bolted together in ways that require more than a modicum of precision, forethought, and block-and-tackle work.

Still, that sense of spontaneity remains.

Martini moved to Key West in 1976, with little formal art training. After college he'd worked as a community organizer for Vista in St. Louis, making jewelry on the side. He moved to Atlanta when he realized “the revolution wasn't going to work out as planned.”

In Atlanta he did “this and that” until he was awarded an art in public places commission, then realized he needed to learn to weld to execute the piece he'd proposed. He enrolled in an auto body repair class, dropping out once he'd learned the fundamentals of using a welder. The piece still stands in Fulton County.

Like many in Key West, an incident with frozen pipes, and the notion that it didn't have to be that way, inspired him to move south.

Key West in the mid-1970s was a place like no other, a town between eras. The navy had largely pulled out. The hippies and the gay community had moved

in. Drug smuggling was a common occupation. No one had figured out there was money in renovating houses yet.

Martini rented studio space in a recently abandoned navy base warehouse at Truman Annex for \$60 a month. He made jewelry, and continued to make sculptures from pipes and I-beams scavenged around the property.

“I was always working with metal. I always had this dream. As I kid I used to play blacksmith, believe it or not,” he said.

Like most artists, Martini had several parallel careers, including the obligatory stints as waiter and taxi driver. He is one of America’s few working sculptors who is also a graduate of shrimp boat deckhand school. (His career in the crustacean trade lasted one ten-day expedition.)

He opened Lucky Street Gallery on Margaret Street in 1982.

In 1984 he bought the iconic (now) blue building on Emma Street where he works. The structure was constructed originally as the Lincoln Theater for the surrounding African American neighborhood during segregation, but was later a church, a flophouse, and a rumored brothel before languishing empty for a time. The floor is still sloped the way it was when it was built as a theater.

Martini says his style was heavily influenced by Haitian and other Caribbean artists he was seeing in South Florida, and by the three or four road trips a year he would make to seek out the work of Southern outsider artists.

His earliest sculptures were abstracts. When he began more figurative work, he tended towards the angular and linear, with curved lines an anomaly. Over time, his style relaxed, developing a neo-primitive fluidity that is definitively his own.

Initially he sketched directly onto the steel before he began cutting, aiming to draw in a Jungian sense, without making conscious decisions. Through that he developed a personal iconography of human shapes, animal shapes, structures, machines, and a myriad of both hybrid and relational combinations thereof.

As Shamim M. Momin, adjunct curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, noted, “The artist prefers not to distort the relationship between work and the

viewer with an explanation, relying instead on the work itself to say what needs to be said.”

There is underlying tension in the work, a worldly disquiet. Creatures with seemingly articulated spikes, tongues, tails, ears, and wheels are deployed in a meta-evolutionary manner. Arms reach towards the unknown, teeth are gnashed, and airplanes are tethered to the ground. He seems to have an uneasy relationship with birds.

“His creatures are not poised to enter our common, three dimensional world, they inhabit another time, or timelessness, which time slyly is; they inhabit another dimension of becoming, a very stasis of becoming. The work is all straightforward contradiction. His steel is lithe. His silhouettes have soul,” wrote Joy Williams.

Though he is no longer a principal, walk-in traffic at Lucky Street has led to Martini’s work being shown in galleries in Paris, New York, California, Palm Beach, and other places.

A visit to the gallery by the sculptor J. Seward Johnson brought about the commission of “Head2Head” — two 35-foot steel heads that were fabricated at Johnson Atelier and installed along the route to Grounds For Sculpture near Princeton, NJ. (The museum and sculpture park holds approximately ten other Martini pieces in its collection.) That first visit also led to a long-term friendship between the men.

In the early 1990s Martini and his partner, the photographer Carol Munder, began spending part of the year in rural France. While Munder spent time capturing images of Etruscan figurines and the sculpture of other lost cultures, Martini sketched. He noted it was his first classical arts education, allowing him to absorb works by the Assyrians, Romans, Greeks, the French Romantics, and prehistoric artists. It also led him to works of Serge Poliakoff, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, and the non-school of art brut, the European analog to outsider art.

Martini said that his recent shift towards more constructed and layered sculptures is a way of expressing both volume and duality. But the preparation

and planning required led him to making monoprints as a way to stay connected with that sense of spontaneity and immediacy, allowing him to enter the studio “blank” and create work directly on the etching press.

While much has changed since he arrived in Key West, Martini said that the cross-pollination with writers and other artists that the island allows has been vital to his work.

“Key West has been a great place for me,” Martini said.

-Mark Hedden