

THESIS

THE CHASE

Submitted by

John R. Saurer

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Summer 1995

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

June 5, 1995

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
OUR SUPERVISION BY JOHN R. SAURER ENTITLED *THE CHASE* BE
ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

Patricia D. Conner

John D. ...

Tom Lundberg

Ron B. Skelton

William ...

Advisor

Philip E. ...

Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE CHASE

I intend to use those materials (steel, iron, bronze, wood, fabric) and forms (geometric shapes, vessels, rings, wheels) that strike a response of familiarity in us all. I hope to develop a dialogue between the forms, scale and chosen materials that engenders an emotional, perhaps sublime, experience for the viewer.

Sculptural concepts often begin for me verbally - through a word or phrase - and the physical materials I choose to use create associations that build and finish the concept presented by the title. I hope to present a situation, involve the viewer by piquing their interest in a familiar form or medium and leave them with a new experience.

John R. Saurer
Department of Art
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Summer 1995

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to my family, both immediate and extended, for their unconditional love and support from the very beginning. Special thanks go to my committee members: Gary Voss, Jack Orman, Pat Coronel, Tom Lundberg and Ron Williams. Deep gratitude goes also to Bruce Davidson for his subtle challenges and technical help; and of course to Buster, Rube and Jennifer for their inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Plates.....	vi
Abstract of Thesis	1 - 5
Plates	6 - 14
References	15

LIST OF PLATES

PLATE		PAGE
I	<i>BUSTER KEATON</i>	7
II	<i>RUBE GOLDBERG</i>	8
III	<i>SLIP</i>	9
IV	<i>STUD</i>	10
V	<i>MARTYR</i>	11
VI	<i>LOCO-MOTIVE</i>	12
VII	<i>HEY</i>	13
VIII	<i>SINGER</i>	14

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE CHASE

Common Materials

Familiar Forms

Craftsmanship

Subtle Humor

Verbal Puns

Connections

Suspension

Acrobatics

Sublimity

Triumphs

Strength

Tension

Silence

Timing

Hope

The work of my thesis, both sculpture and drawing, has come from a body of forms, materials and concerns that have been a part of me since early childhood. Forms (cones, bullets, boats, funnels, rings, wheels) and materials (steel, wood, iron, brass) can be traced back to personal experiences and observations of: airplanes, railway trains, Great

Lakes ore freighters, semi-trucks, refineries, bridges, water towers, row boats, motorcycles, washing machine agitators, silos, windmills and engines. I am a product of a very real, impressive and often aggressive machine age. It is my intention to present situations which involve the viewer by combining archetypal form with familiar materials and leave them with new experiences. It is my hope that these experiences showcase a unique type of order, born from both natural and technological worlds.

I have also come to realize, accept and celebrate the fact that this work has been directly influenced by two important American artists. Contemporaries some 75 years ago, both worked in much the same vein but with different methods and materials. These two geniuses were Rube Goldberg and Buster Keaton. This document opened with a list of expressive and conceptual concerns that I feel are common to Rube, Buster and myself. In the early part of this century, America was facing a burgeoning machine age. These two artists responded to this impressive and often frightening beast with completely different and relatively new media: the comic strip and the silent motion picture.

Rube Goldberg (roob-goldburg') *adj.* Of, pertaining to, or being a contrivance that brings about by complicated means what apparently could be accomplished simply.

[After Reuben (*Rube*) L. *Goldberg* (1883-1970),
inventor of such contrivances.] ¹

The artwork of Rube Goldberg that I respond most to are his "invention" cartoons from 1914 to 1934. It was during this time that he began shaping his career as an artist. He became an important voice for the common man in America, facing a dramatically changing world. Rube's vision made light of the intimidating advances of machines and

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary, 2nd Edition, 1991.

industry. He gave the little guy a chance to laugh at the complexity of this new world, to see it as comedy and not just a beast out of control.

Similarly, the most critically acclaimed work of Buster Keaton occurred between 1917 and 1931. He was the quintessential mime, the most human of the silent comedians. His early experiences with his family's Vaudeville tour and apprentice work with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, taught Buster the essence of slapstick comedy: timing and silent expression. He was given his own studio in 1920 along with complete creative freedom in writing, directing and acting. This was a time for Buster, like Rube, when his artistic vision was clear and his expression unbound by large studios and micro-management.

"Keaton was the serious one - from the never-smiling face on to extremely personal concepts of fate, which for Buster Keaton, is man at the mercy of both chance and 'The Machine'."² Buster often paired himself with machines and props of all types: cars, ships, houses, cannons, submarines and, of course, his beloved trains. This relationship often placed him as victim in a situation centered around the mechanical world. This duality of victim and fate was central in most of his work. He has become a sort of modern-day sage and mentor for me even though his finest work was created 70 years ago. "He was a fine and conscientious actor, and gave all these characters their own validity. Yet ultimately they all fuse into one figure, a small, solitary, solemn animal with a face of other-worldly beauty and great melancholy unsmiling eyes that gaze unflinchingly outwards upon a world which must always dwarf him, but cannot diminish him; because behind those eyes there is a soul."³

* * * * *

² Rudi Blesh, Keaton, (New York, New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), p. xi.

³ David Robinson, Buster Keaton, (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1969), p. 8.

The work presented in this exhibition has become a metaphor of my response to a crazy, mixed-up machine age. The forms are all commonly recognized geometric shapes, quite regular and symmetrical. The materials, likewise, are common and unimpressive. It is my hope to involve the viewer with an immediate response to things familiar, and then through their own investigation set in motion a series of reactions to other and more sublime elements found in the work. Examples of these concerns can be seen in the piece *LOCO-MOTIVE*.

Upon first encountering *LOCO-MOTIVE*, one views a simple iron ring, 12 feet in diameter. Spread across the floor like an industrial platform, track or base, it is familiar in form and approach to material. Investigation will show that the ring is made up of identical segments, pinned and locked together similar to a child's model train set. While looking down and around the body of the ring, the viewer might realize that the outside face of the ring is canted inward, while the inside face leans outward. A strange optical dynamic is set in motion that, for me, is not unrelated to the sensation of vertigo. The work is successful when the viewer recognizes these more sublime elements and moves beyond the mundane form and materials. In all of these works, the title relates to the underlying dynamic, and should give the viewer an indication of the "chase" at hand.

Likewise, *HEY* began as a play on words and the formal elements were developed around this interchange. The choice of galvanized steel mesh and alfalfa hay are related to agricultural Northern Colorado and my childhood impressions from rural Michigan. The material choices are essential to the concept presented by the title. Straw, for example, is completely unacceptable, however easier to find than hay. It is my intention that these commonly related materials infer new meanings based upon their composition.

Finally, in *SINGER*, the most important element is merely implied. These two large similar forms, woven of hardwood laminates and suspended in opposition to one another, suggest a dialogue. It is this dialogue, related to the subtle differences in surface,

fabrication and distance, that is essential. The resultant tension may allude to similar dualities found in male/female or natural/technological relationships.

The title of the show is "*THE CHASE*". It is my intention to lead the viewer into sublime messages through subtle humor and simple approach. This has been my response to the artwork of both Rube Goldberg and Buster Keaton. I deeply respect the determination and artistic vision of these two men. Their voices are poignant, accurate and timeless. Their message of order and human perseverance, regardless of technological chaos, is as important now as ever.

PLATES



Plate I. *BUSTER KEATON*

in *Go West*, from 1925
(Metro-Goldwyn Pictures)

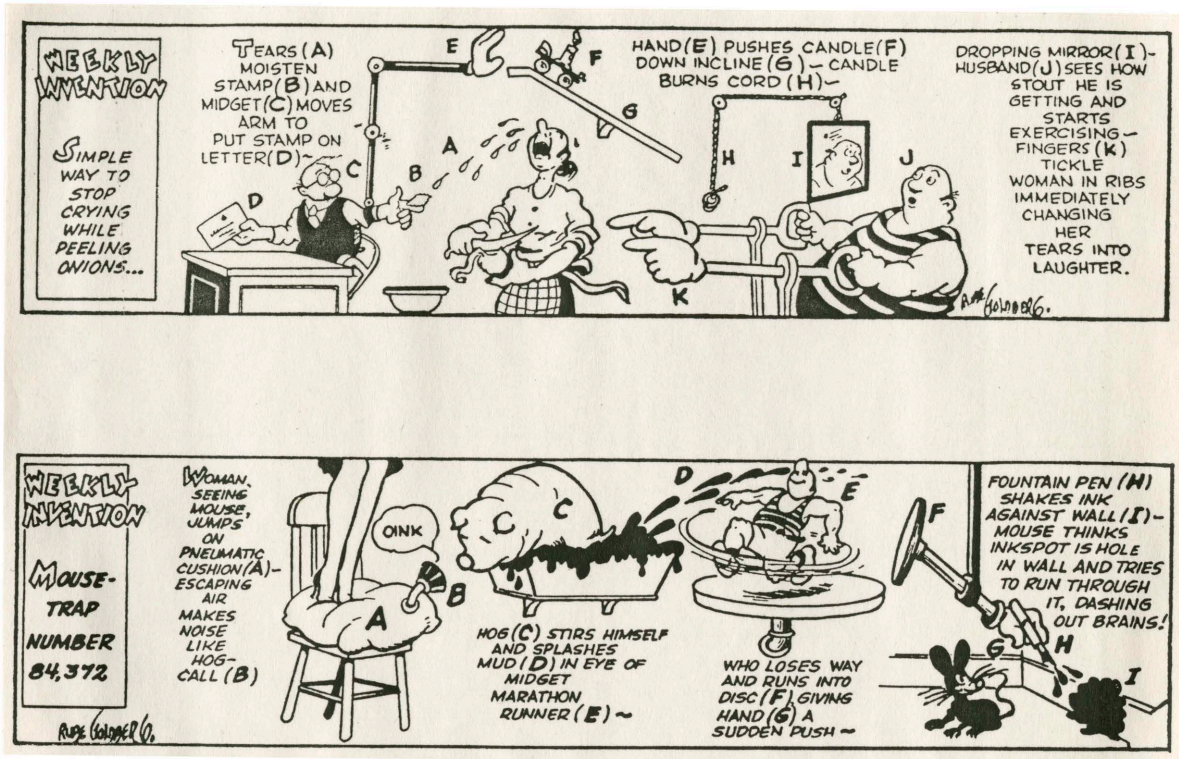


Plate II. RUBE GOLDBERG

A Simple Way to Stop Crying While Peeling Onions and Mouse Trap
 ("The Weekly Invention")



Plate III. *SLIP*

pine, grass, earth
1993, 4" x 29" x 16'



Plate IV. *STUD*

welded steel, 120 # ice
1993, 36" x 15" x 15"



Plate V. *MARTYR*

1994, 1' x 24' x 48'
welded steel, bronze, 3600 # earth

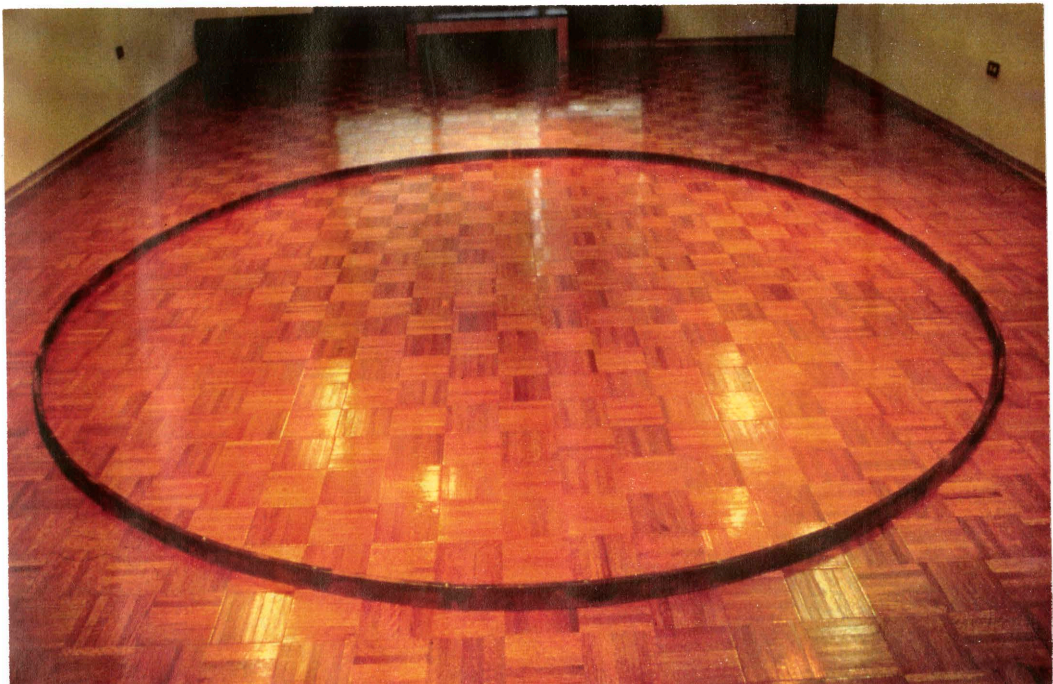


Plate VI. *LOCO-MOTIVE*

cast iron, steel, bronze
1994, 1" x 2" x 12' diameter



Plate VII. *HEY*

welded steel, screen, alfalfa hay
1994, 71" x 9" x 23"



Plate VIII. *SINGER*

hardwood laminates, steel
1995, 71" x 51" x 21"

REFERENCES

Benayoun, Robert, The Look of Buster Keaton. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Blesh, Rudi, Keaton. New York: Macmillan Company, 1966.

Keaton, Buster, and Samuels, Charles, My Wonderful World of Slapstick. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1960.

Marzio, Peter C., Rube Goldberg, His Life and Work. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973.

Rapf, Joanna E. and Green, Gary L., Buster Keaton. London: Greenwood Press, 1995.

Robinson, David, Buster Keaton. London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1969.

The American Heritage Dictionary, 2nd Edition, 1991.