

# ARTS & IDEAS

★★★★

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THE MORNING CALL

SECTION E

## AGAINST THE GRAIN

### Wood turner Michael Brolly's creations are unusually unusual

By Geoff Gehman  
Of The Morning Call

Michael Brolly is in a friend's studio near his Mertztown home, uncrating "[www.jewel@space.re](http://www.jewel@space.re):1999," a jewelry container he made to resemble an alien with a mahogany bra. The wood turner opens the bra cups, which are coated in 23-karat white gold leaf, to reveal a pair of rotating drawers. He slides the an- viled head to reveal a tongue pierced to hold 10 pairs of earrings. The joints, he points out, are bicycle quick releases, for changing the stork-like creature's height and position.

It's the sort of piece that makes people think that Brolly is a science-fiction fanatic. It's the sort of piece that makes other wood turners think that he comes from outer space. It's the sort of piece that travels in prestigious exhibits of wood works that are really out-of-this-world sculptures.

"I've been accused of being abducted and all that stuff," says Brolly with a smile. "Maybe I was, and I don't remember."

The comment is as sly as Brolly's creations, which are displayed at the Baum School of Art in Allentown, the third venue on a four-stop tour. A church lectern kneels to pray; a hooded, stacked residence for birds and bird dogs could be a model for the opera house in Sydney, Australia; a toilet seat is suitable for framing. All have gyrating shapes, musical grains and an effortless blend of wryness and spikiness.

Brolly, it turns out, is as independent as his creations. As a child in Philadelphia he carved things he should have turned on a lathe: boats, nails for his sister's jewelry box, even a chalice, a vessel of his Catholic upbringing. In his early 20s he made a cradle because his sister had recently adopted a child after five miscarriages, and because his father said he couldn't do it. Brolly simply taught himself how to cut a dovetail on a

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**MICHAEL BROLLY**  
wood sculptor



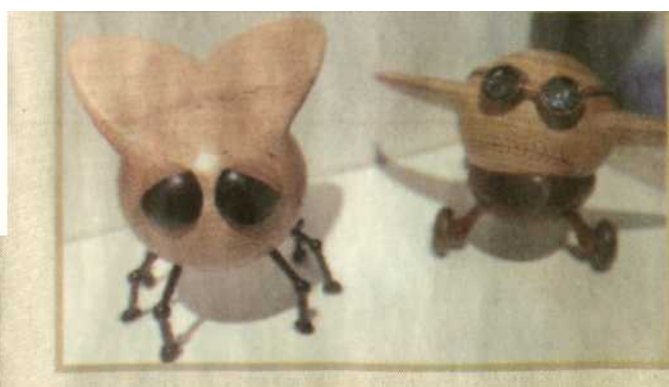
Photos by Denise Sanchez The Morning Call

**SELF-TAUGHT** wood turner Michael Brolly of Mertztown inspects his large sculpture, '[www.jewel@space.re](http://www.jewel@space.re):1999,' on display in 'Cradle to Cradle' at the Baum School of Art.



Photo by David Haas

'BIRD/DOGHOUSE' (1992) has a mirror for viewing the inside of folds resembling those of the Sydney Opera House.



'HIGHLY BALL' (left) and 'Baron Von Baseball' are two of Brolly's whimsical works. He took his first woodworking course at Kutztown University in spring 1977 then taught himself how to work with the lathe.

Denise Sanchez  
The Morning Call



# Sculptor's work evokes more than realism

Michael Brolly is featured at the Hicks Art Center Gallery in Newtown. Wood is his primary medium.

By Victoria Donohoe  
INQUIRER ART CRITIC

Michael Brolly's wood-turned sculptures featured in his mid-career retrospective show at Hicks Art Center Gallery, Newtown, possess vague overtones of menace in the direct and continuing surrealist tradition.

This artist, with a home and studio in rural Berks County near Mertztown, has a droll sense of humor. And he is a precisionist in his use of detail in his craft-based artwork with striking virtuosity by means of the lathe and hand tools.

Certainly in all his work Brolly produces not realism but something haunting and very much beyond realism. Perhaps it is this sculptor's romance with detail in his artistry that prompts him occasionally to include mechanical devices in his wooden functional and sculptural pieces.

Such works are literally an open-and-shut case. They also are a slight reminder of human-figure sculptures in cast metal by well-known sculptor Ernest Trova that were easily assembled by snapping parts together, then just as easily disassembled.

Another point of interest is that an earlier generation of Brolly's family lived on the Main Line at Maybrook while that Wynnewood estate still belonged to its original owners, the Gibson family, and before Jack Merriam took it over and built the Thomas Wynne Apartments on a corner of it. Brolly has early childhood memories of visiting the "big house," still on that property.

Brolly's attitude as an artist is neither placid nor reserved. Not content to observe, he is involved with each episode he portrays and is a fluid draftsman and an economical one.

His use of wood is supple and sensitive, his images gracefully witty and uncontrived. Brolly's pieces invariably deal more with style and inner expression than with fact, and science fiction has been mentioned as one of his sources.

There also is a constant attention to activity around him. He uses straightforward, familiar forms and conventions to ensure that this information is presented in a clear, accessible manner, whether it is baseball lore, spaceships, physical attributes of his mother-in-law, a jewelry case, mother/daughter relationships, a lectern, toys, or a letter opener.

And Brolly's work is as much engaged in giving a sly wink to the future as it is in remaining faithfully by the side of the present, his present.

Though easy to take, this exhibit should not be greeted as a strange novelty. The work in it has broad appeal. Now, doubtless thanks to an exhibit calendar hungry for new themes, we have a chance to look at what's going on.

Brolly is an extremely capable, resourceful and gifted artist. It's good to see him get some attention as a soloist.

*Bucks County Community College's Hicks Art Center Gallery, Swamp Road, Newtown. To Oct. 19, with a public reception 5-7 p.m. Thursday. Mondays-Fridays, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. to Sept. 20; thereafter, also Tuesdays-Thursdays 9 a.m.-8 p.m., Saturdays 9 a.m.-noon. 215-968-8432.*

**Tyler Gallery.** During the 1980s, people's longing for a new unity with the environment became so intense that artists began taking up the subject in fresh and innovative ways. One of those who did was Clayton Merrell of the Carnegie-Mellon faculty in Pittsburgh, now exhibiting environment-friendly paintings at Tyler Gallery, Elkins Park.

His featured works are of two types: small crisp panel pictures of geological formations and larger sky paintings that are his main subject *here*. In these, Merrell wants to control our sense of actuality. So his sky paintings are less about what is to be seen above than about the standpoint of the viewer.

Merrell aims to show what it is really like being surrounded by the horizon as we gaze skyward at cirrus clouds. So he takes the horizon off the bottom of the canvas and lets it run up the sides.

This apparent tipped placement of some of these canvases is a way to "bend the world to the curve of vision" - and thus fend off the habitually inattentive (or lazy) way most of us look up outdoors.

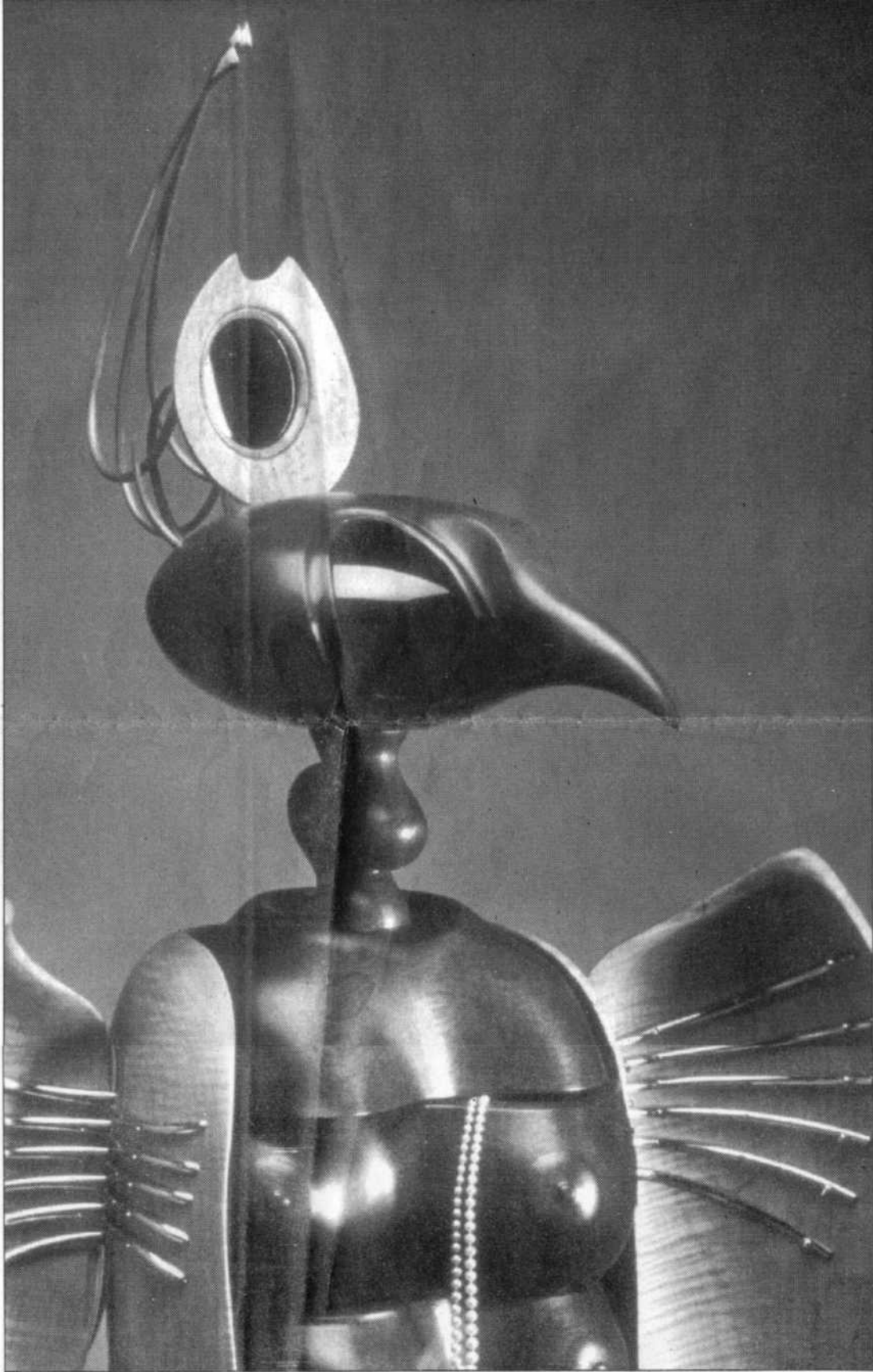
Ideas and appearances therefore both have interest here. This work is confident, perhaps fallible, but probably also quite capable of extension. And it seems to reveal the thoroughness of Merrell's mind. It is a mind that seems to shift increasingly toward intuitive, visual decisions and to be considering all the possibilities as it proceeds.

These paintings are presented as endorsing footnotes that reinforce today's lively discourse about our environment. Is the real purpose of Merrell's new work the humanization of our environment, as if to reflect nature peaceably reclaiming the world overrun by technology?

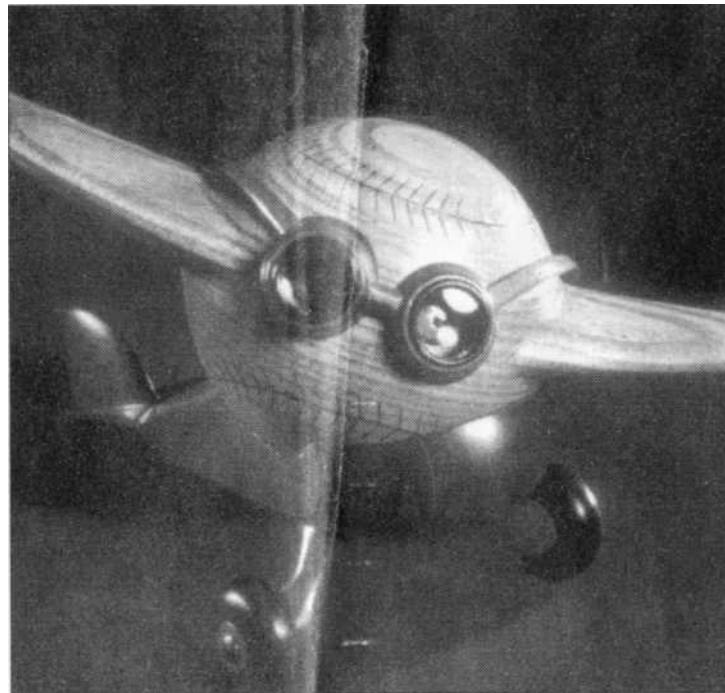
*Tyler Gallery, Temple University's Tyler School of Art, Beech and Penrose Avenues, Elkins Park. To Oct. 5. Tuesdays-Saturdays 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 215-782-2776.*

**Rosemont College.** Daniel N. Marder makes blown-glass constructions that are about body language and refer to the body's form and gesture without actually representing the human figure.

A series of those colorful floor-standing works is on view at Lawrence Gallery, Rosemont.



"Thinking of My Mother-in-law Marianne and Those Magnificent Mahogany Breasts" (1996) features several kinds of wood including maple, ebony and walnut, as well as steel and suede. Michael Brolly sometimes includes mechanical devices in his wooden functional and sculptural pieces.



"Baron Von Baseball" is a 1997 work from Brolly. The Hicks Art Center Gallery will display his work until Oct. 19.

Whether those "figures" stand alone or interact, as many of them do, the overall impression of the show is pleasant, easy, without the ingredients of intellectual or emotional intensity.

Marder's presentation makes the viewer feel good about look-

ing at sculptural work done in hot glass. This he accomplishes, in part, through the whiplash energy that vibrates through the position and stance of each of these tripod-shaped pieces that give a convincing semblance of being in motion.

Surrealism is often suggested but diluted by the succulent surfaces. And the artist brings to his art a particular sensitivity to color that glows with an inner life here that expresses well his insistence on letting it carry its artistic weight, and avoiding decorative surface variation.

Marder has had a lightning career in glassblowing. It's been 4' years since he founded the hot glass studio at Salisbury University on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He loves teaching there and spends every weekend in Philadelphia, where his late father, who lived in Bryn Mawr, was an osteopathic surgeon. Marder's work seems to be moving in two directions - toward direct experiences of objects with our senses and toward conceptualism.

Both serious attitudes are presented with humor. And for now with this body language series, in a few capering blade-strokes a story is told.

*Rosemont College's Lawrence Gallery, Off Montgomery Avenue, Rosemont. To Sept. 29, with public reception Thursday, 4-8 p.m. Mondays-Fridays 9 a.m.-6 p.m. 610-527-0200.*

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