



# Rust Never Sleeps

NATHAN SLATE JOSEPH USES GALVANISED STEEL THAT AGES OVER TIME TO CREATE BEAUTIFUL ART FROM RECYCLED MATERIALS, WRITES BONNIE ENGEL

**E**MERALDS, RUBIES, sapphires, 24-karat gold. Aquamarine, topaz, amber, turquoise. The sizzling colours of the pigments in the paintings and sculptures of Nathan Slate Joseph nearly leap off the walls of the gallery; looking at them, you might think the artist has ground up precious stones to create his works. The colours are so saturated yet so organic that it's difficult to resist the urge to touch them. ❑ Hongkongers recently got a chance to see for themselves, when Joseph's works were showcased at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery. "I grew up recycling everything," he says.

"I was born in Palestine before independence and grew up in Israel, where the notion of recycling was elementary to us. Because of the wars, which to this day are still over water, we reused almost every material and conserved food and energy naturally. I took rusted nails and straightened them to be reused, we never let the tap water

run, and we always turned off the lights, so my awareness of the environment comes from how I was raised in a time of scarcity."

Son of a German-Jewish father and Uzbek mother, Joseph moved from Israel to New York City aged 16. He attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the New School for Social Research, where he studied drama, as well as at the Art Students League.

"At first, coming from Israel to the United States politicised my art, reflecting all the war and pain and suffering," he says. "But coming of age in New York in the '60s and '70s, I adapted and met the most remarkable artists who exemplified freedom to me – artists who were not afraid to turn over all the rules and make up new things. These original minds believed they could do anything they wanted to with colours, size, form and subject matter."

He landed in the right place at the right time, he says: New York was open to experimentation. He had no money, so he started to make art with the "gold I found in the streets of New York" – galvanised steel, which reminded him of



**METAL GURU**

**FROM TOP** Joseph's installation in Beverly Hills; the artist at work  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** Springs Hall from the Silk Route Project



**NATURE'S PALETTE**  
**LEFT** *Untitled Boat* from the Sari Kimono Suite  
**ABOVE** Joseph's studio in New York



refugee and transit camps, soldiers' barracks and temporary forts, and slum dwellings. It's a cheap material – but “it was chosen, not found,” he says.

“Everything I do has a subtext of nature and I wanted a sturdy material for art that changed when it was exposed to nature. Galvanised steel is covered with zinc, another natural material, and the pigments are also minerals, fixed with acid, like the gesso on murals. The pigment permeates the steel permanently, becoming more intense as time passes. There is no harm to the land when it biodegrades.

“I take the sheets and pipes of steel to my studio rooftop and apply acid, then the pigments. I keep hosing the sheets down with water and more pigment, and allow the sun, rain and wind to do their magic by organically spreading the colours and allowing some rust to show through. I am nature's partner throughout the process.”

His art has evolved over time, but since he discovered steel, the material has stayed the same. Each sheet of steel, once the pigment is fixed and weathered, is cut into pieces with an electric torch that leaves its own marks on the surface of the painting or sculpture. These square and rectangular pieces, which vary in size from several metres to just a few centimetres, are then spot-welded into a frame, with small and large

sheets overlapping to form a greater whole. Some are monochromatic, with each individual piece a variant of blue or red, while others are mosaics: patchwork quilts of riotous colour. All create a three-dimensional impression.

He was encouraged by other artists, such as John Chamberlain and Larry Rivers, who recommended him for a Guggenheim Fellowship. A visit to Rivers' Mexican studio opened his eyes to the vivid colours used by the local artists there. He was friends with other great abstract expressionists, including Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as watching the rise of minimalism and pop art.

“That material, the steel, is mine,” he says. “I'm the only one who makes art with it, so whatever I do with it is my art. Picasso, my hero, could make art out of anything, and I follow him by applying my ideas to myself. The material tells me who I am. I like the raw feeling of the art. I don't like to use too many machines; each piece is made by hand by me.”

The grid pattern and the juxtaposition of colours remind almost everyone of something. It might be the fields of the US Midwest from the air, or a bird's-eye view of slum rooftops in Asia, or perhaps the colours of the deserts of the Middle East and Uzbekistan.

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Joseph quotes another artist he respects, famed architect IM Pei, who said that freedom doesn't mean you have to go outside the box. “This helped me stick with my material and find all the memories and arrested moments that I try to recapture in my paintings. My mind's eye is always looking inside to memories of places to what I have seen and experienced, yet I like to make my art outside and then bring it in.”

In a fairly logical progression, Joseph has branched out from smaller, two-dimensional pieces into big sculptures and even architecture. He has created large-scale installations at the Dan Eilat Hotel in Eilat, Israel and the Time Hotel, New York; numerous murals on airports and building façades; and Inagiku Restaurant at Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and the façade of the Harlem Patchwork Building in New York, to name just a few.

His fascination with nature and his fondness for recycling help him create imaginative sculptures by weaving strips of discarded metal into beautiful balls he refers to as “tumbleweed,” and into the Sari Kimono Suite of steel, boat-shaped vessels made of long, three-dimensional strips of folded and coloured steel.

Recently, spurred by old photographs of himself playing with his two sons while they

were building towers by placing wooden sticks together, layer after layer, he has begun the Urbana series, with coloured steel rectangles instead of wooden sticks. “The point was to build a building with the sticks as high as you could, until the structure fell down,” he says. “All you need to know about art is in those sticks: design, balance, structure. Now I want to make these cross-hatched structures much, much bigger, echoing all the new construction in all the new cities springing up all over the world.” Of course, the colours, once again, are ravishing. ■



**TOWER OF STRENGTH**  
**FROM FAR LEFT** Joseph's installation in New York; pieces from the Urbana series  
**ABOVE** Sari Kimono Suite II from the Sari Kimono Suite