

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

ARTISTS

Text: Jamie Sterns
by PPOW Gallery, NYC

Bill Smith's artwork calls up images of science experiments, outsider art, inventions from the future, and mystery machines from the past. He is an art insider, in that he has shown at art galleries and art fairs around the country, but he also is a part of the American tradition of inventor, creator and artisan producing work in relative isolation, without regard for accolades. He lives in a small town outside of St. Louis, Missouri, and has been creating sculptures about nature, science, and man's impact on both for over ten years. His densely packed workspace, a converted barn, functions as garage, laboratory and studio – a tinker's den for a reclusive scientist and artist.

Bill's uncommon educational background,

which includes biology, diesel mechanics and fine arts, enables him not only to envision how a sculpture should look, but also how to build it with readily available elements. He collects, recycles and gathers diverse materials such as inherited beads, animal skulls, seedpods, and steel wires, as well as technological artifacts like computer chips, motors, and electroluminescent film. He combines the materials in intricate patterns and forms that reflect nature and science. An example of this can be seen in "an epidemiological model of the perfect infectious disease (evolved growth system)" which expresses, in a three-dimensional sculpture, numerical data on the way diseases expand into their host populations. This particular

incarnation is eighty-five inches in diameter, but since Bill has developed a formula that mimics the process as observed in nature and captured in numbers, he can make the piece in a variety of dimensions without departing from the scientific pattern behind it. His thinking, and his work, is complex, specific, organic, and ever-evolving.

Today few artists, architects, and designers have

their appropriate function. Many were mere design elements. People are now beginning to look at nature again as not just an aesthetic playbook but as a scientific resource for efficient design and artistic expression."

He may be looking for a scientific parti for his work, and sometimes even for a useful outcome, but these do not relay the tactile, experiential aspect of



spent their formative years interacting with the natural world. For a variety of reasons, they aren't imprinted with nature's aesthetic. This is reflected in their products. Bill comments, "This phenomenon has paralleled man's isolation from nature, as he has subdued it. The furniture, machines, clothes and architecture of a hundred years ago looked as if they were designed by someone that had been influenced by organic forms, but they did not necessarily apply those forms to

Bill's work. His fine metal filaments often move at the slightest breeze generated by a passer-by. Luminescent surfaces are charged by ambient light and glow at the day's end, or when the light is switched off. Intricate constructions dangle from the ceiling and spin to create luscious and changing shadows on walls and floor. He speaks the language of science, but what he makes acts very much like art.

Bill Smith continues to make art in his studio/garage/laboratory, and exhibits in New York City at PPOW Gallery. See ppowgallery.com for more information.

