

## World

Michael Brolly, a Berks County artist, has developed an international reputation as an innovator in the thriving but somewhat esoteric field of sculptural lathe-turned art. Now his work from the past 20 years is being featured in a retrospective exhibition at Hicks Art Center Gallery, and the 39 pieces in the show give a detailed and comprehensive picture of his ideas and development as an artist.

Born in Philadelphia, Michael Brolly worked in a factory for many years, changing careers to study art in college and perfect his skills as a woodworker. He has maintained a no-nonsense work ethic as an artist. His technique is labor-intensive: he cuts, turns and carves multiple wood components that he assembles into quasi-functional creatures with movable parts.

Brolly finds inspiration in bizarre insects, television nature shows and *National Geographic*. On another level, his work seems to tap into the adolescent imagination as expressed through comic book characters or video game creatures.

The exhibition includes a few early pieces that indicate Brolly's penchant for over-the-top craftsmanship and quirky subjects. *Frog Bowl*, 1988, made of maple and mahogany, is an odd combination of a functional lidded bowl and a stylized frog. It has a sensuously rounded bowl form with three little pointed legs and a covered top with bulging frog eyeballs. From the same year, *Self Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* shows a stylized alien wearing an oversized raincoat, but opens up in the front to reveal an assortment of hidden drawers and compartments, and a peculiar skeletal system on which the owner can hang earrings and other jewelry. The piece foreshadows Brolly's innovations in what you might call "extreme cabinetry," made of dozens of highly polished, custom-made wood (multiple exotic wood species) and metal components, variegated goldleaf, bike parts and customized hardware.

Brolly has taken these ideas and techniques much further (into alien territory, if you will) in his recent large-scale sculptures with sci-fi imagery. *Thinking of My Mother-in-Law Marianne and Those Magnificent Mahogany Breasts*, 1996, is a 5-foot-tall cabinet in the form of a peculiar insect-bird. As the title indicates, an obsession with breasts is a major theme, and Brolly has provided not two, but eight of them in the form of carved mahogany drawer fronts. The piece is filled with hidden compartments, revolving drawers and even a mirror that



**Michael Brolly, *Self Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1988), 27 inches by 17 inches by 11 inches, lacewood, maple, purpleheart, mahogany, ebony, bubinga and variegated gold leaf.**

can be seen when the head is removed. In *www.jewel@space.re*, 1998, an alien creature - clearly female by the looks of her silver-plated bullet bra - stands on two spindly legs with quick-release knees and taloned feet. Brolly has carefully linked form with function: each of the breasts hinge outward to reveal two revolving drawers and the head (a creepy alien noggin with large dark almond eyes and a tall domed and pointed forehead) slides upward to uncover a moveable tongue with holes for earrings and a single row of pointed teeth.

In between these major pieces, into which Brolly sometimes pours as much as a year of full-time studio work, he works on smaller pieces, such as a group of baseball and toy sculptures that use puns, innuendo and language games. Brolly's life-size baseball sculptures, such as *Flyball*, 1996,

a lathe-turned baseball with a metal zipper head and inset wooden zipper, and *Baseball Bat*, also 1996, an elegant object-animal made of ebonized walnut, are humorously low-brow forays into conceptual art. The toys, incongruously, have more complex, adult themes. Several of them, *Rattle*, 2001, and *Doubled Breasted Yo-Yo with Blacklace, Velvet-Lined, Satin-Strapped, Demi-Cup Carrying Case*, 1998, play with ideas of the nourishing and erotic breast, and are wonderfully fetishistic.

Michael Brolly's sculptures are strange and powerful, and not just from the use of bizarre creatures as subject matter, but from the passion, eroticism and insane amount of time he invests in them. Yet, Brolly's humor and graciousness are just as deeply embedded in the work, which draws the viewer into a groovy, psychosexual universe of friendly monsters.

**-Susan Hagen**

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**MICHAEL BROLLY:  
CRADLE TO CRADLE**  
Through Oct. 19, Hicks  
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