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SECTION D

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EDWARD OWEN

"Saw Bird" by Mark Blumenstein, a 1979 sculpture fashioned of hardware. "Tools," says one sculptor, "are what make us human and ideas possible."

Tool Time Sublime

Our tools, our selves: In Charlie Brouwer's sculpture, the man and his ladder have become one.



A Washington exhibit turns tools into creative jewels, celebrating the artistic essence and essentialness of our gadgets.

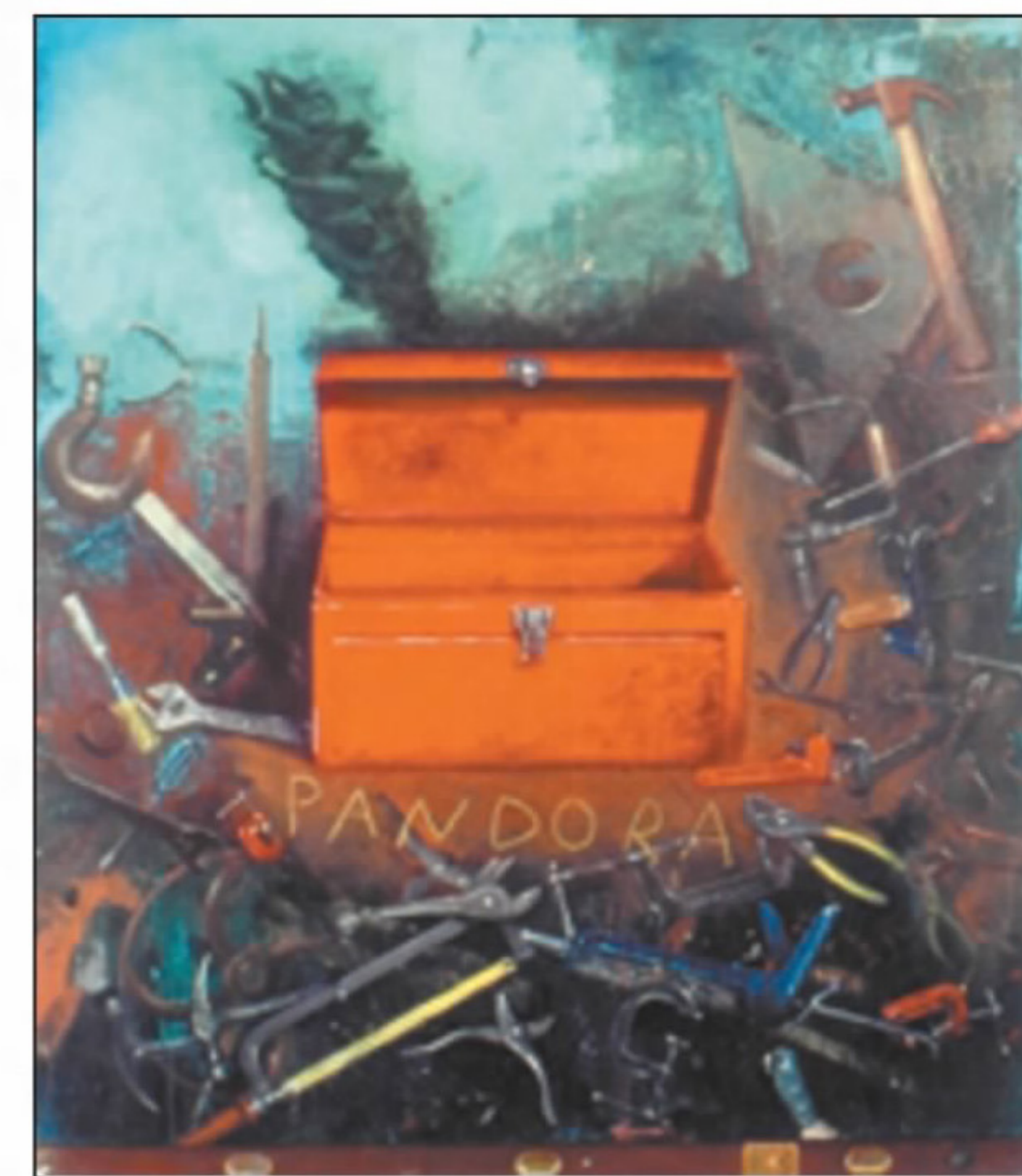
By Alan J. Heavens
 INQUIRER REAL ESTATE WRITER

If you have ever been so tired that you couldn't sleep, Scott Lesiak has a bed for you. Its main features include a large hammer poised above a pillow on which a bull's-eye has been painted. Behind the headboard is a series of weights, pulleys and levers. Lesiak's *Insomnia Bed* is just one of many works of tool-inspired art in *Tools as Art VI: Instruments of Change*, an exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington. Using pieces of the collection that

Art Exhibit
**Tools as Art VI:
 Instruments of Change**

At the National Building Museum, Washington

once decorated the Maryland headquarters of the now-defunct Hechinger hardware-store chain, the museum has mounted six exhibits that, according to its brochure, celebrate "the dignity of common tools and the intrinsic beauty of their design, where form See **TOOLS** on D4



Christopher Pelley's "Pandora's Box" is a tool chest emptied of its contents. No tools: That's a bad thing. The exhibit's 60 pieces trace the use of tools as a hallmark of civilization and a source of creativity.

Tools that work as art

TOOLS from D1
and function are often inextricably linked."

Or, as Pete Hamill wrote in the 1995 book *Tools as Art: The Hechinger Collection* (Abrams, \$37.95) that he coauthored with John Hechinger: "The art ... tells us something about who we are and where we come from. It even suggests, with a smile or a whisper, where we might be going."

The current exhibit is considered the crown of the series, and its 60 pieces trace the use of tools as a hallmark of civilization and a source of artistic creativity.

But if you've ever picked up a hammer or sawed a piece of lumber, you'll quickly realize that the paintings, sculptures and photographs are artistic manifestations of the relationships that professionals and amateurs develop with the tools they use.

For example, if you've ever painted your house or repaired roof shingles or changed a light bulb in a ceiling, you know how important a sturdy ladder can be to your work.

The fact that, in Charlie Brouwer's *He Always Carried His Own Ladder to the Job*, the ladder has become part of the subject's body comes as no surprise at all.

"Tools," said Brouwer, "are what make us human and ideas possible."

How important are tools to the well-being of the world?

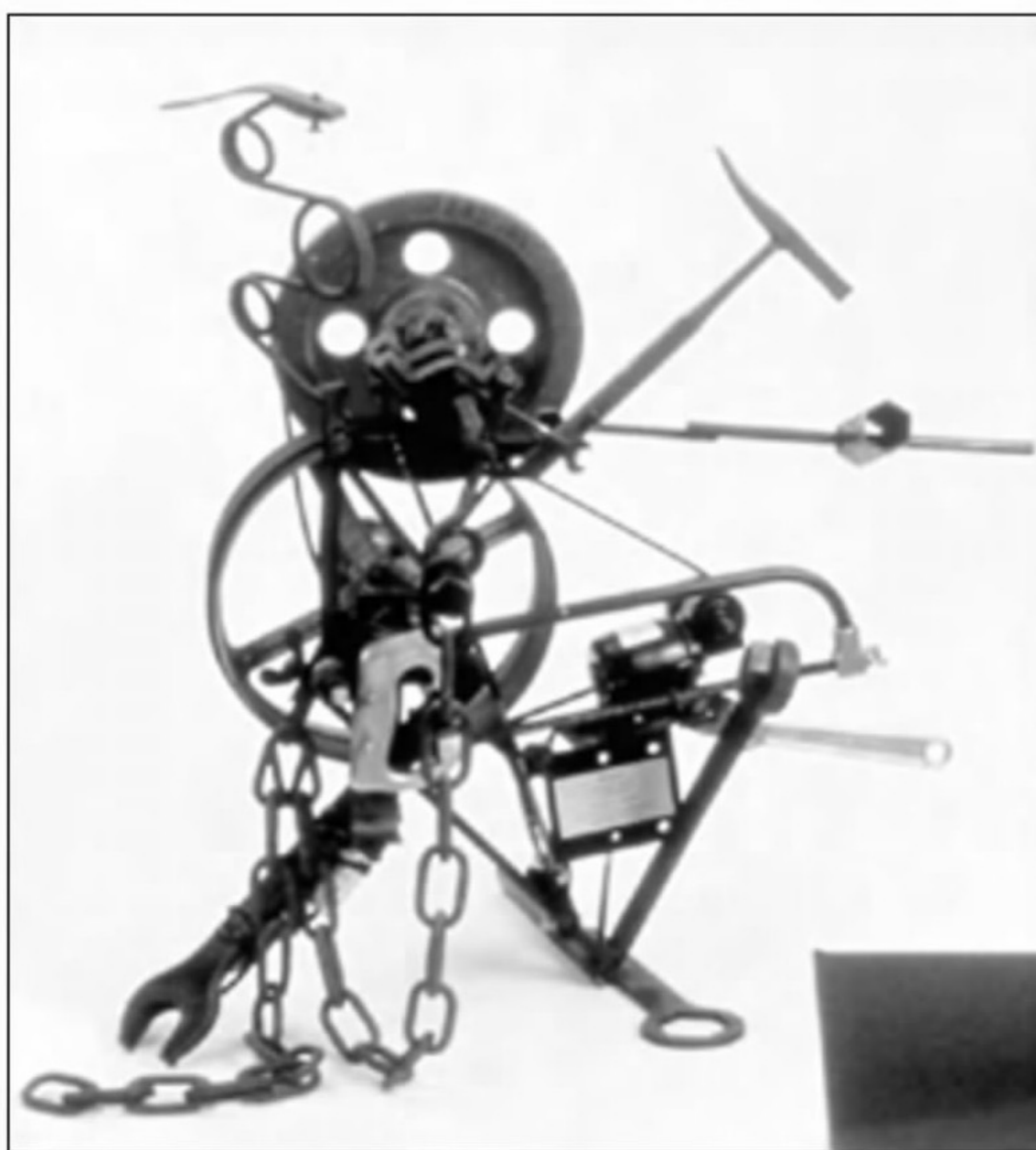
Consider *Pandora's Box* by Christopher Pelley, which shows a toolbox emptied of its contents. Without access to tools, it seems, humankind would be in real trouble.

Yet tools in the hands of those unable to use them are a real danger. Stephen Hansen's *Man on a Limb* saws the part of the board on which he is perched — oblivious to the situation in which he has put himself.

Tools also can make a statement seemingly unrelated to work.

Susan D. White uses two hedge clippers with black gloves and white gloves at either end in *It Cuts Both Ways*, a commentary on racial harmony.

Jim McCullough offers a tribute to Hechinger with his rendering of the hardware chain's



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Jean Tinguely's "Tools 85," 1985, a motor-driven construction of hardware and tools, in the National Building Museum exhibit.

first store on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington, which opened in the 1920s. The details include a sign now ecologically out of place — "Big Trees Make Good Lumber" — and the store's motto: "Hechinger Co., from foundation to roof, rock-bottom prices."

Folk artist Howard Finster's painted saws honor the place of tools in history as he suggests that "tools came first, the building of America came second — without tools we could not have master builders or maintain the world."

It isn't all that easy for tool users to understand what the artist who tries to celebrate tools and their uses has in mind. What's fun is trying to come up with your own interpretations.

Michael Rocco Pinirottis' *The Nest* is a bird's nest surrounded by the neon frame of a house — perhaps a first project for a fledgling woodworker with a knowledge of inert gases.

From the Kongo people of central Africa comes the Nkisi, a clay figure with nails driven into it as an appeal to the spirit within. It can also be interpreted as an advertisement for nail-gun safety.

The pieces are poignant; for example, Jonathan Borofsky's *Hammering Man* depicts the underpaid worker at the dawn of the technological age, marking the passing of hand labor in favor of the machine.

They are also really clever. *Hybrid Flatware* by Hiro J. Masuku is a plumb-bob fork, a crescent-wrench knife, and a drill-bit spoon.

Some are incredibly innovative. In *Spinning Wrench*, Berenice Abbott creates a snakelike abstraction in a photograph by using multiple exposures.

Arman transforms hundreds of vise grips into a *School of Fishes*. In *Kouros*, John Van Alstine balances two huge granite blocks with a vise.

And Michael Malpass' use of welded steel and hardware in *Globe* evokes relics of the industrial age.

A word of warning: Don't try

to use Pier Gustafson's *Drill Press*. The lifelike full-scale creation is made of paper.

Contact Alan J. Heavens at 215-854-2472 or by e-mail at aheavens@phillynews.com.

If You Go

What: "Tools as Art VI: Instruments of Change," a permanent exhibit.

Where: National Building Museum, 401 F St. NW, Washington, between Fourth and Fifth Streets, at the Judiciary Square Metro stop. (Wheelchair access is at the Fourth and G Street entrances.)

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free.

Information: 202-272-2448; www.nbm.org.

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