

# Forms of Imagination

greening of the arts

by Sophia Sorensen

There is a man standing in Charlie Cowie's yard. He is tall, about 6 feet, and he is holding a rake firmly in his left hand. He stands erect, regal even—not moving, not blinking, in fact, not even breathing. This man has no name, but Cowie has a special moniker for him. Cowie calls him Sprinkler Man. He is a larger-than-life, fully functioning sprinkler.

Sprinkler Man is one of the most unusual of Cowie's inspired recycled art creations. It is a figure made from an assembly of pipes, chains, a metal broom, and an old-fashioned farm sprinkler mechanism. To see this figure is to marvel at the power of imagination.

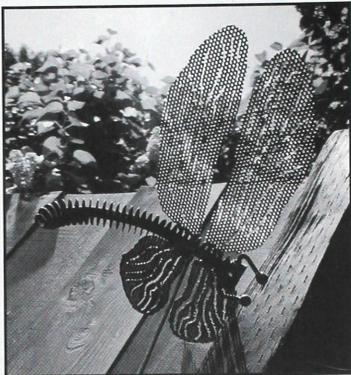
Cowie is gaining recognition as a pioneer in the hip and practical genre of recycled art. What started as a hobby has grown, and recognition (he twice won the North Shore Recycling Committee's Art in the

Garden Tour) is coming his way. His career as a millwright has given him the skills and experience to guide his creative impulse. The transition to artist came about a decade ago, when he discovered a neighbour who was making "interesting things" out of copper, and another friend, a blacksmith, who was using his trade to create art from unlikely materials.

His creations are the inspired musings of a unique artist, one with the ability to see the potential in otherwise neglected hardware. Dragonflies made of bolts with graceful welded wings, snakes made of chains with glass-bead eyes, a pumpkin made out of a propane tank, and sunflowers, beautiful, giant, polished brass sunflowers.

Although Cowie's art is "at home" in the garden, sometimes it finds its way indoors, as did the set of sunflowers that now graces the lobby of the Burnaby Dental Centre. Other creations designed for the indoors include a table made out of a grain spout with railway spikes for legs, spiders with enormous chain legs, and vases made of brass and bronze.

Each fanciful creation results from a recipe of design, timing, and luck. Pieces, and in some cases, personalities, evolve from Cowie's finely honed ability to source materials. Investigating neglected corners of machine shops, maintaining valuable networks of tradespeople, and relying on the keen eyes and kindness of his local garbage collectors are all necessary. Sourcing takes the most work. He never knows where or when one of his "recycling angels" will deliver backhoe parts, a pipe piece, or a roller chain. Other people's junk



A combination of creative vision and luck results in many wonderful, fanciful creations  
Photos by Sophia Sorensen



becomes Cowie's latest project, or, as with a length of discarded saw, his next crocodile.

"When people see my art, it makes them think about what they throw away and what could be done with it" says Cowie. "Everyone has an imagination. This is no different from making art out of egg cartoons like we did as children." Given the diversity, beauty, and life he injects into leftover metal, Cowie demonstrates considerable modesty about his talent.

While the final products attract attention, the process is also a source of interest for budding artists. In Cowie's experience, "the area of recycled art is really growing a lot. More [and more] people are contacting me to find out how to get into it and how to display their work." Artists in this genre are primarily self-taught, and the thought of possibly teaching his unique approach to art is something that appeals to him. But for now, he is focused; it's time to bring the next Sprinkler Man to life.

*Cowie's work was displayed at this year's Art in the Garden Tour. Some of his pieces are currently on display at First Street Gallery and Rocking Horse Gallery, in North Vancouver.*