

# The Tension Between The Work and Vision of Charles Timm-Ballard



*A Review by  
Tanya Hartman*

*O waste of lost, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this weary, unbright cinder, lost!  
Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a  
stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? ~ Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward Angel.*

*Your goal in drawing should be to encounter the reality of experience. . . to see ever more  
clearly, ever more deeply. ~ Betty Edwards, Drawing On The Right Side of The Brain.*



Facing page: *One Track Mind*. 2015.  
Stoneware and porcelain fired to cone 8 in  
oxidation. 7 x 22 x 22.5 in.

Left: *Mind Like Clock Works*  
(Detail, View One).

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CURIOUS about everything," Charles Timm-Ballard tells me earnestly, as we discuss his work and artistic vision. His references and the scope of his intellect support this self-observation. In the course of one conversation, he moves through ideas seamlessly, bringing together the concept of ontological pessimism with our hunger for the sublime. He discusses creativity and its suppression in social media. He speaks of manifest destiny, Dutch landscape painting, and stage capitalism and its dismal effect on the landscape. There is no pretension in him at all – merely a hunger to understand the circumstances of our times and how society affects emotional life.

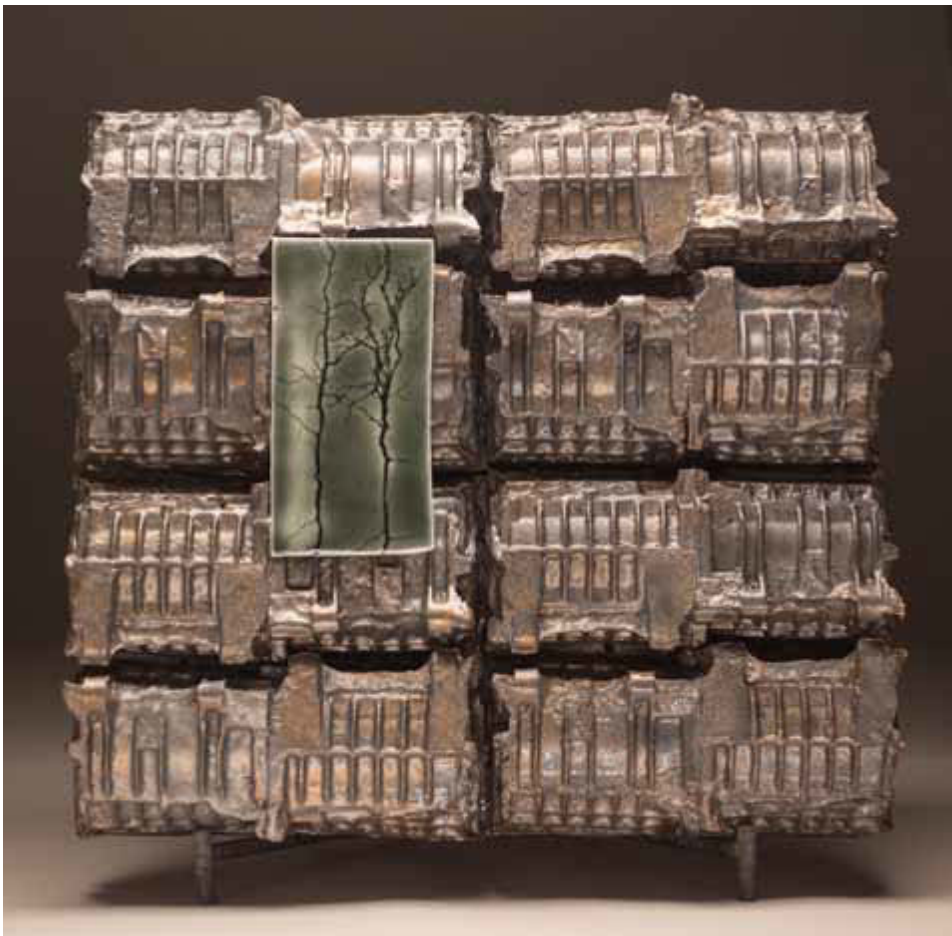
Most striking about Timm-Ballard is how he frequently pairs opposites in order to illuminate cultural contradictions. Fusing antitheses together in concept and image is an ongoing preoccupation of the artist, a practice that weaves through his work, uniting seemingly irreconcilable imagery and ideas.

Bringing the pedestrian into proximity with the sublime is one of the hallmarks of Timm-Ballard's work. "You would think growing up in industrial landscapes, I would want to run, but I am fascinated.

I used to think that growing up in those raw spaces was negative but it made me question everything."

What those gritty landscapes and the rough neighbourhoods surrounding them made the artist question seems to be the contradictory, elusive nature of visual reality and cultural constructs. "Growing up with urban industrial landscapes and Lake Michigan there are a lot of empty, natural panoramas but they are all surrounded by industrial spaces so there was always that tension. You could look in one





direction and see a beautiful vista, turn around, and see a factory." There was also the atmosphere of the artist's household, generous enough to take in 13 foster children, "all in a row" in marked contrast to the tough neighbourhood and schools Timm-Ballard attended. "One of the things that I did was I hid in the library. I had a circuit that I went through, starting with art books and black and white photography and then I would just get lost in fiction, in all genres of books. The moral ambiguity I lived in created the iconoclastic mindset that I now have."

The artist still loves to read. In college at The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and later in graduate school at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 90 percent of his classes outside of art were in literature. The result of all the reading is a mythical essence in Timm-Ballard's work. Most pieces, whether they are landscape based and painterly or more sculptural and industrial, evoke a narrative environment that fosters the creation of stories. For instance, in a recent work in progress titled *One Track Mind* a decrepit train, almost like a child's broken toy, perches precariously on a worn section of track, which in turn rests on two railway trestles of dubious stability. Hanging between them is a pristine tile with a luminous and haunting image of two barren trees. The piece immediately establishes itself to be about duality, as pairs dominate the composition and seem to communicate that a conflicted mind is monotonous and dispiriting. The train cannot move, composed as it is of two cars pulling in opposite

directions. The track leads nowhere anyway. Only the illusion, the image of the trees, invites one inside, seeming to communicate that nature and its concomitant wonder is the only portal out from emotional inertia. Thus, the viewer is pulled into a fragment of a saga. Why is the train so broken down and still? Do the trees represent the industrial landscape beyond the track, or something more enigmatic and foreign? How is it that the piece communicates pain and the interior world, while also depicting a scene from ordinary experience? Another interpretation of the piece lies in its title. Perhaps human beings are irredeemably committed to despoiling the land with industry, and thus have 'one-track minds'? The compression of various meanings into one modest

work of art is akin to a poem or an economically written short story.

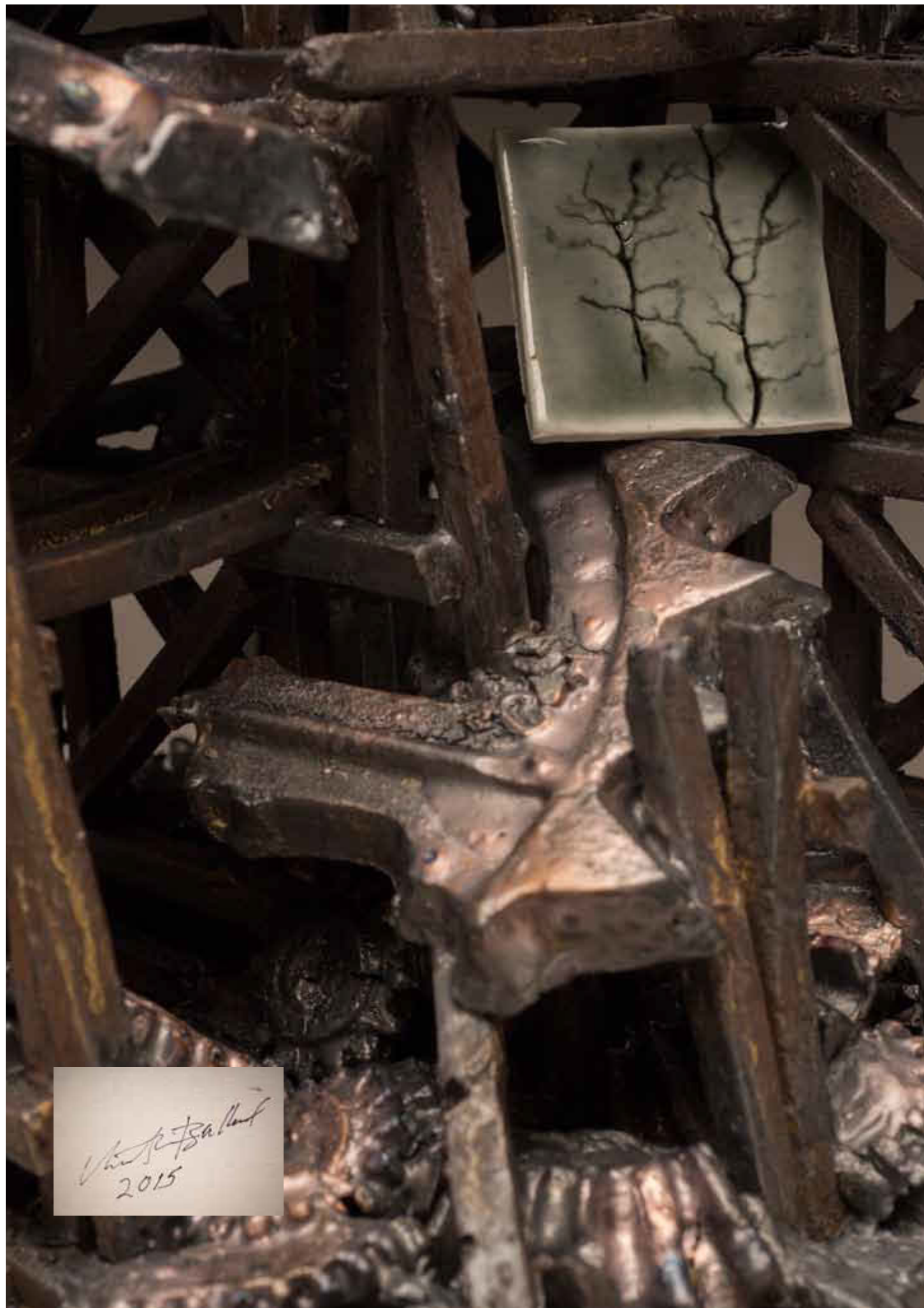
Another work in progress, *Gearhead* presents industrial ruins bedecked with fragments of detritus. Wedged into the irregular grid of the structure is a small tile, shaped like a postcard with an incandescent image of monochromatic trees and sky. The way that the tile is pushed into the structure is poignant. The entire assembly is evocative of a brain, the ruined pylons almost like neurons, the postcard like a cherished memory of something sacred and pure. The structure, however, also reads as a manufacturing site, the detritus the remains of what was created there, the trees a memory of a landscape before pollution and erosion. Another reading of the piece might allow for the trees to be seen as despoiled, tucked into the industrial structure as a warning of its effect on the environment. Again, it is up to the viewer to create the story. Timm-Ballard provides all the elements and just enough intrigue to pull his audience into imaginative contemplation.

Ontological pessimism, or the belief that non-progressive change is a permanent condition of existence, is a theme that runs through Timm-Ballard's work. "Lately, I have been thinking about ontological pessimism and god. Freud called god 'the oceanic experience' or 'the sublimity'. When it works, it gives you a sense that you can have some

Facing page: *Mind like Clock Works (View 2)*. 2015. 8.5 x 11 x 18 in.

Above: *Grinder*. 2015. 20.5 x 22.5 x 4 in.

Above works are stoneware and porcelain fired to cone 8 in oxidation.



White Salt  
2015



was a series of abstract landscapes glazed onto tiles with irregular edges, a couple of inches thick. The juxtaposition of the delicate, glazed semblance of something natural offset against the brutality and materiality of the clay tile is communicative of disconnection between human illusions of nature and its pitiless reality. Thus, the artist has created an image of nature upon a slab of nature, for what is clay other than earth? The works also depict, metaphorically, body and soul with the ephemeral in proximity to the visceral.

There is a rare depth of feeling and intelligence of perception that runs through all the artist's work, due, in part, to the fact that he does not shy away from existential pondering. "There is a mystery to being a finite thing and we have this limited tool, the brain, to sort this out. What I am

kind of connection bigger than getting by from day to day." Indeed, the artist seeks experiences that will allow him to encounter the transcendent. During a recent sabbatical, he was invited to make work at The Hambidge Center for the Arts in Rabun Gap, Georgia, US. Timm-Ballard says, he is "monastic about everything". Thus, he drove to The Hambidge Center For The Arts from his home in Walla Walla, Washington in pure silence, stopping to take photographs of strip mines and power plants. His silence continued at The Hambidge Center, as he worked all day and hiked sections of the Appalachian Trail that cross the campus. The artist found that time changed in silence, lost its linearity and became "an essence to inhabit". What is fascinating is that the works that resulted from deep quiet lack a specific reference to an era. The assemblages that he is putting together and that combine industrial imagery with mystical images of nature could just as easily be from mid-century as from our own era. Thus, like myths they stay eternally relevant.

Charles Timm-Ballard has explored his ideas through a variety of media, but ultimately keeps returning to ceramic art as his primary means of expression. "Whenever I walked into a ceramics studio, the smell of the clay would envelop me. I just felt comfortable there." As an undergraduate, the artist studied drawing, ceramics and sound sculpture. "I went in a lot of different directions at one time. Then, at grad school, I painted a lot and did less ceramic work. One day, I was looking at test tiles and thought that they were like Dutch Paintings. I thought, why couldn't these two idioms be jammed together?" The result

doing in the studio is to try to bring stuff together that resonates in some way. The best things are when you can suspend the binary. With all the collisions of ideologies, catastrophes we see in the world, art makes us more human. Making ceramics is about making something, rather than hurting something. Suppose I die next year. I want to die in the studio, trying to get to that place of sublimity. My best advice to other artists is to get out of your own way so that something bigger can pass through you."



Facing page: *Gearhead* (Detail).  
Top: *Gearhead*. 2015. Stoneware and porcelain fired to cone 8 oxidation. 11 x 12 x 17 in.  
Above: Charles Timm-Ballard.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University US. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas and has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.  
All photos by Matthew Banderas.