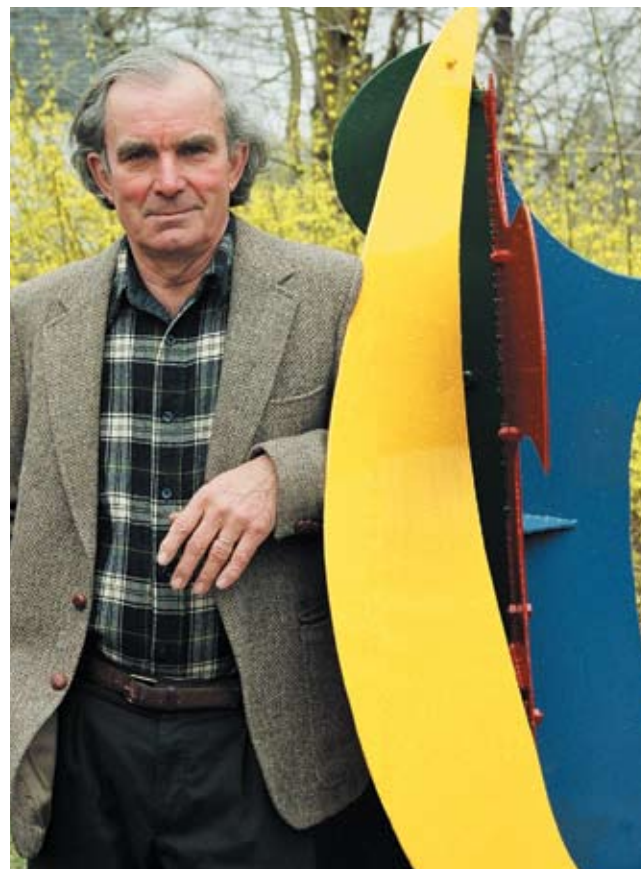




MAN OF STEEL

David Hayes has been exhibiting his sculptures for more than half a century. At 76, he just might be at the top of his game. **BY CHRISTOPHER HANN**



SCULPTOR DAVID HAYES plods through the snow that surrounds his 18th-century farmhouse in rural Connecticut. Swaddled in a sweater and a heavy coat, he's bound for a large field outlined by dozens of his signature works in steel. The snow is a foot thick and partly frozen across his 53 acres. With each step, his boot breaks through the surface, plunging him shin-deep in the mix. Step. Fall. Step. Fall. Crunch. Crunch.

The effort is worth it. In the dazzling sunlight, sharply angled, the sculptures inspire dramatic shadows that seem to burnish new and unintended forms into the pristine landscape. "Look at that," Hayes says, pointing to a kaleidoscopic pattern in the snow, formed by water dripping from a circular sculpture hanging from an old apple tree. "I never would have imagined it would make that shape."

The sheen of sun and snow seems to intensify the impact of the pieces themselves—collections of abstract shapes welded from quarter- to half-inch-thick plates of steel.

Some, painted flat black, stand 10 feet tall. Smaller works are painted in bright blues, reds and yellows. Hayes's favorite time of year to show his work is winter. On this day, it's apparent why.

The 76-year-old artist with long gray hair and Kerouac's gruff, solemn gaze is perhaps best known for his series of black Screens—large-scale sculptures made from multiple, complementary shapes (and the empty spaces between them) and fashioned to resemble industrial-strength partitions. But he's been working in steel for more than half a century now, and his enormous body of work also includes large numbers of polychromes, Totems, Vertical Motifs and maquettes. His résumé lists more than 300 exhibitions, and his work is included in more than 100 institutional collections, including those of the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

At his age, Hayes confesses to an occasional midday nap, but the constancy of his work ethic makes him as prolific and

Facing: "Caryatid," 1999, welded and painted steel. Hayes with "Leaf Figure #7," 1997, welded and painted steel.



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as viable today as ever. In 2007 he had 10 exhibitions from Texas to Florida to upstate New York, including eight solo shows at regional museums, and no fewer than four exhibitions are scheduled in 2008.

“He just continues to find new forms,” says Lucinda H. Gedeon, the director and CEO of the Vero Beach Museum of Art in Florida, where 15 works by Hayes were displayed in a six-month exhibition that ended in February. “He’s exploring not only form, but the way light and shadow play against it.”

Hayes never really strayed from the medium he took up during his studies as a graduate student at Indiana University in the mid-’50s. There, in a stroke of great fortune, he was introduced to steel by the sculptor David Smith, a visiting professor



who was already a giant among America's mid-century Abstract Expressionists. Forty-three years after Smith's death, Hayes recalls him as "a wonderful mentor."

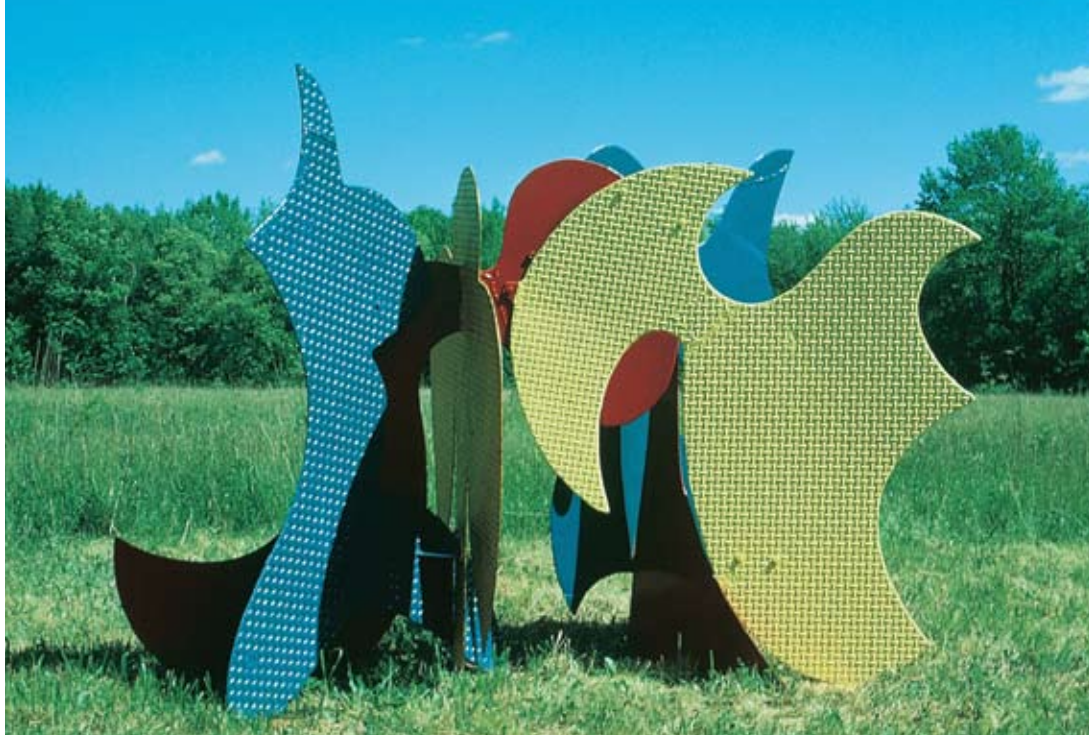
Sniff around Hayes's sculpture field and you catch a whiff of others who left their mark, like Alexander Calder, Henri Matisse and even Picasso. But having plumbed the depths of a single medium for 50-odd years, Hayes has stamped his work with his own imprimatur. A Hayes sculpture, Gedeon says, "is very identifiable as a David Hayes."

Which is to say that a David Hayes might look at once timeless and contemporary. Citing his many muses, Hayes says, "I start with the cave paintings and go up to Pop." He is forever observing the world around him, soaking up colors, shapes, light and shadows. He might stop his car on his daily run to the post office, intrigued by the form of a tree's shadow. (He says that all of his sculptural shapes are rooted in nature.) He draws every morning, part of a workmanlike regimen. "I get up in the morning, have tea, look at the paper, make drawings, go make sculpture," Hayes says. "That's what Smith was like—like punching a clock."

In his small studio just outside his front door, Hayes will lay patterns cut from cardboard on a steel plate and trace a chalk outline. Then he dons steel-cutting regalia—safety helmet, goggles, gloves, acetylene torch—looking as much like an ironworker at the old Brooklyn Navy Yard as an artist doing his thing in the Connecticut countryside. Once he cuts the steel, he tack-welds the different shapes for a temporary seal ("like putting little drops of glue on the pieces so they hold together"), then grinds down the edges with a heavy-duty grinder, sometimes removing an eighth of an inch of steel. It's messy work—"a terrible job," he says.

After the pieces are sand-blasted, Hayes

Facing: "Vertical Motif #21" (far left), 1987, and "Painted Half Moons" (at right), 1971, both welded and painted steel. "Semi Screen Sculpture" (right), 1987, and "Gladiator" (top, right), 1989, both welded and painted steel.





“Leaf Figure,” 1975, welded and painted steel. David Hayes working outdoors with steel (left).

applies several coats of primer and several more of rust-preventive paint. (He’ll leave unpainted certain works of Cor-Ten steel, which forms a protective layer of rust that prevents further corrosion.) A square foot of half-inch steel weighs 20 pounds, but Hayes bolts the pieces together, which makes them easy to take apart, lug to a museum halfway across the country and reassemble, a task normally performed by his sons, David and John (and, on occasion, Brian).

Back inside his house, Hayes and his wife, Julia, are sitting at the kitchen table, not far from a cast-iron wood stove, eating a lunch of venison meatloaf, cornbread and hot tea. Hayes is talking about a topic



“Rouge et Noir,” 2005, welded and painted steel.

that comes up often in discussions of his work. What does it all mean? What message—hell, what *object*—is this or that piece meant to convey? Is this one a storm of leaves blowing across the prairie? Is that one a school of porpoises in mid-leap? A giant hammer? A devious unicorn?

Hayes insists that any meaning rests solely with the viewer. After all these years, he’s heard plenty of theories. A woman in Connecticut believed that a Screen sculpture alluded to the Wallace Stevens poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” A man in Mississippi believed that Hayes’s work signified the Ole Miss football team beating Louisiana State University.

Hayes’s general response to such artistic deconstruction is something akin to “whatever.” He seems more interested in shape than in meaning, more inspired by process than by outcome. And as he begins his next 50 years of sculpting, he knows what keeps him going. “The next piece,” he says. “People ask me what’s my favorite piece, and I say”—he taps a finger against his noggin—“the one that’s up here.” ☐

Christopher Hann writes on culture, travel and business for publications such as The New York Times, Executive Traveler and Leader’s Edge.

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