

# Opposites attract

From bulldozers to sculptures, artist pursues fame

By John Villani  
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**U**pside down and right side up. Chaos and order. Van Gogh and Thomas Kinkadee.

In the eyes of Scottsdale landscape architect Bill Tonnensen, the world's symmetry of opposites is an exploitable playground. It's a place to deconstruct, analyze, inspire and reformulate the elements above and whatever else turns up in his art.

## art notes

Tonnensen, who also has designed homes and commercial spaces, gained a measure of Valley-wide fame when he incorporated a full-scale bulldozer into the new offices of Empire Southwest, a Caterpillar dealer on Country Club Drive in Mesa. On that project, he built a room for the dozer, directly underneath Empire's boardroom, and covered the boardroom's floor with Plexiglas panels.

Now he is focusing on achieving fast-track success in the art world. Tonnensen has spent a year designing and developing a body of work that's primarily sculptural and uses hard-edged materials in repetitive assemblages. He also wrote and published a book, *Tonnensen: Twelve Months to Fame and Fortune in the Art World*.

The book tracks this Valley resident's relentless development of his insight into what makes the art world tick. It also documents Tonnensen's year of studio efforts creating the pieces he hopes will take the art world by storm.

If the initial results of his multilevel strategy are a reliable indication of Tonnensen's future on the Valley arts scene, there's reason for him

to be encouraged.

His first-ever exhibition is a full-scale, one-artist show at Chiaroscuro, a Scottsdale gallery backed by deep-pocketed European owners Stephan and Ursula Gebert.

The show, "Bill Tonnensen: I'm Off Chicken," runs through October at the gallery, 7160 Main St., Scottsdale. Details: (480) 429-0711.

## Memorial for McKee

A memorial service for Barbara McKee, who resided in Apache Junction and Santa Fe during the 1980s and '90s, will be Saturday morning in McAllister, Mont.

McKee, 50, who exhibited at Scottsdale galleries and attended workshops at the Scottsdale Artists' School, died Sept. 10 after being injured in a car accident near her home in McAllister, according to her mother, Peggy McKee of Scottsdale.

For details on the service, call Landon Jones at (406) 763-5929.

## Prescott, Bisbee doings

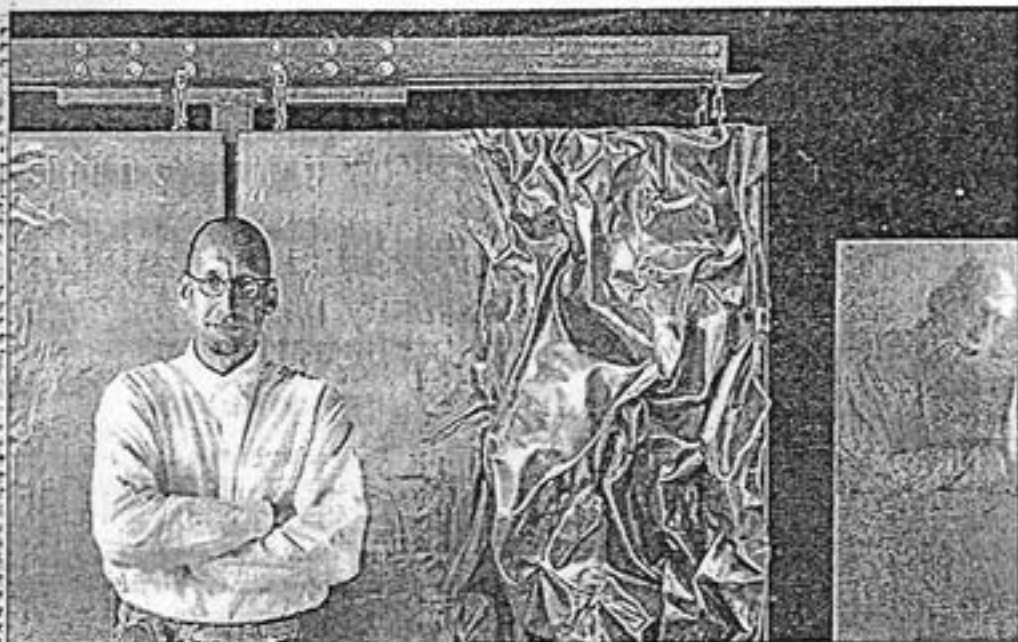
Two events outside the Valley are worth the trips.

■ In Prescott, "En Plein Air, Painting on the Porch" takes place from 3 to 5 p.m. Saturday on the hillside grounds of the Phippen Museum, 4701 Arizona 89 North. An auction of the new paintings follows at 5:30 p.m. The event includes music and snacks. Admission: \$10 in advance and \$15 at the door. Details: 1-(928)-778-1385.

■ The 10th Bisbee Fiber Arts Festival will be staged at Copper Queen Plaza in Old Bisbee, off Arizona 80. The opening reception is from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday. The event continues Saturday and Sunday, with a "spin-in" at 10:30 a.m. Saturday sponsored by the Arizona Federation of Spinners and Weavers. Details: 1-(520)-432-1846.



Jack Kurtz/The Arizona Republic  
Bill Tonnensen with *Hanging Man*, which he sculpted in beeswax.



Bill Tonnesen

A comment about Bill Tonnesen: "I'll shoot myself if he's successful." Tonnesen has not endeared himself to other artists, but most of his works sold out before a recent show opened.

## Artful smack in the face

Architect turned artist demonized by some peers

By Oriana Parker  
Special for The Republic

When all 6 feet, 8 inches of Bill Tonnesen stands up in front of the FirstMonday's art salon audience, chances are some will think of his book as well as his art.

After all, this is the architect who wrote, published and promote the book *Tonnesen: Twelve Months to Fame and Fortune in the Art World*.

That achievement did not set well with some in the artistic community. As Tempe-based Tonnesen points out in his book, "I know of a well-established artist who confided to a friend, 'I'll shoot myself if he's successful.'"

Even if Tonnesen is demonized by some, you've got to give the devil his due. His one-man show opened at Chiaroscuro, one of Scottsdale's most prestigious galleries, last Thursday and continues through this month.

Much of Tonnesen's art was sold out even before the show opened and an exhibit at Santa Fe's Chiaroscuro Gallery is

### If you go

**WHAT:** FirstMonday's Art Salon lecture series, featuring artist/architect/author Bill Tonnesen.

**WHERE:** Pulliam Auditorium, first floor of Burton Barr Central Library, 1221 N. Central Ave., Phoenix.

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. Monday, (artist's reception with coffee at 6:30 p.m.).

**ADMISSION:** Free.

**INFORMATION:** (602) 256-3521.

being discussed.

Not too shabby for someone who committed himself to a career in contemporary art only last August.

It should be noted that the 49-year-old Tonnesen has put in more than 20 years as an architect before venturing into contemporary art's rarified circles.

"As far as I can see, the difference between art and architecture is that art is easier," he points out. "No clients, no meetings, no life-safety issues, and you're not constantly focused on cost."

It's highly doubtful most architectural clients would let him indulge the sense of hu-

mor evident in some of the art. For instance, the ring of chicken feet rampant on a field of poultry waste, part of Tonnesen's social commentary series.

"I've given up eating poultry," he said. "Did you know that chicken farmers feed the birds their own, FDA approved, feces flavored with molasses?"

The artist's newer body of work, the *Drowning Man*, is darker, brooding, drifting into the grotesque.

"This is work that no one will ever just walk by," says Ernest McIntyre, creator of Phoenix's FirstMonday's and Tucson's FirstTuesday's art salons. "The immense humanity of it still haunts me."

An artistic breakthrough of this magnitude, which slugs the viewer between the eyes intellectually and emotionally, could catapult Tonnesen up to that enviable contemporary art A+ list.

"There are two kinds of artists," McIntyre said. "Those who want fame and fortune and those who are living in denial. Most are too afraid to do anything about it. They're hoping the system will deliver them. Doing is the path to success."

"And Bill Tonnesen is a doer."



# Artists' Books Reviews

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COLLECTORS  
WORKINGIN THE  
VOLUMENUMBER 1 No. 9 AUTUMN/2002

XWRTSDFOR  
ANDARTISTS  
BOOKMEDIUM

## COMING - NEXT ISSUE KEEPSAKE No. 3

Edward H. Hutchins who provided us with Keepsake No. 2 (*Star Box*) is presently developing another which he has sworn not to tell anyone what it is about so it will be a surprise to one and all.

### COMMENTARY:

As this newsletter enters its third year of publication it is a good time to reflect on why it came into existence in the first place, and where it is heading. ABR was originally conceived to define the controversial difference between a fine press book and an artist's book. "Aren't they one and the same?" was what I most often heard, especially from authoritative bibliophiles. And from artists: "If it contains language, then it's not an artist's book!" It has always been difficult to explain that the term *book arts* encompasses both fine press books and artists' books as a descriptive genre. The line between the subsets is more easily illustrated by actually showing and describing them.

And, some will say (and have said to me), "Why bother? Who really cares?" That defensive attitude is usually maintained by those who find it convenient to remain ill-informed because then a fine press book may be considered an artist's book and consequently reach a broader audience. A fine press book is in itself a wonderfully beautiful object made with loving and tender care by craftspeople working together to achieve perfection. An artist's book is many times the work of only one person trying to communicate on a more visual level; may be fragile by comparison and most often not perfection because it has been fabricated by an artist with a new idea rather than a craftsperson who has honed a knowledge from a pre-conceived concept. Both are necessary and desirable. However, only one is an artist's book. (Cont. page 7)

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c/o Joe D'Ambrosio (ABR)

4449 N. 12th Street, #A5 Phoenix, AZ 85014-4520



## TONNESEN

### *Twelve Months to Fame and Fortune in the Art World*

2003

Edition: 5,000 copies

Price: \$35.00 (plus shipping)

Size: 6 x 6 x 2 inches

*Review by Joe D'Ambrosio*

Can a book that is commercially produced and bound, but designed by an artist, be an artist's book? Is it an artist's book, or a book by an artist? Must the artist who conceived the project be the one who puts it together? Certainly, as an artisan, Michelangelo carved his own statues and painted his own frescoes—albeit with some assistance. And in his work, *The Last Supper*, Leonardo da Vinci would have gained some necessary structural knowledge if he could have consulted with I.M. Pei. Some authors do not write their own material—they use ghost writers, but the "ghost" is given no credit. And many politicians utter phrases which echo through the ages, but in fact the words are written by a speech writer. The concept appears to be the primary aspect of a project and not the actual fabrication—hence a "conceptual artist."

The problem with the notion that an artist may conceive an idea and another execute it is that it is completed by a prearranged plan. Any new discovery which happens during and because of the fabrication of a piece (and usually the result of an unpredictable occurrence), is not gleaned by the artist—unless the artist is also the publisher of the book where the artist has complete control to steer the work. (Cont., page 2) 1

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2 (Tonnesen, continued)

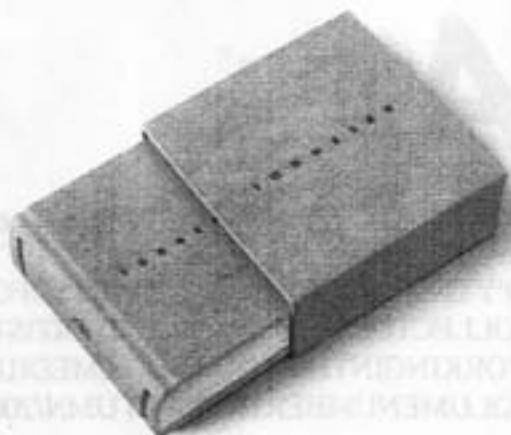
This new book by the artist Bill Tonnesen is a case in point. And, even though Tonnesen is a gifted and prolific artist, he makes no claim that this is an artist's book; he conceived it and designed it and he is publishing it. But the very large edition precludes him from actually fabricating it. (An image of Tonnesen as *Drowning Man 1* appears on the previous page.)

The book is really a marketing strategy to promote his works of art and I don't believe it is intended to be one of them. And yet his creative genius emerges from the books presentation—a large portion of the first part of this book is inverted from the other half—dos-à-dos style. The book is 600 pages with the largest side of the book block (429 pages in black and white only with liberal illustrations) consists of Tonnesen's excursion into the world of fine art in an "...attempt to fast track a successful career change from architecture to contemporary art." The other side of the book is in full color and consists of representations of his art. However, when one gets to that point, the book must be inverted to continue. Or, one can begin from the back and work forward—or is one going backward when one is going forward? It appears that it is necessary to delve into Tonnesen's artistic concepts to fully understand what he has achieved in creating this book. And, sorry to say, no photo can justify a live presentation of his many works because they are three-dimensional in nature even though many of them are wall hangings.

In most of Tonnesen's works he suspends motion in perpetuity. In his *Lead Circle, Bullet 1* a circle of bullet heads fractures a four foot by four foot lead panel all at the precise moment of entry. I was mesmerized as I waited for the bullets to continue on their path of destruction (which is di-

rectly at the viewer). I don't know how long I stood in front of this piece before I naively realized that the bullets would never continue to move forward—they are frozen in time. And even his *Neoprene Circle, Razors* is constructed so that the viewer fully expects the very sharp menacing blades set like obedient soldiers in a circle to begin at any second to start rotating and slashing everything in their path. Even his somewhat static tactile pieces such as *Lead, Pattern 1* looks as if the rippling folds and creases of the actual lead panel will begin again their continued undulation at any second. It is hard for a viewer to turn away from one of his pieces because the dimensional image may continue on its intended movement at any moment and one is compelled to see it happen—yet it never does. Is it a disappointment? Somewhat—but one is compelled to again peek to see if anything has moved since the last sighting.

And that is exactly what Tonnesen has done in creating this book—forever frozen his entry into the world of fine art. And he has done it in such a way as to make time stand still by guiding the reader forward and then backward through that period of his investigation into the world of fine art. Not only does he share his actions with the reader, but he also shares his family and friends which makes this a very personal account and one which another human being can associate. And he does this in fragments of occurrences so, certainly related within a time frame, everything seems to be happening at one time. Each recto page of text faces a verso page of illustration so the action is not only related mentally but also visually.



In August, 2001, Tonnesen committed himself to begin a career in modern art, and for the subsequent twelve months to do everything in his power to realize success. The journey that Tonnesen takes us on within this book is a trek familiar to many aspiring artists and consequently one will be further educated by his experiences, especially those occurrences with the elite New York art galleries. It is candidly told with the honesty of a true artist, but some who have never found a way to the upper echelons of the art world may resent the beginning as Tonnesen's contacts make it considerably easier for him to see and be seen in those rarified circles. However, a continuation of the dialogue shows one and all that the road to fame and fortune is not simply paved with good contacts, but with fortune and tenacity and a positive attitude. In fact, this book does not end with success—it ends with hope. And one hopes that Tonnesen will be successful in his committed quest.

The book and its companion slipcase are simply and beautifully crafted in heavy kraft paper over boards. JJD

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# Tonneson makes waves on art scene

By Dolores Tropiano  
Scottsdale Republic

**SCOTTSDALE** — Nouveau artist Bill Tonneson was researching poultry one day when he discovered that most farmers were using the birds' own feces to feed their chickens.

Tonneson stopped eating poultry at once. The knowledge was so profound to him that he named his very first art show "I'm Off Chicken ...."

Having a show in a major art gallery was one of three goals that Tonneson, 49, a landscape architect, set out for himself in August 2001.

Another was to produce 100 pieces of artwork, and a third goal was to write a book.

Surprisingly, he has done all three, and successfully, despite having no previous experience in the art world.

His 84-piece show features large, three-dimensional, contemporary pieces that fall into several groups, including *Chaos and Order*. It is currently on view at the Chiaroscuro Gallery, 7160 E. Main St., the first time the gallery has turned its entire space over to one artist. It runs through Nov. 4, and already the Tempe resident has sold \$85,000 worth of work.

A memoir, *Tonneson: Twelve Months to Fame and Fortune in the Art World*, is also part of his show.

During presentations this coming week, Tonneson will discuss two themes:

■ "Understanding Art: Hey, Art Connoisseur, What Planet Are You From?"

■ "Conceptual Art: Is That Paint? No, It's Chicken Feces."

Both address the common man's disconnection with much of contemporary art.

"My perception is that artists have no experience in the business side of promoting themselves. I have 20 years' experience in both," said Tonneson, dressed in his signature outfit, a white shirt and a tape measure attached to his jeans.

"I'm getting a lot of criticism and controversy because of my declaration that I am not interested in being a starving artist. I intend to promote myself because if an artist doesn't have an audience, no matter



Heather Walton/Scottsdale Republic

**Artist Bill Tonneson will lecture on "Understanding Art: Hey, Art Connoisseur, What Planet Are You From?"**

how creative the effort, no matter how profound the insight, no one will ever know about it, and I can't feed my family."

While speaking at a library in Tucson, one woman, accompanied by a curator from the Tucson Contemporary Art Museum, stood up and declared that Tonneson was boring and that he demeaned the work of legitimate artists.

Tonneson cried. "It was a miserable experience," said Tonneson, who attended Scottsdale's Saguaro High School and was kicked out for disciplinary reasons.

Others feel that his work is an insult to the hard-working, long-suffering artist. Wayne Rainey, publisher of *Shade Magazine* in Phoenix, wrote in this month's issue that Tonneson's arrogance was "sometimes almost painful to endure."

Susan Krane, director of the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, described Tonneson this way:

"Bill is his own performance piece. The performance piece is how to break into the art market in one year. Whether he turns into the maker of significant art objects with deep meaning for people is yet to be determined. He has been making art for a year. For most,

## Artist Bill Tonneson

**Sunday, 2 p.m.**

Bill Tonneson on *Understanding Art: Hey, Art Connoisseur. What planet are you from?* Barnes & Noble, 10500 N. 90th St., Scottsdale.

**Thursday, 7 p.m.**

Bill Tonneson on *Conceptual Art: Is That Oil Paint? No, It's Chicken Feces.*

Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, 7380 E. Second St., Scottsdale.

that would be considered his first-year apprenticeship."

Some feel that Tonneson is offensive to those who have dedicated their lives and struggled to make art from a deep, personal place.

"No one wants to discourage Bill, but his outrageousness and his chutzpah in this is casting a negative light on a lot of sincere artists that are not market-driven," Krane added.

David White, owner of the

New Urban Gallery in downtown Phoenix, laments the fact that Tonneson gets in the way of people experiencing his artwork.

None of that occurred to Howard Hendler of Carefree, an art collector who came to see the show and described it as "evocative and exciting."

And it was Jeff Schwartz, an artist in Tucson, who came to Bill's rescue at the Tucson library. He thinks the criticism of Tonneson is immature and unfounded:

"Bill has an incredibly strong personality, and it's unusual to find someone with his presence and capability who talks about what he has accomplished and what he intends to do. And I think it's a natural reaction for people to say, 'Who do you think you are?' I think he's pretty clear about who he is. He says, 'I'm Bill Tonneson, and I want to become a fantastic artist.' I'm not put off by that. I admire this kind of determination."



# Artist may cause meltdown at Ice House

By Ernest McIntyre  
Special for The Republic

## THE ARTS IN PHOENIX

### If you go

**WHAT:** Art Detour 15, Bill Tonnesen exhibition.

**WHERE:** Ice House, 429 W. Jackson St., Phoenix.

**WHEN:** 7 to 9 p.m. today; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday; and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.

**ADMISSION:** Free.

If anyone can cause a meltdown at this weekend's Art Detour 15, it's *Twelve Months to Fame and Fortune* author and artist Bill Tonnesen.

His 2002 self-published book told the story of his goal to become a successful artist in just 12 months. Tonnesen's brash declarations and interjections into the Scottsdale arts scene last year drew icy remarks from area arts professionals, including one comment that has since become the theme of his current Art Detour exhibition at the historic Ice House.

"I'll shoot myself if he's successful," one well-known artist was overheard saying before Tonnesen held his first-ever exhibition at Scottsdale's Chiaroscuro Gallery last October. Tonnesen

was the only one not surprised when the gallery sold more than \$100,000 of his art.

"No shots were heard," Tonnesen laughingly says, "but then it was hard to hear anything over the loud ringing of

the gallery's cash register."

What will register with you if you go to the Ice House this weekend is that Tonnesen's exhibit is as close to an "art happening" as you're likely to see outside of New York. However, don't expect to see Bill Tonnesen there. He's in New York sticking his foot in the door of the Armory Show, the world's largest art fair exclusively devoted to contemporary art. Standing in for him at his exhibition will be the Chiaroscuro Gallery staff and Tonnesen's small but growing band of "Tonnesenites."

You won't see his disciples wearing orange robes, but you might see them outfitted in de rigueur black T-shirts. Whether these young artists appreciate the art of Bill Tonnesen or not seems to be irrelevant. It's Tonnesen's irrever-

See ART DETOUR Page 3



Artist Bill Tonnesen's *Hanging Man* sculpture is considered by many to be his best to date. Tonnesen has an exhibit at this weekend's Art Detour 15.

## ART DETOUR Exhibit may heat up Ice House

From Page 1

ent and "you can do it, too" attitude that they say they admire. "Notice the rules," Tonnesen tells those willing to listen, "then decide whether they apply to you or not."

Breaking the rules is what Tonnesen does best. If you're an artist, the unwritten rule has been that it takes years for you to get into a gallery and years more before you can get a one-person show. Tonnesen

decided that the rule didn't apply to him. He scouted out Scottsdale's contemporary art galleries, picked the newest and biggest and then declared it was going to be his gallery. None of his friends thought he had a chance. First-year artist Bill Tonnesen not only got in but was given a rare one-man show at the height of last year's art season.

Seasoned and surprised artists now know that Tonnesen is someone who will do whatever

it takes to detour around accepted barricades as he races towards success. Even his detractors will be stopping by the Ice House to see Tonnesen's latest and perhaps most radical, exhibition.

"My ultimate goal," Tonnesen says, "is to create an art experience that's as far from just looking at a painting on a museum wall as possible."

It's possible that Tonnesen's participation in Phoenix's Art Detour this weekend may melt some preconceived ideas about downtown art in general, and his art specifically. Don't be deterred by Tonnesen's detractors; they'll be there, too. Tonnesen is just too good of a show to miss.

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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FRIDAY

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