

Hatchet Job Review By Christine Rose

I sat with Sculptor Jim Felice in the Molten Java Upstairs Gallery, where a collection of his work entitled "Hatchet Job" will have it's Opening on March 16.

Felice, a Ridgefield resident of 37 years, has a studio on the Bethel-Danbury border. He has been working on this collection on and off since 1995, and he sees the exhibit as an installation, pieces that connect as a whole. Together they represent a journey that begins with creation and ends with the kinds of choices that determine a life.

Because the medium of most of the pieces are different and unrelated, it might have been difficult for the casual viewer to see the relationship between them. The only interrelated object was a hatchet used to inflict wounds on each piece.

At the entrance of the gallery, there is "Bang" on the left and "Creation" on the right. Felice explained they are both about giving birth, and when seen in that context, it was immediately clear.

"Bang" was the first piece of the project, made in 1995. The hatchet was used to make all of the little starbursts that decorate the piece. Where it was used with force would be the place of giving birth, the exit route into the world.

As he described it, I wondered what is more beautiful and forceful than the actual and real birth process? Through the starlit skies, through the bloody mess of ejecting from the womb, that surely is the beginning of the journey; life's own Big Bang.

Across from "Bang" is a smaller, more subtle piece. It is clearly the depiction of the process of life, and it is called "Creation." The forms used in this simple, understated piece are a depiction of the relationship between man and woman, the DNA codes, the earth, the matrix, the exchange of information from one to the next. It is indeed, Creation.

Felice has given us no childhood in this exhibit. Instead we walk right into "The Vamp." You can't miss her, and you'd know her anywhere. All polished aluminum and beckoning, lipstick-red folds, the piece is joyously seductive and reminds one of that time of life when the sensual is what it's all about. In "The Vamp" is the hatchet is used with freedom. It is caution thrown to the wind, the "It's All Good; let's have a drink and a roll in the hay," fun.

As life goes on, reality hits, and life begins to take it's toll. Felice described how the the next two pieces are filled with the pain of life's journey. "Time Travel Artifact" is a wounded, yet still smiling, warrior. Formed of a Volkswagen engine hood, the inherent shape lends itself to facial features. Yet in this piece, the hatchet has taken its toll. Here the ax has not broken through with a joyous, mysterious bursting into life. Instead, it has exacted wounds that mar the soul and scar the surface.

In "Bang", the hatchet frees a being into being. In "Time Travel" the gashes burst inwardly and exude a quiet pain suffered.

"Time Travel Artifact" is not just personal. Felice said it is also the journey of this nation's culture. A horse represents the calvary, metal pieces are immediately identifiable as sky scrapers, the encroaching structures of the industrial ages on a bruised and rusting planet. Even the horse's bits relate to the theme of mastering and the destruction of the freedom of the animal. The bits could be piercings, they could even be tears. With scars and tears, and yet a small smile, this piece was aptly named by Felice as the warrior.

Another Volkswagen hood, "Crisis," is much simpler. Very little has been done to the shape of it and the biggest impact was not immediately obvious. But it did catch up with me. Amidst the simplicity, there are the subtle colors Felice has sanded off and those he has left. Like an inky oil stain, the color moves across and around the piece like a deep blue fire, quiet, undetected at first, but slowly recognized as it spreads throughout the piece.

Unlike the wounds of "Time Travel", though, "Crisis" has been subjected to one very deep, very damaging wound. Straight down the middle the hatchet crashed, and it left a ragged, gaping tear.

It would have been easy to bypass this subtly decorated piece, maybe only admiring the deft manipulation of the metal and the paint. However, the story behind it leaves one feeling as raw as the scarred piece.

Felice's daughter was in high school when two of her friends died in a car accident. They were boys his daughter knew well, and it was a crushing blow to her and to everyone who knew them. Felice said that there are things in life that do not have to be dealt with as crises, but how could one ever dismiss such a sad event? Contemplating the impact of that accident, a hatchet might have been the best way to have expressed those feelings.

The journey of life is expressed in each and every piece. There are good times and bad, destruction and survival, but Felice said that the two final pieces are meant to bring the viewer to examine the results of such a life. Harshness causes different people to do different things. Does trauma soften the heart or harden it? Therein lies individual choice.

Standing in front of the two wide windows in the Upstairs Gallery, on the left is the "Caged Beast", to the right, "Louise."

"Caged Beast" is the actual hatchet responsible for the destruction and creation of these pieces. It is the bringer of birth, the inflicter of pain, the crossroads of the journey, the vamp's stunning vulgarity. Now caged, the hatchet is restrained. It is capable of causing more pain if unleashed, which becomes a life choice. Do we hold onto our traumas with bitterness, and unleash an emotional hatchet upon others? Or do we go with "Louise", a breath of fresh air, the light and lifting of spirit?

"Louise" is the last piece, and is as light as a wind that gently wafts

lace curtains on a mild, spring day. With "Louise", there are angels about, and all is right with the world.

"Louise" came about through the influence of a Louise Nevelson sculpture that Felice was repairing for the owner. Working on his own sculpture, he was shaving away pieces of steel that dropped in a heap on the floor. He looked down as he was working and saw the beauty of the shapes, and reluctant to disturb them, he found a thin piece of steel and slipped it underneath the heap so he could attach them forever.

Felice said that "Louise" is the opposite of the beast, she is a choice to go with the good. It is the recognition that, "Yes, it was all hard, and there was pain, but I can choose to let it all go and follow the beauty."