Arrested Memories

Text | Ria Vaeezian

“The sky was red. It was like a volcano had erupted in the woods,” Cuban-born artist Nathan Sise describes when he moved to New York City in 1984. “I was looking into the depths of my method, when he constructs his deeply coloured metal works. A veteran in the New York City art scene, the 67-year-old artist has become known for his sculptural paintings and three-dimensional works that have been inspired by the urban environments, and his relationship with the city. Perhaps most vivid is the memory of the rusted metal he picked up in the rust piled up in the streets.

Everything was considered precious, he explains. Anything in the city, in 1984 was a shock for Joseph. “People threw away so much in America. You could build entire countries with the junk,” he muses. It seemed only natural then for the young artist to explore the deposits that filled the streets. Unsurprisingly, he began collecting junk and discarded metal. By the mid-seventies, Joseph began exploring bright mineral pigments and the scrape of zinc-coated steel — a method which he continues to use today. Working in his outdoor studio in Venice, New York, Joseph’s yellow granules of pigment, water and acid onto steel. He then exposes the metal to wind, rain and sunshine. Over time, the once ordinary surface morphs into a pearly embrace of colour. “Metal is also in some funny way, you can have life or a relationship within it like a relationship with a woman.” He explains — “I can make a mistake but I can go back and correct it.”

Recently, Joseph has began creating boat-like vessels that hang from the wall. He bends pieces of coloured steel into sinuous forms that are stacked together. The fragments of metal cut fluidly through space with their shape echoing the raided boats Joseph knew as a child. “But it isn’t just boats that have inspired these forms. During a recent trip to Japan, Joseph became fascinated with the structure and color of kimonos. “Women in kimonos are like ships or sculptures in themselves — they are imbued with movement,” he says. For Joseph, the form of a kimon conjured ideas of travel, journey and discovery. The notion of discovery and the search for the unknown is a central theme in Joseph’s art. “Sometimes it is serendipitous as to why you gravitate towards certain things and certain things gravitate towards you,” he states. It is apparent that he isn’t just talking about art here. His own life has been about fortuitous encounters.

Coming to New York in the fervor of the 1960s, Joseph landed in the right place at the right time. “The village was vibrant with artists like Bobby Dylan, Joni Mitchell and John Chamberlain, there was real hopped-up of young talent in SoHo,” he says. Spending hours in fabled artist hangouts including Mickey Rourke, the Ocean Club and the Chinese Chancy, Joseph immersed himself in the city’s exploding art scene. By the late 1970s, Joseph had a 7,000 square foot penthouse studio with a vast rooftop where he could work outdoors under the lights of the city. He lived with artist Ellen Bank and later shared a studio with singer Joni Mitchell, who remains a close friend and avid collector of his work. Over time, his work developed and his circle of collectors grew.

“Today, Joseph is firmly established in the city’s contemporary art scene. Constantly exploring the possibilities of his medium, he continues to unearth new memories. Peering forward in his wide-rimmed glasses with a cigar dangling firmly in hand, Joseph surmises, “Trying to figure out why and how is not good in art, it’s just what you react to and what reacts to you.”

“Metal is alive in some funny way, you can have life or a relationship with it like a relationship with a woman. It is forgiving — I can make a mistake but I can go back and correct it.”

Nathan Sise. Joseph, 2006. pigment on galvanized steel, 60 x 60 x 16 inches

Nathan Sise. Joseph, 2010. pigment on galvanized steel, 46 x 44 x 15 inches