

MICHAEL JEAN COOPER • *When he is not teaching, Mike Cooper is in his shop behind a solid, white, Herbert Hoover sort of house in Santa Clara. He races against an exhibition date, making elaborate kinetic wood and metal sculptures and resorting to a black punching bag mounted near his machines when frustrations accumulate.*

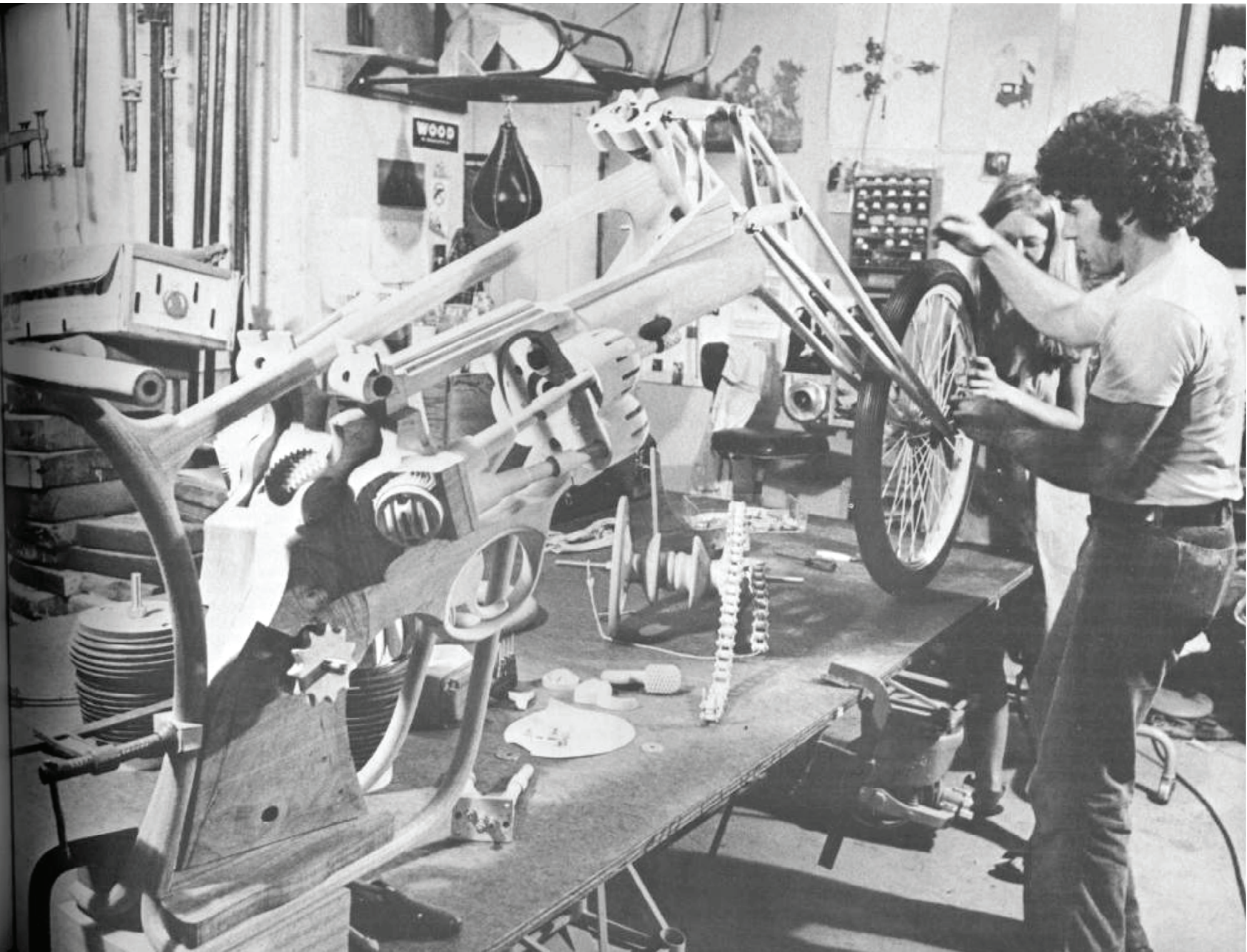
Mike Cooper is a modest and likeable guy who teaches at Foothill College near San Jose and spends a lot of time in his shop in Santa Clara. With tremendous care and exactitude, he builds vehicles, flying machines, and kinetic sculptures of wood, metal and sometimes fiberglass. Though exhibition until recently has given him little gratification, viewers find themselves compelled to respond physically to his work. The Captain's Chair, built in 1975 and shown in California Design '76, swung several degrees across a sloped wooden deck from a pivotal peg leg. It wasn't a proper chair. It made people feel giddy, unsure of their perspective. It offended their sense of proportion and stability, but seduced them with its beautiful workmanship and graceful parts. Many were angered to be so lured to something they couldn't feel comfortable with as either art or as a chair, yet they couldn't resist actual contacts with the piece—a stolen stroke of one of its smooth curves or an angered shake of the whole thing. It was a very sophisticated piece which eventually ended up in the Salvador Dali Museum in Cleveland; but that was the first time anyone had bought any of Michael's work. Most of it still lies around his shop: a slick metal and glass Chitty Chitty Bang Bang sort of race car made shortly after he got his Master's in sculpture at the University of California, Berkeley, a radio-controlled flying machine with bent-wood wings covered in fine nylon mesh, as were the fins on a later three-wheeled bent-wood vehicle made for the artists' soap box derby in San Francisco. At most twenty-eight inches high the vehicle rolled on the finest bicycle tires made and could be driven by someone lying on his back going head-first downhill.

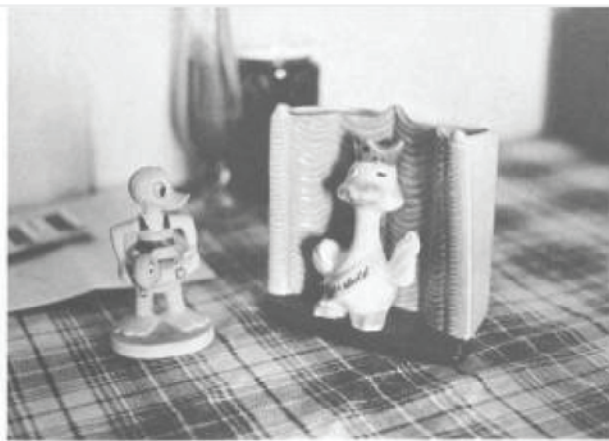
In front of his two-storied shop, a fifteen- or twenty-foot blue steel crane-like arm dangles a few electrical connections that bungled the final completion of the piece. The arm was to move in all directions above the horizontal plane, flapping attached wings to the delight of some maniac at the very complex control panel.

"I had to abandon that one," Michael says. "There's a lot of trial and error in all of this. You learn something from the things that don't work, but it's not exactly the kind of thing you want to write your parents about. Gee, I just learned a tremendously interesting thing for about two thousand dollars and three months' time."

Michael grew up in the San Joaquin Valley town of Lodi, "where grapes are grown for cheap wine and table use. Dad had a grocery store with a gas pump in front and chairs inside. He actually encouraged people to come in and read the magazines in the store, if they could get through all the kids and comic books. The thing I remember and liked the most, besides living in the country and having the freedom to make noise, go out into the street and do whatever, was water-skiing on

The true workman...must be forever stirring to make the piece at which he is at work better than the last. He must refuse at anybody's bidding to turn out—I won't say a bad—but even an indifferent piece of work whatever the public wants, or thinks it wants. He must have a voice, and a voice worth listening to in the whole affair. William Morris





the lake. I still love that kind of danger."

Michael completely undermines the belief that artists are lonely, melancholy souls on the fringes of society and sanity. His living surroundings reek of an innocent, honest America, and of the rural town he grew up in, where old tractors and mudholes full of polliwogs fostered imaginative and creative play.

His kitchen in Santa Clara would be comfortable and familiar to anyone who has ever eaten cornflakes. It's big and square as Kansas, with a large icebox, cast iron frying pans, a cloth-covered table and a separate, can-stocked pantry. On the table are two small Disney ducks; Miss Duck in her bathing suit and an inner tube around her waist startles Donald with a flirtatious wink.

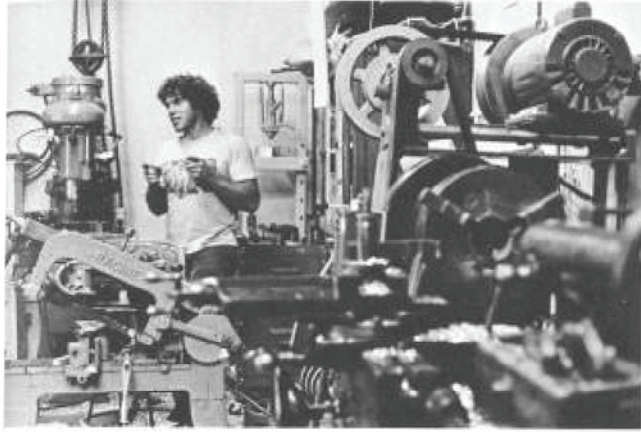
Michael has a beer and laughs, as he must laugh every day at Miss Duck and as he must be cheered by the great lips in his medicine cabinet, or the variety of sculpture in his living room.

"I never thought seriously at all about being a sculptor until after I had my BA in commercial art. Commercial art was good training in selecting an idea and taking it as far as you could, but it sure is removed from what I'm doing now."

At present, Michael is working on a series of handguns. "I've always been opposed to the use of guns, but I saw potential in the idea."

The first piece in the series is a fat-tired child's tricycle; about two-year-old size, beautifully crafted in bird's eye maple. Under the seat and handle bars is a pistol

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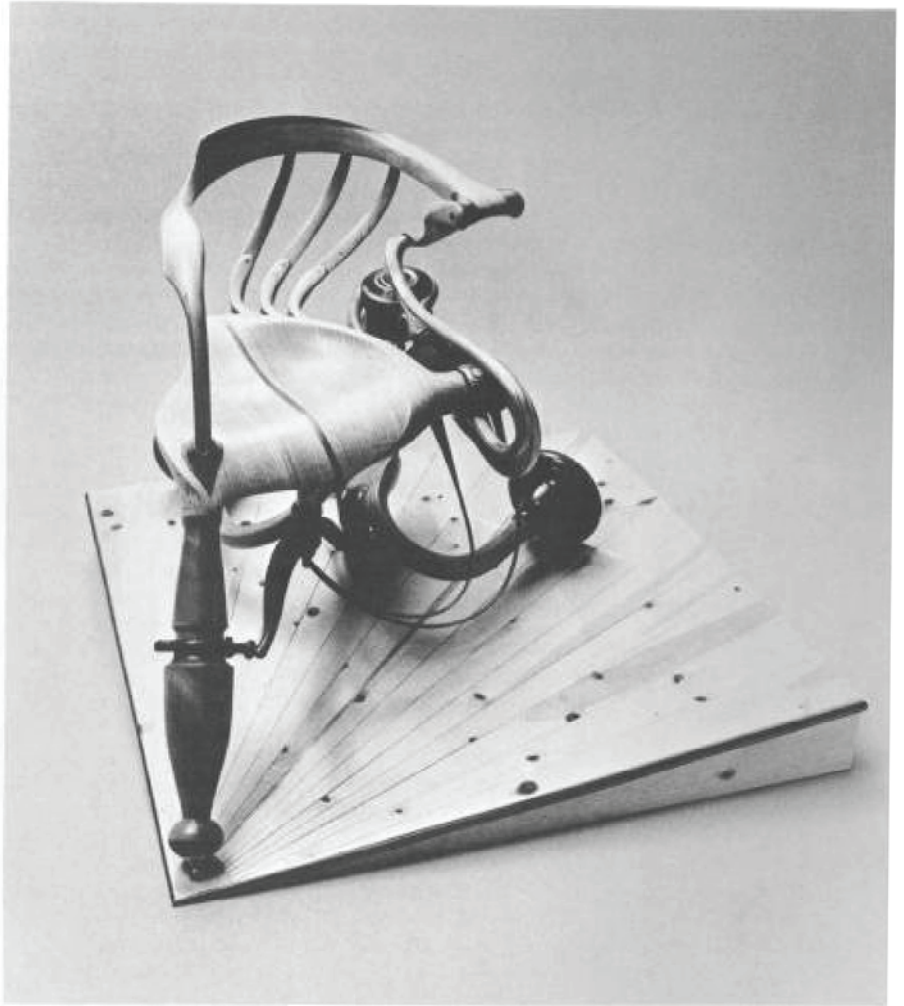
with a revolving chamber and movable trigger. There is a Charles Adams's snicker to it.

Another in the series, made of the most exotic and finely cut pieces of wood, is composed of male and female parts of a fondleable size. Mike calls it a fetish gun. "It's an elegant little jewel, but it's dirty as it can be. It's pornography, but it's clean, you know?"

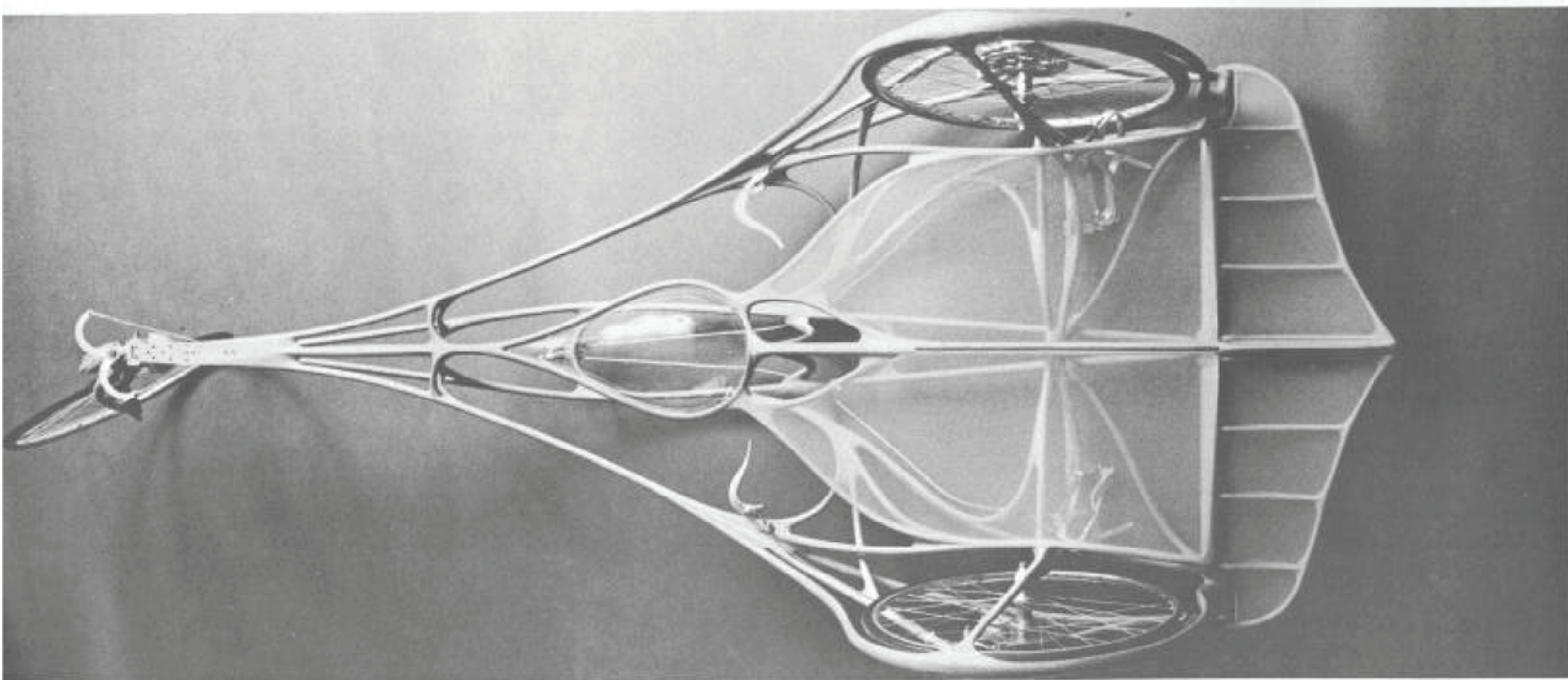
Mike's ideas are abundant and fun, but fast as he works, he gets frustrated by the slowness of his exacting craftsmanship. To save his sanity he has a punching bag mounted on a ball bearing on the wall of the shop.

"I'd like to make furniture, but I just don't have the time. Other things take precedence. I'm trying to reschedule myself in an attempt to be satisfied with the limited amount of stuff that I can make. That seems to be a big factor in whether or not I feel happy. After teaching, I'm trying to put in a set number of hours each day and each week. I keep an account of what I accomplish each day. We'll see if it seems realistic. You can't do anything the least bit technical with a little bit of time here and a little bit of time there. It requires a lot of discipline and nothing happens until you've got a couple hundred hours into it. I set myself a problem and a time limitation. I've only got my mind and wits to carry me through, but I like that kind of competition with myself."

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Photograph by Jay Ahrend



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