

ARTISAN

Picture: SEBASTIAN COSTANZO

Steel appeal

There's art in spare parts, says sculptor Jos Van Hulsen, who gives industrial junk a new lease of life.

By REBECCA LANCASHIRE

Jos Van Hulsen, a softly spoken, unassuming bloke, is a closet heavy-metal fan. Not only his closet, but in fact several sheds at his home, are stacked with defunct industrial objects.

Cogs, springs, piping, knobs, fuses, insulators and fittings of all kinds are piled up awaiting a new lease of life. The trash of 20th century industry is his treasure.

Van Hulsen trained as a sculptor at the RMIT and his skill in finding beauty in hunks of grimy machinery parts is brought to his contemporary furniture and homewares.

A discarded tractor carburettor is recycled to form the basis of a quirky candelabra, a fruit bowl is made from an old plough dish set atop a hefty metal valve. With a few modifications, a gleaming copper boiler becomes a stylish post-modern cupboard, ideal for camouflaging a TV or

for use as a cocktail cabinet.

"Steel appeals to me because there is so much of it around as scrap metal and it's in so many amazing shapes," he says. "Much of what I use are historic pieces - I like to preserve a bit of history and people can relate to the pieces because they remember them from their childhood."

His work has a strong nostalgic appeal, from quaint old bakelite insulators to metal printers' type, but it is his skill in reincarnation that makes these objects come alive. As Van Hulsen says "putting familiar things in a different perspective can make them look beautiful". He has hung a wrought iron gate on the wall, and suddenly it looks like a lacy sculpture.

He deliberately retains the marks from the objects' previous lives - because their history is in the patina. It's a style that would suit the industrial feel of a contemporary ware-

house apartment, or add a quirky remnant of the past to a Victorian villa.

He and his partner, Mary Long, hunt out the detritus of the pre-plastic, pre-electronic age discarded

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from farms, railway yards, power plants and factories. Growing up around Ballarat and seeing agricultural machinery and metal flotsam in the paddocks must have had an effect, Van Hulsen believes.

"I once worked for a scrap-metal guy. He did a lot of jobs for the SEC and they were throwing out so much great stuff; things I knew wouldn't be

around anymore," he says. "It was all junk to him. He would laugh at me because I always ended up owing him more than he paid me!"

Van Hulsen started making domestic functional objects when he discovered how difficult it was to make a living as a sculptor in Australia. Few Australians buy sculpture for their homes and few commercial galleries are prepared to show it. "It was also about trying to make art a bit more accessible and less threatening for people, it's easier to relate to the functional stuff."

His abstract sculptures - he shows with Gallery 101 in the city - also use metal and found objects, including '50s kitchen utensils and barbed wire, which he weaves into soft-looking organic shapes.

Almost everything he uses for his furniture and sculptures is recycled - from the hardwood used for the top

of a dining table to its curvy metal base - made from old printing machine rollers and car suspension springs. Railway line bolts, a spanner and old metal pipe become a jewellery box, while bearing shafts metamorphosise into a mantelpiece clock.

"The shapes of the pieces I find inspire me, there are shapes that I could never think of myself," he says, although fitting these industrial discs together is like working with a giant, unruly Meccano set.

As he sits surrounded by his creations, Van Hulsen looks a bit like a boy in a toy shop. "I would love to see some of these things animated," says Long, and her eyes light up.

• *Post Industrial Design*, tel: 9689 6258. Prices: Candelabras from \$65, large \$950; jewellery box \$250; large lights \$340, bird garden sculpture \$1100, garden sculptures from \$700.



Van Hulsen and partner Mary Long love giving familiar things a different perspective "to make them look beautiful".