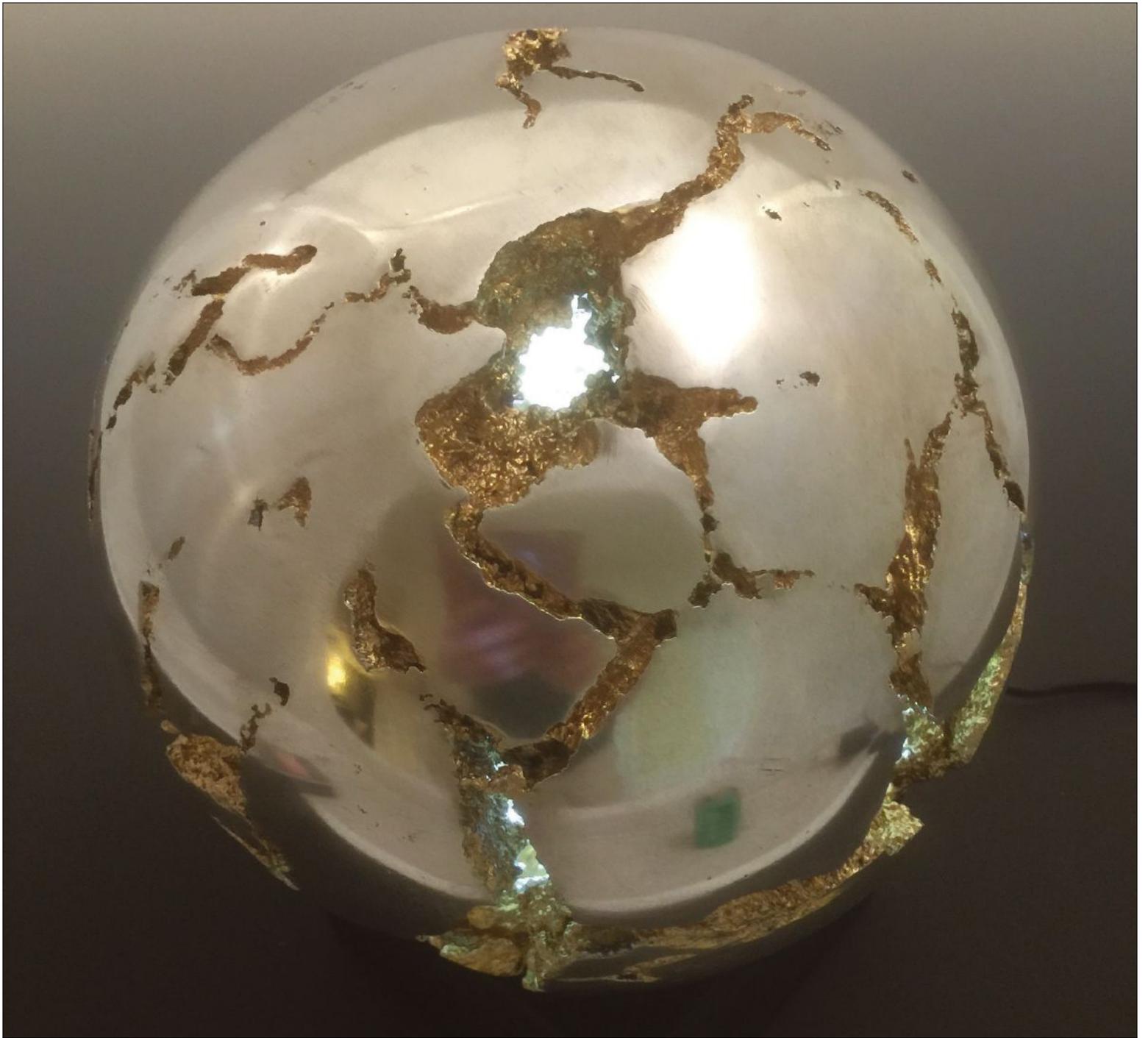


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SCULPTOR KEN LOEWENTHAL

Going to the Edge

WHAT'S OLD BECOMES NEW
BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY



Ken Loewenthal

Great Falls sculptor Ken Loewenthal grew up in America's industrial center: the land of big metal, of assembly lines and overhead cranes, and machines that cut, stamp and weld gray sheets of steel. It's a place where orange sparks fly through smoke, like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

But Ken says his passion for machines, both their form and function, came from his father, a tool-and-die tradesman who emigrated from Germany in the 1960's and settled in Michigan, where he made specialized instruments for the automotive industry. After a hard day at work, his father would bring home pieces of metal in odd shapes and sizes for young Ken to examine. The look and feel of the material, its heft and texture, captured the boy's imagination.

Ken started to draw abstract illustrations and began to wonder how it all fit together. One day, his dad showed him. Together, they built a steam engine from scratch. Other projects soon followed.

"I love abstraction and complexity," Ken says, and apparently math, too, which served him well in exploring the mysteries of how machines work. He received a degree in engineering and took a job at Kodak, where he holds patents in digital imaging and facial recognition. But it wasn't just creating machinery that fascinated Ken. "Anytime I worked on one, I wanted to make it look more interesting than it had to be."

When Kodak downsized and then filed for bankruptcy, many of its machines, some three stories high



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—Ken Loewenthal

and a hundred yards long, were dismantled. Ken considered purchasing these unusually shaped pieces of scrap for his art. But, he says, "I was living in an apartment at the time and collecting this stuff would have posed a gigantic challenge. My landlord would have had problems with that."

By any scale or measure, Ken's art is unique, because it reflects both the magnitude and intricacy of life around him. When a large cherry tree blew down on his West Virginia farm, he pulled it from the ground, power washed and sanded its roots to a furniture-grade finish, revealing the tree's abstract form. Now mounted on an iron base, Ken's highly lacquered, "Cherry Tree Spiral," reflects the complexity of nature that's often hidden from view.

Like many artists, Ken's evolution is closely tied to experimentation. But that's where the similarity ends. He doesn't spend time reworking a piece or mastering a technique. "I leap-frog, pass all of it and go to the

edge to find something new that no one has done before."

Ken's garage is unlike any other artist's studio I've seen. It has the look of an industrial laboratory with caldrons, copper and aluminum ingots, saws and sanders of all sizes and shapes on the floor or resting on work benches. There's almost no room to walk, a sign of a creative and enthusiastic artist at work. I lift a grinder, and it's heavy. I marvel at Ken's ability to hold it for hours on end. "Yeah," he says wryly, taking it from my hands, "some days, I don't need to visit my personal trainer."

Clearly excited about his art, Ken pulls out his phone and shows me a video of how he created his work "Emergent Sphere" by pouring super-heated liquid aluminum into a hand-crafted mold within a bucket of sand. After removing the mold, grinding, polishing, and finishing, the cast aluminum globe was given a bulb. He shows me the completed "Sphere" inside his



Page 32: "Emergent Sphere," solid cast aluminum with lit base, 11.5" x 7.7" x 7.5"

Page 33: Maple Tree Root Table, solid maple root, rock and glass, table: 24" high x 24" x 36"

Above, top: "Wild Cherry," tree spiral, 8' tall x 18' long x 2' thick; and "Golden Starburst," tree root, fully sanded and finished with gold paint, 48" x 30" x 16"

Opposite, left: "Deer Head," solid oak root, fully sanded and finished with stain and polyurethane, 48" x 36" x 20"; and "Infusion Rock," solid cast aluminum infused around rock with walnut base, 10" x 6" x 6"



home and turns it on; a light radiates through crevices from within, suggesting the birth of a star. Its exterior, like so many of Ken's pieces, is highly polished and smooth. I resist the urge to touch it.

Ken's abiding love of machinery is exquisitely demonstrated in his kinetic art, where beauty and symmetry are reflected through an additional dimension: motion. In Ken's piece, "Triple Orbiting Sphere," three orbs move about a center in an intricate pattern, much as particles might move around an atom. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYrXyilFh18>)

Other works are highly finished using natural materials. His "Maple Tree Root Table," a composition of wood balancing on rock, is functional and demonstrates balance with a pleasing form.

Ken finds it odd that he has two audiences for his art. Those who like his natural pieces have less interest in his metal sculpture, and those who prefer his metal sculpture have less affinity for his works of wood and stone. His goal, he says, is to find a way to blend metal with natural materials.

But there's a new audience, too: millennials. As the industry Ken knew growing up fades from view, he captures its essence in his art, to remember it, raise it up and introduce it to a new generation. "Older folks," Ken says, "know what looks industrial, but for the younger generations, well, all of this is new." é

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