

FALLING

INTO PLACE





BY SHANON LYON

Art director June Corley creates sculptures from a few of her favorite things—letters, faces and found objects. And her work will inspire you to see what you've overlooked.

Take a look at June Corley's sculptures. You'll see a cow, a deer and a number of different figures. If you're observant, you'll also notice that the sculptures are made out of letters: 'U's and 'T's and 'H's combined with found objects to create something ... entirely different.

But not everyone sees the letters at first glance—and that's just how Corley likes it. She thinks that many people take their surroundings for granted, and she hopes her work will inspire others to look at everything in a new and different way and discover things they may have overlooked. "So many people look at something without really seeing it," she says. "I always seem to be able to see beyond what's really there."

After graduating from her hometown Auburn University in Auburn, AL, with a degree in visual design, Corley moved to Boston and landed a job as an art director at Humphrey Browning MacDougall. A few years later, she headed back south to Atlanta, where she worked as both an agency art director and later as

a principal of her own firm, Corley & Day. But even as Corley, who was known for her strong concepts, was winning awards and accolades for her ad work, she continued to engage in creative projects on the side. After her latest move, you could say that her sculptures just sort of fell into place.

Corley started collecting vintage signs more than 20 years ago after stumbling across the first ones in a salvage yard in Atlanta. The letters found a home on the shelves and walls of her office and house in Atlanta. After 22 years in the city, Corley decided in 2006 to return to her Alabama roots, moving to Loachapoka, near her hometown. She packed up her belongings, including that collection of letters, and moved to a log cabin built in 1842 and surrounded by woodlands.

As she was unpacking, the box of letters spilled open. When she looked at the jumble of letters on the floor, she saw them in entirely new ways. 'E,' 'D,' and 'U' went together to make an elephant. And the 'V' and the '3' fit together to make a strongman. "I doubt I

would have even made these creations if I'd stayed in Atlanta," Corley muses.

"I just started making them for fun," she says. "I took pictures of them and made little books to give out as Christmas gifts."

These simple gifts, intended for family and friends, fell into the hands of a woman who ran a small gallery nearby. A show of 35 pieces sparked popular interest in Corley's work. She started a Flickr page, appeared on Print magazine's website and exhibited her sculptures at TypeCon 2009 in Atlanta.

Art director and AIGA medalist Gail Anderson first saw Corley's sculptures about 10 minutes before she left TypeCon to catch her flight back to New York City. "I was so enthralled that I was willing to arrive at the airport at the last minute, and I'm one of those people who actually likes to get there early," Anderson says.

Anderson bought two pieces and sent Corley a fan letter when she returned home. "I was tickled when she wrote back," Anderson says. "I love making type talk in my work, and I really appreciate June's ability to see living creatures in letterforms and rusty old scraps. The sculptures were delivered to my office, and I kept one of them here rather than taking it home because it just made me so happy. It's sitting across from me smiling right now."

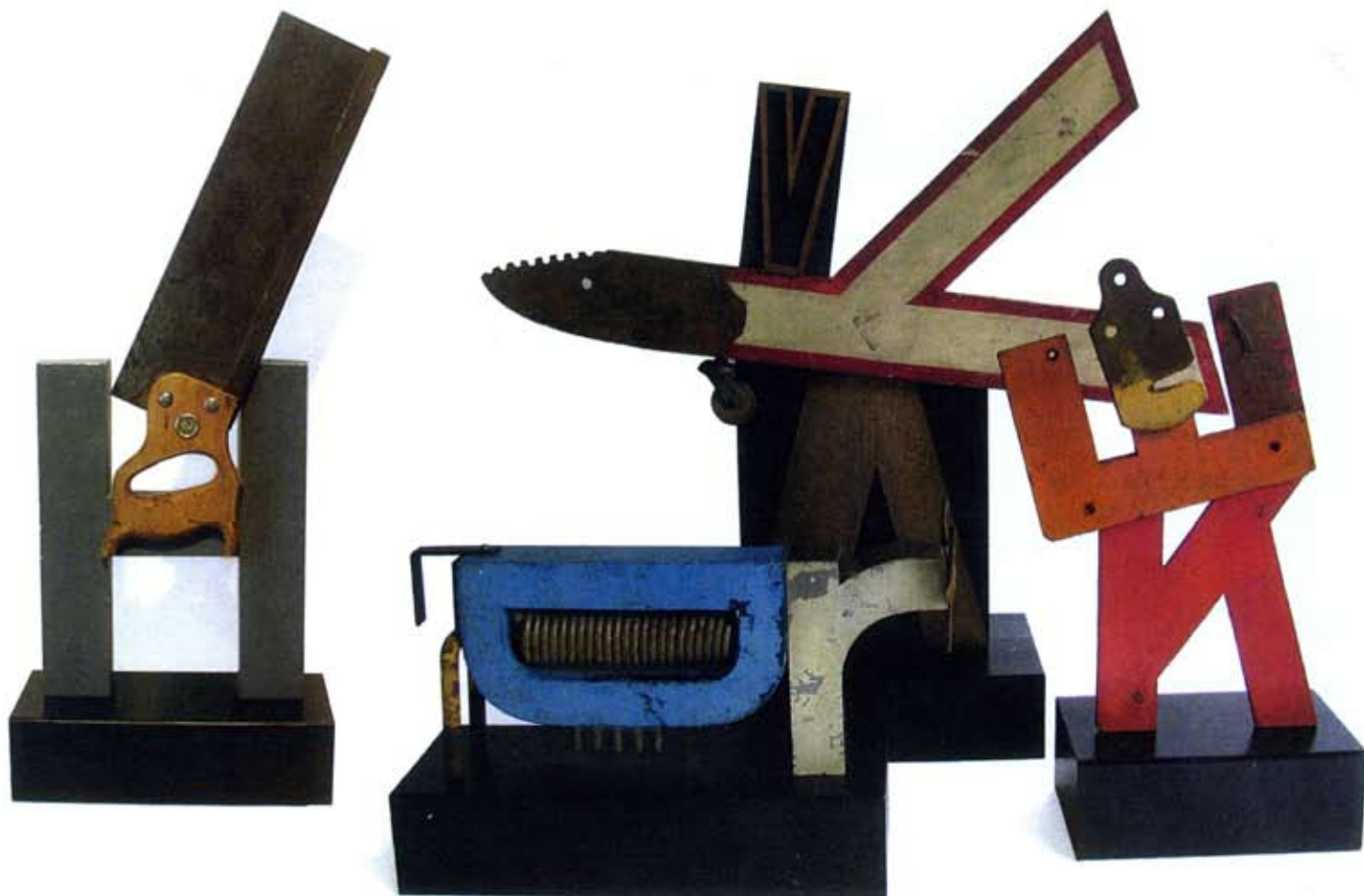
OUTSIDER INFLUENCES

Corley considers herself more of a concepter or art director than a graphic designer, but she's always loved playing with type. She's inspired by self-taught "Outsider" artists whose work she started collecting in the early 1980s. Her first pieces were from Nellie Mae Rowe and Mose Tolliver. She enjoyed the spontaneity and pureness of their art, which was very different from the advertising work she and her colleagues produced every day. She describes the artists as having "an insatiable drive to create art," citing the Gee's Bend quiltmakers from Alabama as a great example of how these self-taught artists can instinctively create great work without formal training.

"Some of their quilts show the strongest designs I've ever seen, anywhere," she says. "The [Outsider] art was always so visually strong and naturally well-designed. There was such a joyfulness about it that I loved. It made me smile."

Corley's log cabin has two small rooms on the second floor: her graphic design studio and her workshop. She drifts from one to the other, looking and touching and looking some more.

She recalls that in the early 1990s, she found herself burnt out on advertising and reluctant to learn how to design on the computer. So she taught herself



how to use tools and built a number of different art pieces that were accepted into the American Craft Council show. The first piece was inspired by a run-of-the-mill birdcage she received. She used her conceptual skills and love of words to create a series of birdcages: "The Bird in the Hand" cage, which was a hand-shaped cage, and cat-shaped cages made out of wood and metal that she called "The Cat Who Swallowed the Canary."

Today she builds the sculptures by hand using bolts, screws, and welding glue. "I love working with my hands," Corley says, "and I missed that when I started working on the computer. I like putting things together three-dimensionally."

SCUPLTURE AS PROBLEM-SOLVING

Corley describes herself as a free spirit and admits that she hasn't had a typical career path. She believes that her side projects fed her work as an art director and vice versa. Although her previous ad work and her sculptures seem different, both involve problem solving. "Sometimes you have a strong direction from the beginning, but you don't stop there," she says. "You keep finding new ways to solve the problem. And sometimes you come back to the beginning. It's a constant refinement until you know that it's finished and it's right."

She doesn't try to force the sculptures. "I like to let them almost create themselves," she says. "And when I look back at a finished piece, I am sometimes amazed myself at how it came to be."

Her favorite letters? "I can do a lot with 'H,'" she says. "But, it's almost too easy. Same thing with 'E.'"

As far as what's next for Corley, she's not quite sure. She still collects letters and other castoffs for future sculptures. In fact, friends occasionally deposit letters on her doorstep. And she'll inevitably spend time gardening the land she's living on. Her father spent 40

years planting native azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias, dogwoods, Japanese maples and magnolias on the property. The garden has been featured in magazines and is often toured by groups. Corley aims to embellish the area with environmental art, new pathways and other garden surprises, and hopes to eventually build a large, airy studio on the property out of simple, salvaged materials.

Whatever she does, she knows that she'll never stop being creative. Creativity, says Corley, makes her come alive. She enjoys engaging both her head and her hands. "I like to get so into it that I'm not even conscious of what I'm doing," she says. "That's bliss for me. When I'm in it with glue all over me and letters stuck in my hair. I'm very happy in that place." ■

Shanon Lyon is a Seattle-based writer and editor and former associate editor of I.D. Magazine. She specializes in content development for board and video games but has written about everything from celebrity phobias to cold sore cures. She's the author of "Gifts with Meaning" and contributor to the latest in the Armchair Reader series, "The Gigantic Reader."

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June Corley frequently updates her Flickr stream with new work. Browse her online gallery and see which pieces are available for purchase at www.flickr.com/photos/junecorley