

1-1-1987

Monuments to the Future: The Art of Ed Love

Robert Farris Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Robert Farris (1987) "Monuments to the Future: The Art of Ed Love," *New Directions*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol14/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Monuments To the Future: *The Art of Ed Love*

By Robert Farris Thompson

When we fly over Washington, and glimpse the Mall, we see the Capitol at one end and we see the monument for Washington at the other. One is Greco-Roman in inspiration, the other, an obelisk, is Egyptian. At the core of our nation, therefore, we are reminded that the Mediterranean is half an African sea.

Washington is filled with women and men who are descendants of civilizations which flourished to the south of Egypt.

All the more appropriate, then, that at Howard University we find the largest predominantly Black comprehensive art school in the United States. When we draw near to this school, and look about, we find it flanked by buildings named in honor of Frederick Douglass and Alain Locke. The Howard College of Fine Arts is bracketed by the names of men who devoted their lives to the regaining of the Black voice (Douglass) and the regaining of the Black philosophic vision (Locke). And when we enter the school we find, immediately to the right, that the department is possessed of a gift no other art history department that I know of has, namely its own permanent exhibition of African classical art. These images render clear, in their presentation, who African-Americans are, where they are coming from.

I would argue that some of the richest minds in American art are on this faculty, united in teaching and making objects in

which the civilizing strengths of nations disclose themselves. Of these great teacher-artists I am privileged to study and consider one, Ed Love.

Ed Love is a man who makes art in welded metal. Possessed of a warrior's passion for fire and steel, he works in a studio in northwest Washington in a world of sparks, smoke, and excitement.

There is something quintessentially manly and brave and aggressive in the art of working metal. In Nigeria I met a blacksmith whose praise-name (*oriki*) was: like an elephant, breathing with confidence. Among the Bamana of Mali, smiths are regarded as *nyama-tigi*, men with a literal handle on ultimate powers.

The ancestors speak in the broad strong hands of Love. He could no more hold back condemnation of oppression and cruelty in his work than a hawk could be denied its flight. Before we examine his art, which gloriously corrects a lack perceived in modern sculpture by Herbert Reed — "There is no Goya or Grunewald among these sculptures in metal" — it is instructive to recall a few aspects of the warrior basis in blacksmithing in the Old World and the New.

It is often assumed that slave ships were inevitably scenes of passive agony. Not always, as we know from the story of Cinque and the *Amistad*. Nor in the case of Dutch and Portuguese slavers who were unwise enough to include blacksmiths (or men who were familiar with the rudiments of the trade) as captives in their holds. William Bosman, in 1704, described what happened among captives from the hinterlands of the kingdom of Dahomey:

chiefly by the carelessness of the Master, who having fished up the Anchor of a departed English ship, and laid it in the Hold where the Male Slaves were lodged; who, unknown to any of the Ships Crew, possessed themselves of a hammer; and which, in a short time, they broke all their fetters in pieces upon the Anchor; after this they came

above Deck and fell upon our Men . . . [tragically, the men were recaptured] The Portuguese have been unlucky in this Particular than we; for in four Years time they lost four Ships in this manner.

The captives, with culturally sharpened eyes, instantly recognized the anchor as a perfect improvised anvil, and fell to their work, and liberated themselves.

Haiti provides a powerful example of African metallurgical know-how at the time of the wars of independence against the armies of Napoleon. In December 1801 Napoleon dispatched a vast armada to seize the Mississippi, block the expansion of the United States, and put down the rebellion of the slaves in Haiti. The expedition failed. Haiti emerged victorious. One of the reasons was Afro-Haitian metallurgy.

By the tens of thousands [African-born smiths in Haiti] made ingeniously devised metal objects to be thrown on the roads, before the French cavalry troops — objects so shaped that, no matter how they fell, a single sharp point stood erect to cripple the enemy horses.

The two vignettes suggest how working with metal is a sacred trust, sometimes calling into being powers of liberation. Love dwells in these excitements. He has devoted his life to shaping in chrome and steel, once and for all, emblems of Black identity.

We can begin to distinguish, when Love's works are set out in time perspective, an early chrome period, massive and figural, and a later phase of linearity, increasingly characterized by polychrome constructions. We are led to an extraordinary translation, into metal and imagination, of one aspect of Davidic scripture, where the king says to the Lord, in *Psalms 23*, *thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*. Clearly Love has taken possession of all sorts of artistic and spiritual powers. He gives us more than forms; he gives us monuments to the future.



Monster 1, Osiris Totem (Big O Series)
July 1971, 6' tall

In 1969 Ed Love read the myth of Osiris. He was struck by the pathos of the legend. Osiris, cruelly dismembered by his enemy, Set, was found, lovingly put back together, and restored to life by his wife, the great enchantress, Isis. Love realized a metaphor in all this for the history of Black people in the Americas:⁴ "black men in the Middle Passage, brought from Africa, scattered everywhere in pieces; black women attempting to put them back together again."

So moved, he started work in 1971 on a piece called *Monster 1 (Osiris Totem)*. He avoided direct mimesis of the style of sculpture of the ancient Nile. Line and massing were original. But the medium, chrome, seemed rooted in Black vernacular traditions of seizing spirit in glitter.

In their towns and provinces the ancient Bakongo, and certain of their neighbors, believed that quartz, kaolin impasto, mirrors, iridescent insect wings, and other shining things specially captured spirit in seized light.

Black America extended and transformed this pattern of belief. Tinfoil was wrapped around glass jars and other vessels on graves from the Carolinas to New Orleans. A shining chrome hubcap decorated a North Carolina burial.⁵ In Washington, D.C., James Hampton built a messianic winged throne and entirely covered it with tinfoil.⁶ Nearby, in Baltimore, Charles Chisolm, working in 1976-85, virtually spiritualized a single motorcycle by adding to its structure 1,450 chrome-plated lights.⁷ Chrome-plated structures decorated banjos in Haiti⁸ plus the percussive arsenal of a spasm-band in Harlem⁹ and memorably marked for special consciousness an automobile embellished by a man named C. Brown in Houston.¹⁰

Guided by the Black vernacular, Love chose, then, to activate Osiris with the optical dazzle, the intense reflectivity of chrome automobile bumpers, trimmed and welded to make the form.

In so doing, he passed over what might be termed the 'romance of rough form,' such as characterizes certain of the automobile part compositions of the modern sculpture of John Chamberlain and César.¹¹ These men usually shaped parts with dents, scratches, and other damage left intact. Love's chrome, by contrast was pristine, a flawless mirror. Nor did he parade car bumpers in the Pop manner of, say, Jason Seley,¹² i.e. as ironic markers of commodification. On the contrary, he sought reverence, the symmetry of human form, and above all, spiritual inherency.

Commodified object in his strong hands became totemic. It became totemic in the sense of rediscovered possibilities of allegory and moral allusion.

Thus the horns which adorn the head of *Osiris Totem* (made from the curve of Pinto bumpers, underportions painted red for accent) allude to the regality of Osiris. The head, gleaming like the visor of a medieval knight (fashioned from the lavish underpinnings of a forward bumper on a Cadillac) render the richness of his aura. The missile-like penis restates, in a deliberate manner, the gnosis of return from death. Legs are bound together, like the mummy of Osiris. Projecting, receding, but always shining, these chiming masses suggest Osiris transmitting and receiving power.

Amused, as he pieced together a figure from found remnants, by the resonance of what he was doing with the famous tale by Mary Shelley, Love designated this work a *monster*.

It was double-entendre. On the streets of Black America the word was praise, as in 'John Coltrane, man, he was a *monster*',¹³ meaning that the famous innovator was armed with the power to mess creatively with mind, shaking things up, extending horizons.

Love kept a private notebook in which he cabalistically played with famous names in modern jazz. He compiled two lists of artists whose last names included, as a second letter, either O or A. From an excerpt:¹⁴ O — Monk, T.; Coltrane, J.; Coleman, O.; Dophy, E.; A — Parker, Charles; Davis, Miles; Taylor, Cecil; Sanders, Pharoah.

In the spirit of these cabalistic gatherings, Love later joined another *Osiris* with two other works (1972-1973) in a group called 'The Big O Series', honoring Osiris, Ornette Coleman, apostle of 'free jazz' and John Coltrane. Love also explored qualities discovered in *Osiris Totem* and refined them



Monster 2, Ornette Totem (Big O Series)
July 1972, 6'2" tall



Monster 3, Osiris Totem (Big O Series)
November 1972, 11' tall



Monster 6, Isis Totem (Big O Series)
April 1973, 11'6" tall

in the subsequent sculpture, *Ornette Totem*.

Ornette Coleman, the alto saxophonist, is a major figure in world creative music. Through his famous *Free Jazz* LP, he and his colleagues helped liberate modern Black music from cliché and convention. "Let's try," Coleman said in 1960, to "play the *music* [emphasis added] and not the background."¹⁵ Love, himself expert in the history of Black classical music, was moved by Coleman's contribution and determined to honor him.

He intuits the strengths of the musician in the eponymous sculpture. Love associated the creative departures of Coleman with Osiris' powers of rebirth and synthesis. Hence, like the god, he crowns the musician with metal horns, this time crafted from the front bumper-sides of a Jaguar. A dividing accent marks the middle of the facial panel. This stratagem somewhat recalls the amazing length of the nose of certain Ngi Society masks of the Fang civilization in Gabon. (Compare Love's *Mask for Skunder* [1972] made in honor of his famous Ethiopian colleague [Skunder Boghassian] in the art department at Howard — this work subtly attaches its formal structure to the Ngi manner of rendering the nose, spiritualizing the face with the flash of kaolin, effected in this case by chrome, and citing forest energies with raffia accoutrements).

Essentially panache, nose, membrum, limbs, *Ornette*, too, has become a monster. He bends at the waist, like an African dancer. His pelvic girdle is marked for emphasis (welded on bumper ends) and from this area emerges "a huge phallus, his weapon, his instrument."¹⁶ Black aesthetic 'badness'. *Ornette's* affinity with *Osiris* also signals a growing awareness of Black aesthetic presence in Ancient Egypt.

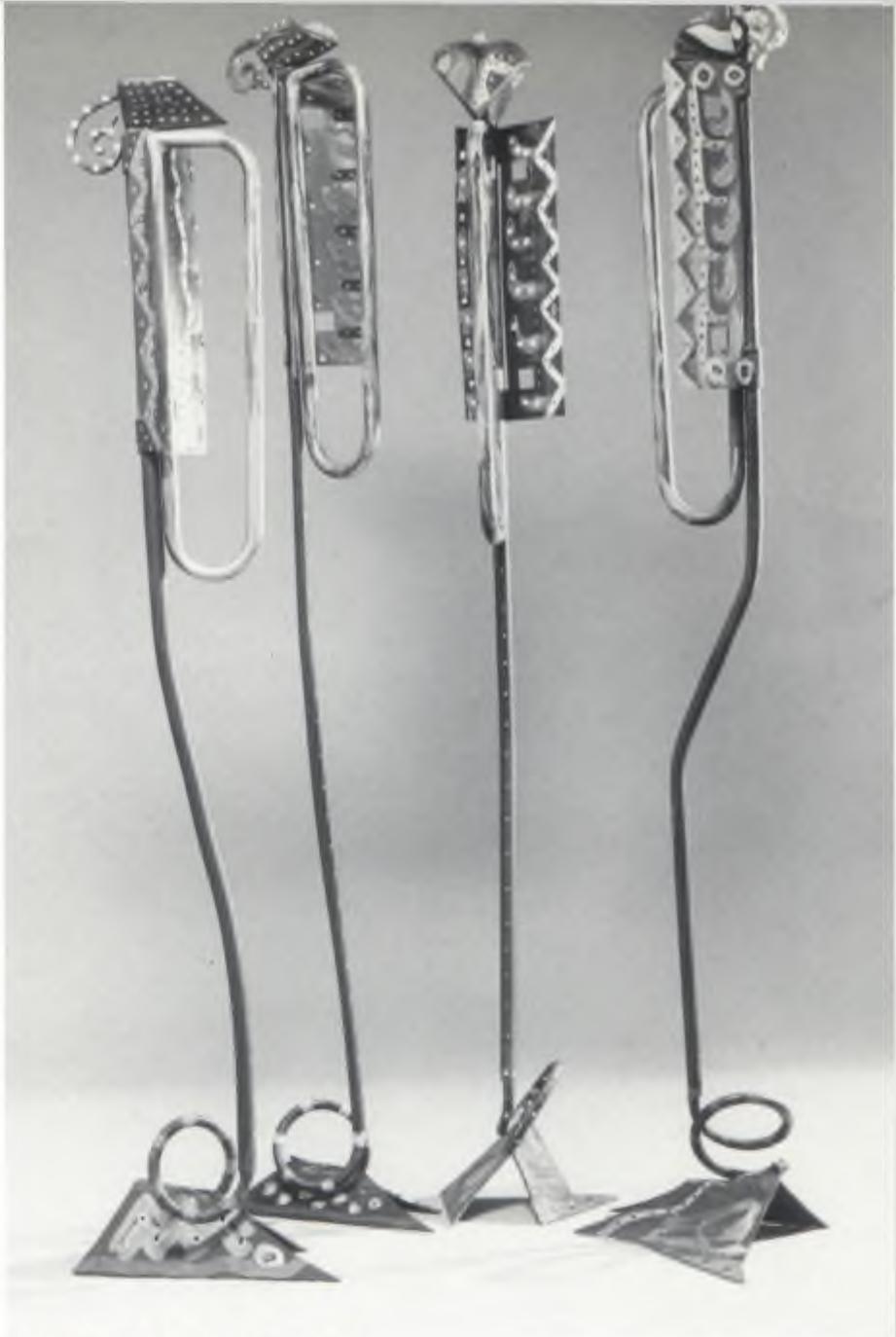
Love was not alone. Black America stirred in the early '70s with rediscovered excitement in the iconography of Black women and men in Ancient Egypt and the kingdoms of the Ancient Upper Nile. McCoy Tyner, the famous pianist who played with John Coltrane, recorded on February 9, 1970 a composition called *Message from the Nile*.¹⁷ In 1976 Jean Vercoutter published a full account of Black visual impact along one of the longest rivers on earth, from the beginnings of Egypt to the 25th dynasty.¹⁸ He included mention of the papyrus 'dancers' of



Mask for Skunder 1972, 2' tall.



Mask for Mingus February 1974, 4'4" tall



The Strutters February 1986, 5'10"-6'4"



The Diviners' Rod April 1985, 3'7"x1'2"x6'3"



ReMan September 1980, 8'4"



Ogun (Big O Series) April 1973, 2'10" tall



The Wallers 1984, 6'-7' tall

the gods' who delighted the courts of certain pharaohs.

New York Black nationalist artists of the late '60s, particularly those associated with the old Yoruba Temple, sometimes placed the sign of the *ankh*, ancient hieroglyph of eternal life, in the hands of images representing Yoruba gods, thus citing two civilizations in the cause of Black identity. Pyramids, for similar reasons, were painted on certain inner city walls.¹⁹ Perhaps the most elegant evocation of this intersection, Black Africa and Ancient Egypt, was evolved by a New York painter named Avel de Knight. In 1970 the latter artist painted a gouache on board called *Mirage Painting: Shields*. The work depicts a warrior from Black Africa, crouching in the midst of shields, near the edge of the Nile. Shimmering mirage lines emphasize the distance of two dreamily perceived pyramids. De Knight recalls:²⁰ "I realized that by placing the pyramid in the middle of the horizon that it became less a pyramid, more a *symbol*, a symbol of perfection."

Against the backdrop of Black Egyptianizing gestures, Ed Love's *Osiris* of November 1972 stands as a proud extension. The artist breaks free of earlier columnar statements. The figure is now free-standing, legs wide apart. As if he were collaborating with Isis in the reconstitution of her husband's body, he carefully fashioned this image, piece by affectively indented piece. First, he rendered the chest, a flawless seal of chromium. Next he made the flaring triangular crown out of the end-wraps of a front chrome bumper. This impressive structure rises like a silver thundercloud above the head of Osiris, oddly resembling the headgear worn by certain figures painted on the rocks of Tassili in northern Africa at Tin Aboteka perhaps some five thousand years ago.

There were technical challenges in the making of the face of Osiris. Love took the indented middle portion of a rear chrome bumper (where the license plate fits) and cut it in two and reversed the pieces, in welding, so that the ridge occurred in the middle. This formed an appropriately hawk-like nose. Volkswagen bumper-guards composed the abdominal muscles. A hint of ribcage was made out of shopping-cart piping. A hubcap formed the solar plexus. The ends of bumpers, "where the dynamic shapes are found,"²¹ complete the pelvic guard.

Unique to this composition is the way the artist brings together the intimation of full muscularity in the chest, dissection in the

abdominal section, and then a purely mechanical feeling in the legs, as if shifting from flesh to cartilage to bone. There is extremity, there is power, in this analytic language. Love started this work on his birthday, September 21, 1972 and worked six weeks, completing the sculpture in November. And when he finished the effect was well-nigh cathartic. He knew that it had helped him in his struggle to regain identity.

The work of Ed Love is an antidote to the over-simplification of African-American sculpture. His creative mind creolizes (combining ethnic strands on New World soil) Western welding by addressing his torch to African and Ancient Egyptian themes.

In addition, Ed Love enriches cultural wholeness discovered in the works of great musicians in classical North-American music, Coltrane, Dolphy, Coleman, by reference to all sorts of further cultural currents — a symbolic hoop from the Piscataway, a Native American group with whom he has occasional contact; the heroism of Japanese warriors, summarized in the topknots of the samurai which appear in *The Strutters* series; rephrasings of the Renaissance technique of *contraposto*, which in his hands rings as not only a learned appreciation of one of the vitalities of Donatello but as a pun upon one of the main operating organizing principles of the Black Atlantic world, off-beat phrasing of visual accents, the suspended accentuation patterning which has transformed as diverse manifestations as modern music (jazz syncopes) and even modern football, for the Black-mediated 'stagger step', from coast to coast, is in spiritual affinity with the sturdy and deliberately conflicted moves of his masterpiece, *ReMan*.

In the next century, when the musical richness of reggae as one of the premier sounds of this century finally is estimated, Ed Love will be shown to be the first sculptor to capture its excellence in forms of metal, paint, and wire. Whole excitements in late 20th century life and art have been captured forever by his remarkable forms. □

Robert Farris Thompson, Ph.D., is professor of African and Afro-American art history and Master of Timothy Dwight College at Yale University. The above was excerpted from an essay in the catalogue for the exhibition Soundings.

NOTES

1. Herbert Reed, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, reprint 1983 [1964] p. 257.
2. William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of The Coast of Guinea* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1967 [1704]) pp. 365-365a.
3. Harold Courlander, *The Drum and The Hoe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960) p. 123.
4. Interview with Ed Love, Washington, D.C., 28 May 1986.
5. See illustration at p. 42, Elizabeth A. Fenn, "Honoring The Ancestors: Kongo-American Graves in the American South", *Southern Exposure* 8 (September/October 1985) pp. 42-47.
6. See, for example, Elinor Lander Horwitz, *Contemporary American Folk Artists* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975) pp. 127-132. And Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1976).
7. Charles Chisolm, C.C. *Supercycle #1* (Baltimore: n.d.), a privately published note. Interview with Charles Chisolm, Baltimore, 25 June 1984.
8. Documented in Port-au-Prince by the present writer, spring 1978.
9. Photographed by Frank Leonardo in the early 1980's on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan. Artist: Jimmy Braswell, 'king of the washboard'.
10. Brown's famous car-sculpture, dated 1972, has been immortalized by a postcard, author's collection.
11. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984) pp. 222-223.
12. William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961) p. 47. Compare also p. 88: "Jason Seley uses nothing but bumpers, and as a counterforce to the elegance of his compositions, he emphasizes their previous function."
13. The late and great African-American poet, Larry Neal, when we taught together at Yale in the early seventies, used to share with me his fascination with this icon of popular Black speech.
14. I am grateful to Ed Love and his family for the privilege of studying and photographing preliminary drawings and other notations from his personal archives.
15. Liner annotations, *Free Jazz: A collective Improvisation* (Atlantic LP 1364), 1960.
16. Interview with Ed Love, 3 June 1986.
17. Liner annotations, *Extensions* (Blue Note LP BN-LA006-F), 1970.
18. Jean Vercoutter, et al, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Volume I (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976) pp. 33-88.
19. See also Gary A. Rickson's *Africa Is The Beginning*, an acrylic mural painted at Warren Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 1969.
20. Interview with Avel de Knight, New York City, 18 June 1986.
21. Interview with Ed Love, 8 June 1986.