TOM MUIR

LYNN MAYHEW GALLERY, OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY / DELAWARE, OHIO
SEPTEMBER 6 – OCTOBER 6, 2000

To view the metalsmith Tom Muir's work, you must accept small dislocations. Dislocation is usually unpleasant, but it is not the case here, where it is characterized by gentle nudges and subtle humor.

One can say that The Definition of Is, 2000, is a sterling silver espresso server with clean, expressive lines. Several elements, including a lid, spout and handle, back up that claim. Even though it is relatively small, it still could be used as a container. But on closer observation, the fun begins. The elongated shape speaks more of sculpture than utilitarian vessel. The ovoid knob on top of the lid slowly morphs into an abstracted human head. The base contains stool-like legs, as well as rounded thighs. Further up, two nipple-like forms emerge. But before we get too serious, we realize that President Bill Clinton's now legendary locution inspired the title. And slowly but surely, the exhibition title—"Devised Nature"—begins to make sense, if your definition of devised includes the synonyms contrive and invent, spoken with a smile on your face.

Clever anthropomorphism also reigns in another sterling silver espresso server, Cycladic Figure Impregnated, 1987, in which elegant art deco lines are juxtaposed with a pair of copper-colored eyes and four feet. Again, Muir plays with purpose and form. The work is almost too narrow to be a container, with its reference to the slender figures of ancient Cycladic sculpture—or is it? The question is not resolved, and the viewer is intrigued.

While these two works are thoroughly three-dimensional, others incorporate a two-dimensional aesthetic. Birth of Venus, 1987, combines a perfectly shaped silver bowl with a protruding metal stem. The bowl is exact, polished and serene, a profound contrast to the improvisational and organic nature of the stem. To complicate the wonderful juxtaposition, from some angles the stem recalls a calligraphic drawing. It also includes an ambiguous form that suggests an internal organ, perhaps a womb.

Another intriguing work is the silver Orchid Vase, 1997. The stem is a simple strand that divides, recalling both plant-like tendrils and the molten state of silver. Muir's organic tendencies can also give way to fantasies of the mechanical. A series of sterling silver and anodized aluminum Bicycle Bracelets, 1983, replicate the wheels and spokes of bicycle shapes. Tea Infuser, 1992, could be a small, exquisite engine. Also engine-like is an unutilized sculpture with gear teeth and a turbine shape. Straddling the real and the imaginary, this piece is futuristic yet also evocative of the machines that launched the Industrial Revolution.

A welcome element in the exhibition was a selection of drawings by Muir, who is an art professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Primarily in pencil, they naturally mirror his three-dimensional work but give the viewer insight into the artistic mind. (They also prove once again that sculptors can be superb draftsmen.) Some drawings are surrealistic combinations of the organic and the mechanical; others recall the geometric architecture of Kandinsky and the Russian constructivists.

The installation was striking — surprisingly, Muir's small forms were not overwhelmed by the high white walls and ceiling of the gallery, which is housed in a former Neoclassical post office. The only discordant note was the inclusion of two sconces that incorporate found objects and seemed at odds with the rest of the exhibition.

—KAY KOENINGER

Kay Koeninger is executive director of the Dayton Visual Arts Center, Ohio.