

Doodling With Metal

Inside the Mechanical Mind of a Gear Artist

When Justin Gates stares at a group of small gears he may see a bird or a tree or a flower. “Generally, I don’t start with an idea. I’ll pick up a couple of gears and see how they look together. I’ll pick up another couple and see how they work with the others. I suppose it’s a kind of doodling, just with metal. Sometimes I will have an idea going into it that just works. The metal gears’ roundness oddly seems to favor the organic in my case.”

The 31-year-old self-proclaimed nomad—he’s lived in Florida, Georgia, Washington and now Illinois—grew up with a gearhead father that worked on cars and a grandfather who was a railroad mechanic. “With these two, there were always mechanical bits lying around to pick up and play with, and they instilled in me a curiosity for how things work. I’ve always found gears, wheels and cogs incredibly beautiful in their design and how they mesh together.”

Gates, a Northeastern Illinois University student and freelance sculptor/artist says the idea for gear jewelry came from this perceived beauty. He taught himself how to solder and created four pendants out of some watch gears for his wife and her family. “They liked them so much that they told me I should start selling them.”

“One can find mechanical parts as decorations all over my house,” he adds. “I have bent railroad spikes on a window sill, an old rusted industrial grate as a centerpiece over my desk and a collage of large machine gears on my wall. Basically, if it rusts, it has a place with me. It’s a dream of mine to one day work on larger installations with gears as the focal point.”

Gates purchases large lots of old and worn out mechanical watch movements from places like Ebay or Etsy. He has also received old watches from friends, family and complete strangers that just enjoy

his work. “At a recent fair, I was asked by several people if I take old watches, and my answer as always is yes. Having always thought of myself as an artist, it’s great to finally have an outlet to show people my work.”

This work, including gear-themed necklaces and earrings, is of particular interest to the steampunk community. “I receive feedback from those in the community that my work is quite different from what they’ve seen,” Gates says. “It’s lighter, more delicate, or more airy than most works out there. Where normally one would find an entire watch movement made into a pendant or ring, I take the time to disassemble that movement and rearrange it into something that is completely different and new... sort of breathe new life into old parts.”

Thanks to this slight difference, Gates likes to call his work, “not quite steampunk” so he’s not upsetting an established community he feels already has plenty of great artists. He’s thankful for being an artist in the digital age where he can get his work out to the masses without the need for large, elaborate marketing campaigns.

“As much as I sometimes deride the Internet, it’s great to live in an age where millions of people from around the world can view and give feedback to something that I’ve created,” Gates says. “For me, more than anything it’s getting the messages of appreciation that really makes all the burned fingers and strained eyes worth it.”

Those interested in learning more about Gates’ gear-themed artwork can visit www.amechanicalmind.etsy.com or www.amechanicalmind.com. The latest pieces in his collection can also be viewed at www.facebook.com/amechanicalmind. Gates will be attending Ravenswood Remix, a recycled art fair in Chicago on September 3–4.



Shade Tree Descendant



Thunder Mechanism



Gearrings



Wildflower