

“Reckless Metal”

Teddy Goldfarb’s 1960s Metal Sculptures



A Personal History by Michael S. Goldfarb

Photographs by Sidney L. Goldfarb/Fried-Louis Studio

Among the most impressive achievements of my late mother’s long and storied life – 1930s swing trumpet player and motorcycle owner, World War II Marine sergeant, pro photographer, clock repairer, organizational volunteer, Elderhostel talent-show magician, etc. – her brief foray into creating welded sculptures in the late 1960s surely deserves special mention!

Early Indications...

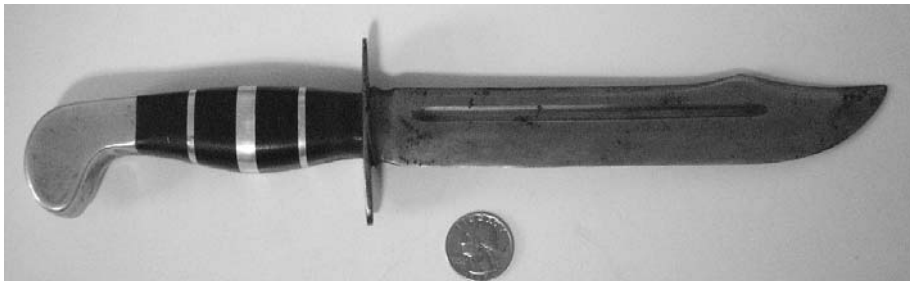
“Teddy” Goldfarb (actually Theodora, though according to her birth certificate, her given name was Tilly) was always fascinated by machines and mechanical processes. In her youth, this took the form of mastering numerous musical instruments, doing secretarial work at Reader’s Digest, and riding her own motorcycle in the early 40s. And with her vibrant, outgoing personality and boundless energy, there was no way she was going to hold back when her country called. She joined the United States Marine Corps Women’s Reserve as soon as it became possible in 1943...

Of course, it wasn’t just a job, it was an adventure!



Teddy and sailor buddies improving their morale, somewhere near El Toro Marine Base

Her service in the Marines included long stints in the machine shop, which suited her mechanical interests well. She learned to handle the power tools like a pro. However, she was eventually busted from sergeant to corporal for making “her own” knife instead of working on assigned projects. (And she kept the knife, despite many servicemen headed overseas offering her as much as \$50 for it: her comment was, “That knife cost me a stripe, so I figured I’d better keep it!”)



Teddy’s infamous “blood groove knife”

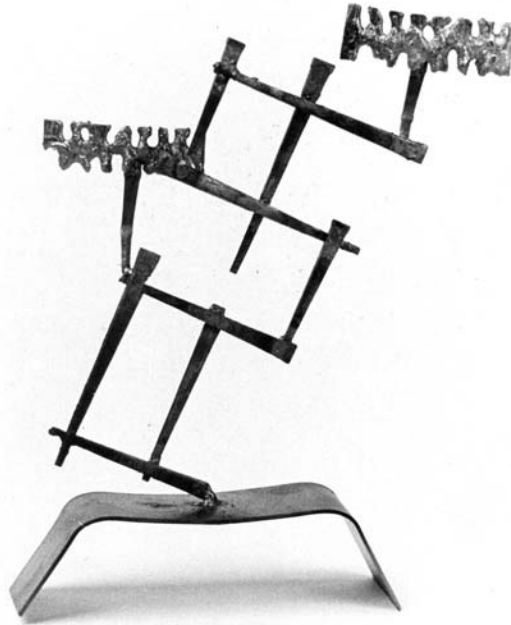
Twenty Years Later...

During my childhood, Teddy was the family expert on all things mechanical... except for cameras and other photo equipment, where Sidney’s word was law. When we moved into the house at 200 Saratoga Avenue in 1960, it was she – not Sidney – who set up a well-equipped workshop in the furnace room. There she tinkered with old pendulum clocks, built my homemade magic apparatus, spray-painted everything that wasn’t nailed down, and soldered connections onto speakers and cables for all my stereo system and movie-exhibiting needs. (And over at the Studio on South Broadway, she was the master of rewiring floodlights and contact printers, and knocking together whatever makeshift equipment was required.)

She always said that if she had it to over again, she’d open a hardware store: She was happiest rummaging around the drawers of a hardware store in search of an elusive bolt or connector... or maybe talking car innards as one of the boys with a series of auto mechanics. Both the Studio and

house had drawers and cigar boxes full of every kind of screw, nail, fuse, bulb, and specialized tool imaginable. (The few home-repair tasks that I can do today – replacing wall switches and light fixtures, changing toilet ballcocks and faucet washers – I learned from her.)

So, when she decided to take an evening welding course in 1967-1968 at Saunders Trades and Technical High School, it was entirely within character. What was unexpected was the direction that her time there took. She was the lone woman among a group of mechanics and machinists who were learning welding to improve their careers. But even more unique than her being the sole female, she wasn't interested in learning welding to fabricate manufacturing materials or repair a busted car chassis... No, she was interested in creating art:



Before continuing, I should note that Teddy was *always* creative. She could write very respectable doggerel poetry for birthday or anniversary cards at the drop of a hat. She could write speeches that would move people to action (for example, her “Who’s On First?” speech advocating the building of the “new” Yonkers High School during a circa-1970 Yonkers outbreak of the culture wars dubbed “The Battle of Sullivan’s Oval.”) The costumes that she created for costume parties and school plays were legendary. Basically, she was up for anything that combined craft and creativity.



Linda, Teddy, and Michael with a home puppet theater that Teddy made from an old high chair, c.1964

And her skill in retouching photographic prints – an exacting business done with fine brushes and gray pigment – also indicated artistic ability. Not to mention all those years of working in the Studio doing vaguely artistic stuff, like assisting in creating complex product shot set-ups, making countless photographic prints, silhouetting images by carefully painting the large negatives with “opaque,” and even doing bits of type/art layouts when needed...



But the things that she began making at the evening welding class – typically thrown together from found materials, like oddly shaped metal scraps, bits of wire, and assorted metal junk lying around the shop room – were unprecedentedly creative:



As the weeks and months went by, and Teddy typically brought home two or three new pieces each week, we marveled at how varied and “artistic” they were. The commercial artists and semi-beatnik family friends who frequented the Studio – Arthur Wise, Fred Cassens, Shirley Liebers, Fred and Elaine Streitfeld, Bert and Annie Brooks, etc. – were universally impressed with Teddy’s work. Word got out that some lady in the tech-school night welding class was making art... and soon the local newspaper, the *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, came around looking for a story.



It was at this juncture that Sidney grabbed a Nikkormat or Nikon and made the pictures that are reproduced herein. Asked to submit a couple for the article, he reacted like the pro he was, and shot over a dozen beautifully lit and positioned 5x7 product shots, plus a more formal portrait:

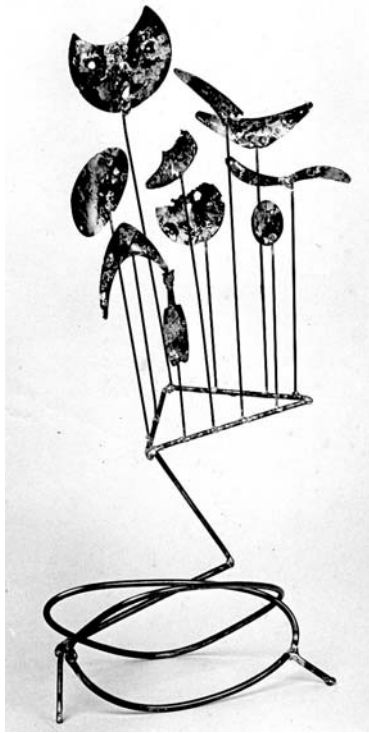


Portrait for the Herald Statesman article

About that Article...

The article, which was approximately a half-page long, included three large photos, and carried the headline *'Teddy' Advocates Involvement: Creating Welded Sculptures Brings Relaxation*, was published June 24, 1968. In now reviewing the article's text (which we have both as a loose clipping, and assembled on a poster board from its time on the Temple Emanu-El bulletin board), some long-forgotten details emerge:

- She wore her old Marine fatigues and field jacket to protect herself from oxyacetylene torch burns
- She had an exhibition of her sculptures at the Hoffman School Art Festival in Riverdale
- She claimed to have a BS degree in Personnel and Advertising from NYU (but we know that she never graduated!)
- She put up, but stopped running, all her repaired pendulum clocks around the house because the ticking and chimes allegedly annoyed the family!
- She was then an active voice in the PTAs of Hawthorne Junior High, Yonkers High, and Temple Emanu-El Religious School, and was a member of the Redevelopment Committee for a New Yonkers High School (note "The Battle of Sullivan's Oval" mentioned earlier)



I am especially struck by her quoted statements:

Although I don't like to say it about myself, I find that the busiest people seem to get the most done. You can't run away from things – everyone has to do a little bit. Being involved is being busy.

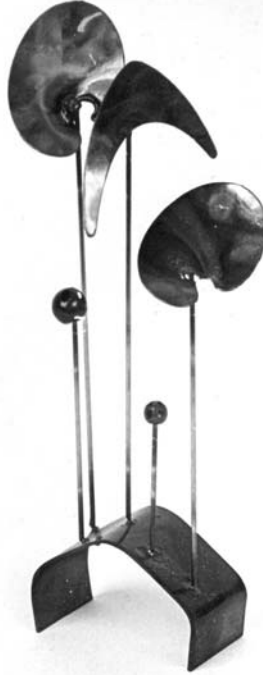
(I find welded sculpting) relaxing, enjoyable, and creative. And besides, people enjoy my work.

I don't like to name many of my pieces, or restrict too many sculptures (in that way), because it's all in the eye of the beholder.



The Origin of “Reckless Metal”...

As it happened, 1968 was also the year of my bar mitzvah. Temple Emanu-El, being a progressive Reform congregation under Rabbi Abraham Klausner, was committed to social justice and was in tune with the feelings of the younger generation, then beginning to flex their influence in civil rights, the anti-war movement, and attempting to loosen up American society.



The Temple’s bar mitzvah tradition at that time was to allow the bar mitzvah boy a chance to speak his mind with a self-authored speech after the torah service. No doubt inspired by Teddy’s recent comments, I chose as my subject “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and began my speech with this then-outrageous-for-the-pulpit statement:

It’s said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and nowhere is this more apparent than in perceptions of modern art. Where one person sees a work a genius, another may see something resembling a diseased kidney!



Not to let this slip by, later in the ceremony, when Rabbi Klausner was delivering his sermon, he said:

*Michael, you speak of art and its perception. Look no further than your own parents: Your father is a talented photographer who finds the beautiful in everyday objects and situations. And your mother? Theodora takes bits of metal – **reckless metal**, with no purpose or organization! – and assembles them into sculptures of beauty.*

So, who am I to argue with him? Teddy's welded-sculpture period was short, not even two years, but the dozens of pieces that she made – many of which are still in our, and assorted family friends', possession – live on as concrete reminders of an astounding burst of mid-life creativity:



Afterword...

In the aftermath of Teddy's departure in 2010, Linda and I have had a chance to reassess her life, and find it to be even more remarkable than we realized in our youth. Mom was an inspiring one-of-a-kind character, with fierce personal energy and a determined disregard for "what was expected of her." We – and everyone else who had a chance to interact with her – were all greatly improved for having known her!

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