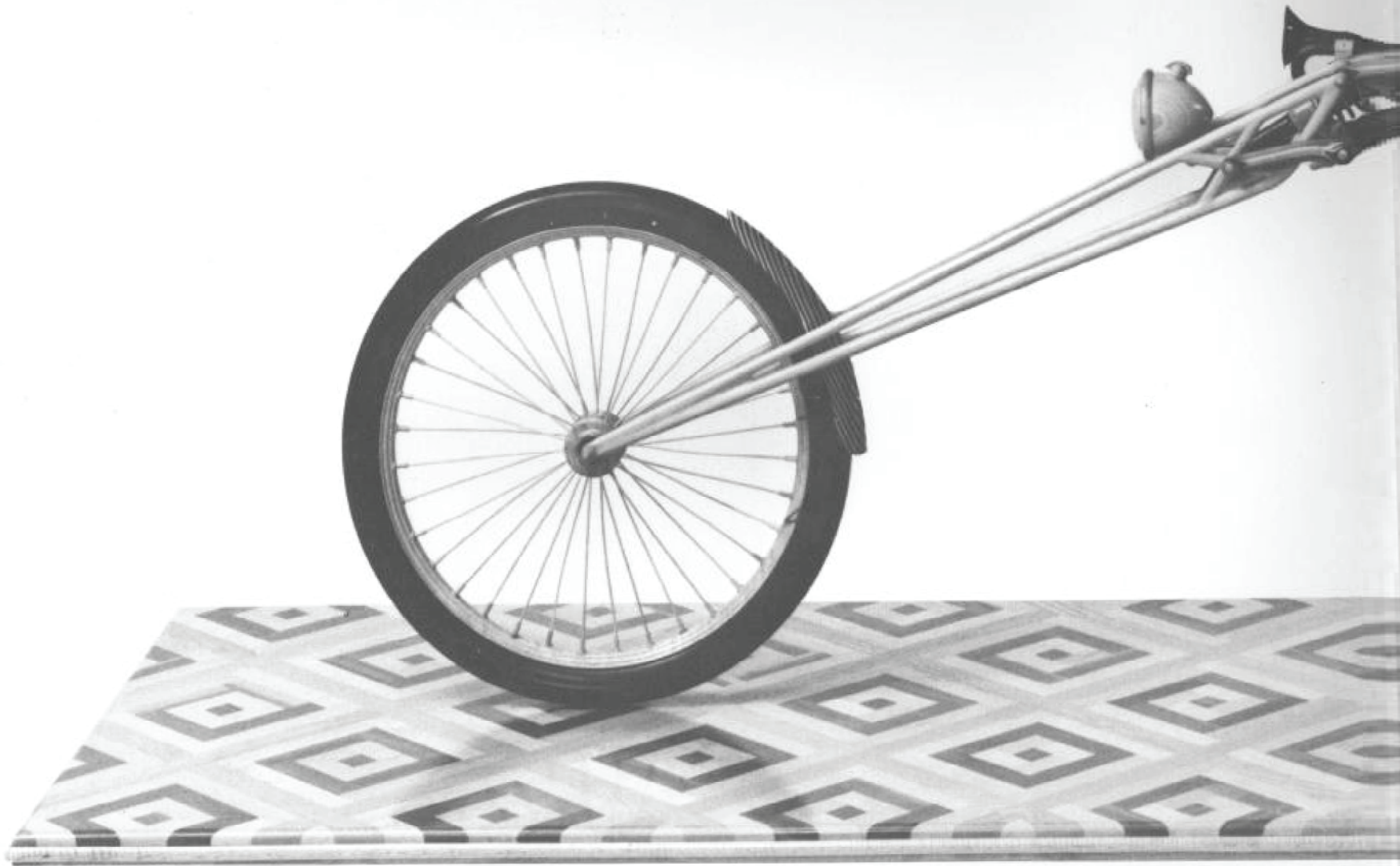
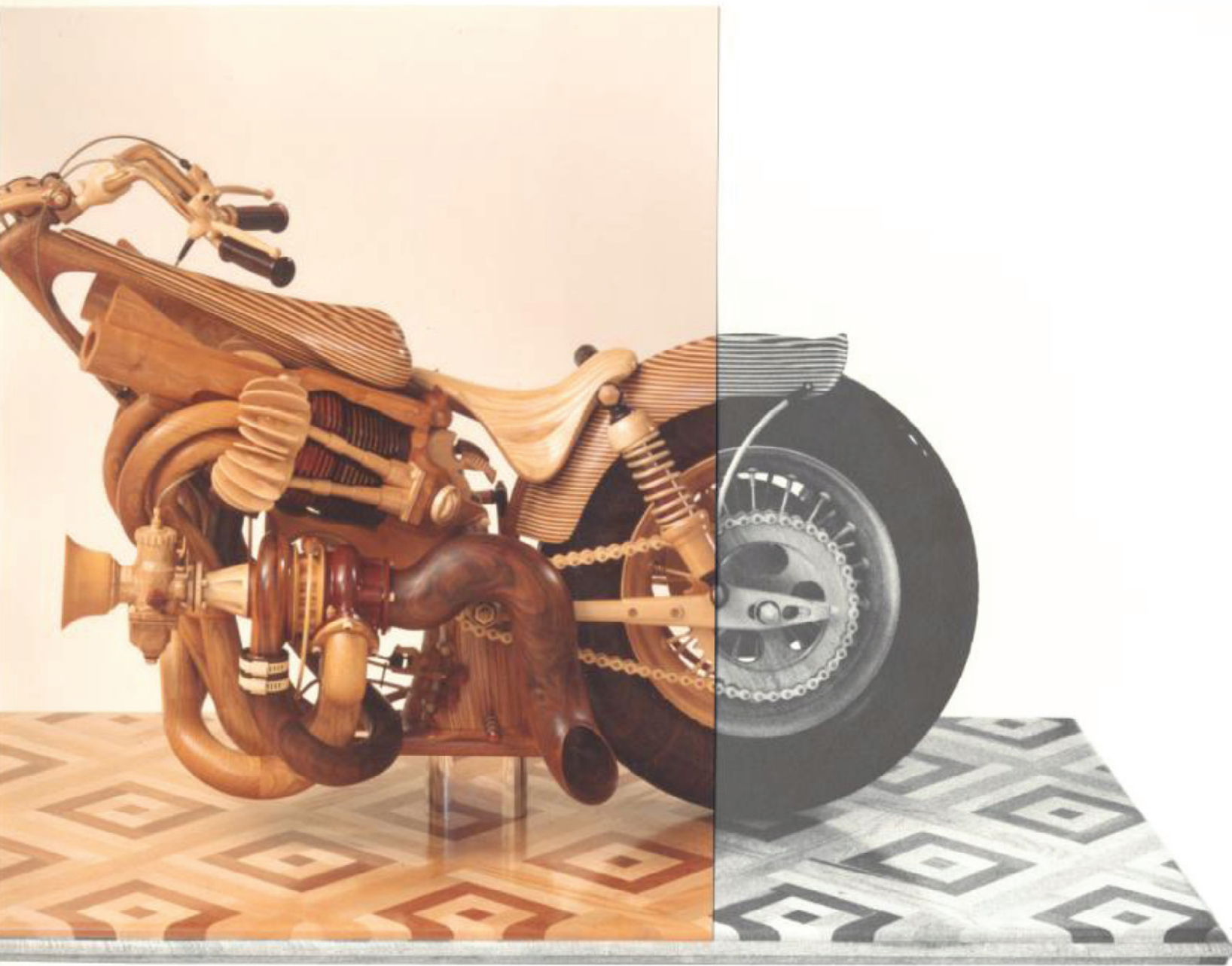


"Armed Chair," 1977, laminated hardwoods, h. 57" x w. 48" x d. 52," including base, collection of Mr. and Mrs. David P. Hatch



"Turbo," 1977, laminated hardwoods: rosewood, maple, poplar, Philippine mahogany, ash, western curly birch, black walnut, red oak, purple heart, box wood, koa, zebra wood, wenge, tulip wood, lace wood, cherry, reeds, vermillion, Baltic plywood, aircraft plywood, and bird's eye maple, h. 44" x w. 11' 4" x d. 40"





"Turbo" began as a rough, quickly executed, sketch on one inch to the foot scale graph paper. This quick pencil notation became a vision which enslaved and obsessed its maker. For eight months, the artist worked twelve to eighteen hours a day, six and a half days a week. The magnitude of the undertaking and the compressed work schedule necessitated the periodic assistance of three apprentices.

In the early stages of the project, the artist devoted a month of intense labor to the construction of the tires which were fabricated from 129 wedge-shaped, laminated pieces of rosewood, milled in seven layers and turned on a large industrial metal lathe.

The complexity and intricacy of the "chopper" dwarfs its pistol-engine. Embedded in the heart of the machine are a pair of pistols joined at the base like Siamese twins by a common handle butt with separate triggers, hammers and barrels. Parts from the turbo-charge engine are interspersed and interchanged with parts from the guns to form a complicated assembly.

The early sketch determined basic proportions, but left a multitude of major and minor details of construction unresolved. The exhaust and turbo charger systems were not designed until the bike was three quarters constructed. A spontaneous decision was made to abandon the symmetrical approach for a fantastic asymmetrical configuration. In its final design "Turbo" belies its apparent compulsive subservience to realistic rendering. It is an ingenious, two-sided machine with a massive entrail-like tubular exhaust system dominating one side.

A complete list of the twenty one different woods used in the construction of "Turbo" reads like a visual odyssey of epic proportions. "Turbo" is the ultimate tinker toy: a fastidiously detailed, painstakingly executed, sensual machine, resplendent with elements drawn from choppers, guns, and customized engines.



"Fetish," 1976 laminated hardwoods, aluminum and brass, h. 61" x w. 21" x d. 21," including base

Guns were invented for use in fighting and were used with the intent to kill one's adversary. While the first guns, which date from the 14th century, were primitive in design and unpredictable in performance, they were lethal. To the uninitiated, they were frightening and mysterious. The flaming, thunderous blast they produced when fired was believed by superstitious peoples encountering them for the first time to be the emanations of the gods or evil spirits.

The issue of the use of guns for sport and self-defense in this country is as volatile as the weapon itself. The word itself manifests itself in a variety of popular expressions and we frequently speak of "sticking to one's guns;" "jumping the gun;" "giving it the gun;" and "gunning for someone."

Michael Jean Cooper chose guns for their rich associations, as the thematic device unifying a series of sculptural objects. "Tex," the first work in the series was based on a Colt Single Action Army Revolver. Subsequent works, now eight in number, were based primarily, but not exclusively, on a Smith & Wesson basic body style.

Each work in the series is a hybrid object which combines the gun image with a second object. "Trainer Tricycle" is neither tricycle nor gun, but a gun-tricycle. Tricycles and toy guns are playthings of childhood. These two toys in combination are the instruments of make-believe games in which children "play" and pantomime mock combat.

"Armed Chair" is the witty title given to an unconventionally constructed, but completely functional, three-legged chair. The arms of this remarkable object terminate in clenched fists which clutch a menacing set of matched guns. The barrels of the guns aim at one another across the lap and legs of the chair's seated occupant, inviting the speculation that this elegant, curvilinear chair of leisure might spontaneously execute its occupant.



"Fetish" is a fantasy object. The penis-barreled pistol, untouchable and unattainable in its glass case, may be fired by cocking a hammer sheathed in a vaginal orifice. "Fetish" is disarming in its candor and explicitness. This exquisitely rendered weapon equates sexual virility with firing power.

Each work in the series is magnificent in its integrity of execution and its passionate devotion to perfection. While the artist's technical mastery is dazzling, it obscures a realistic appraisal of his working procedures. Each work involves hours of problem-solving with spontaneous solutions followed by unexpected deadends and defeats. A high-spirited, playful personality permits him to invent in mid-stream a form for which he does yet have a technical solution. The video tape made by Bob Reynolds in Cooper's studio resolves this gap in understanding by following the progress of "Turbo" over a three month period. In watching this tape, one discovers the joy and energy Michael Cooper experiences as he works. The air of the studio fills with sawdust, loud music from a radio turned up to full volume, and the sounds of electric shop tools in use. Work is interrupted by exclamations of joy or outrage when a phase flows easily or falls apart unexpectedly. Intimate vignettes from the video tape reveal the intense, sustained level of energy and creative thinking involved in making each sculptural object.

Michael Cooper's gun series began as an exploration of his doubts about the legitimacy of possessing handguns. But because the sculptor is an artist and craftsman first, and incidentally a social critic, his interest in guns became an absorbing one. That which repulses, also fascinates. So we are drawn to these replicas of dangerous and deadly instruments by a feeling of awe and unabashed curiosity which sedates our recognition of their menace. The beauty of their form and their intricate combination with other equally fascinating objects ultimately diminishes our confrontation with the destructive capacity of the weapon.

The artist's utilization of a deadly weapon theme invites associations to this particular instrument of death. Possession of a gun implies the potential supremacy of one human being over another. The man who holds a gun in his hand may also hold the life of another in his hand. With domination as the key thread which links together a skein of overlapping interpretations, the gun series is suggestive. Myths of sexual potency may be linked to physical prowess. Beautiful machines may be awesome, even if their intent is ugly and vicious. Fast motorcycles with customized engines may imply escape from authority, autonomy and mastery. Michael Jean Cooper's devotion to perfection of craft and eloquence of form is enriched by these associations and interpretations which surround and illuminate his sculpture like a nimbus.

—Jacqueline Thurston

Gun Series: Michael Jean Cooper

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