

beautifully bugged

Take one workshop full of junk and a Frenchman with an eye for detail (not to mention an obsession with bugs) and you will find the most eclectic mix of metal insects this side of a sci-fi novel

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TWELVE YEARS AGO, A SUCCESSFUL FRENCH GRAPHIC DESIGNER CALLED EDOUARD MARTINET had his Danterone moment. He became severely triggered, by bugs – but not for the first time. He was 10 when one of his primary school teachers began to teach his pupils about insects, and in a rather obsessive way.

Fast forward 40 years, and Martinet has become the art world's virtuoso insectophile, transforming bits and pieces called from flea markets and car boot sales into exquisitely executed insect forms. Though best known for his surreal entomological creations, his repertoire has now grown to include fish and animal forms. "I didn't notice the link between this work and that teacher at first," he admits. This genre of art has produced intensely individual, and even politicized, work. Christopher Carter's abstracted bug forms suggest precision-made machine parts; Tom Hadenridge's bullet-bodded 'antibombs' have been described as steampunk artworks. And Scott Ray's interest in dead stuff and taxonomy generates sculpted insects

from an apocalyptic vision in which, he says, nature will destroy consumerist humanity.

What sets Edouard Martinet's work apart is the brilliant formal clarity of his sculptures, and their extraordinary elegance of articulation. His degree of virtuosity is unique: he does not solder or weld parts. His sculptures are screwed together. This gives his forms an extra level of visual richness – but not in a way that merely conveys the dry precision of, say, a watchmaker. There is an X factor here. A graceful wit. His 35cm high Cooq, for example, is composed largely of typewriter type bars. The form radiates energy and seems about to spring into movement, or crouch at the very least. It recalls the bizarre, perspective-like electromagnetism Writing Ball machine patented in 1874 by the Dane, Rasmus Malling Hansen. The Cooq is equally surreal, for it is simultaneously a symbolic expression of typography, and a poster. It's this often brilliantly executed tension between a sculpture of recognizable form, and parts and details that have nothing to do with the form, that make Martinet's works so notable.

Perhaps living, working and teaching in Rennes, the capital of Brittany, has something to do with this expressive missing-and-matching. The region's *la d'ar brezhoneg* movement promotes a French-Breton bilingual regional character. And yet Rennes was also one of the last typewriters – high-tech industry hot-spots



– to be established in France. Thus, Edouard Martinet exists in a city whose history precedent and new fusions of technology exist together. Only Paris has a greater concentration of IT companies.

The artist's beginnings gave no distinct hint of his later work. Having studied at L'École Supérieure des Arts Graphiques in Paris, he lived and worked as a graphic designer in Paris from 1988 to 1992. "I studied graphic design because I liked drawing, and I was interested in posters and beautiful books," he recalls. Productively, he found work in publishing, and in advertising and trademark logo-design. But after little more than a year, he knew he was only making time, and continued to experiment with sculptures made of discarded materials.

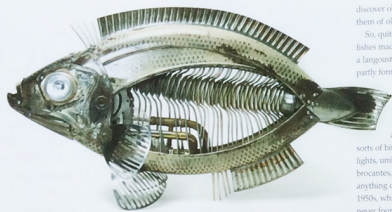
His fascination with found objects was not new. "When I was young I used to keep all sorts of stuff: wood pieces, bits of cardboard, plastic," he says. "I made all sorts of things from them, mainly boats. I can't remember the very first thing I made, but I thought I had done really well. But I do remember the first really successful sculpture – a mosquito made with bike parts."

"I was 27, and I gave it to my sister to thank her for supporting me financially in my art. I used bike spokes to make the legs, a hub for the thorax, a brake D-



Edouard Martinet's pieces convey a beauty and nature seemingly impossible to achieve from the component junk parts

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Fish are a recent departure for the Frenchman, with kitchen spatulas and spoons prominent in the making

"I for the proboscis, a bike chain guard for the wings, and the abdomen was made from two bike headlights." The desire to create sculptures which linked the precision of graphic design with his interest for rearranging detritus became too strong to ignore. "I like giving life to found objects," he says, "and I don't want to make them useful. I only want them to seem alive, but not as if they could be functional robots. I want the sculptures to give the impression, for example, that a bird is about to fly, a grasshopper is about to hop, the praying mantis is ready to catch its prey. In a word – like!"

This quest for poised expressions of life-force is evident in Edouard Martinet's own tastes in art. "What interests me in other artists is the emotion you can feel when you experience their art. You can't explain it. The artists I am thinking of include Picasso, Bacon, Damien Hirst, Turner, Basquiat and Bernard Pras."

But how does Martinet's work escape being filed away as ideal material for cabinets of curiosities? "People who like my art happen to like the precision of my sculptures," he says. "But they also

The original idea can change as I proceed. I discover what the sculpture is becoming gradually

discover objects in the sculptures that they know, or which remind them of old memories."

So, quite apart from cockroaches composed of type bars, we encounter fishes made largely with kitchen spatulas, spoons, and trumpet parts; a langoustine made with food parts; a pigeon whose gleaming wing is partly formed with the badge from a Schwinn bike fender; a ladybird with bike chain feeders; and a wasp of such complex delicacy that its individual parts defy recognition.

Metinet has a "huge storage" of material, cast-off bits and pieces whose shapes appeal to him. "And I don't always know what I am going to do with them. I use any sorts of bits. Bike parts, utensils, radio parts, car and moped parts, car lights, umbrella ribs, sunglasses. I find them everywhere – boot sales, brocantees, garages, everywhere you can find used objects." Almost anything can be of use. The strangest? "Ski boot fasteners from the 1950s, which I found in a brocante in the Dordogne. And I have never found another example of those particular fasteners. The potato-peeler I found in a food market in Rennes and, again, have never again seen one like it."

His sculptures, which range from 30cm to 2m long, are never achieved straightforwardly. "The original idea can change as I proceed," he explains. "I discover what the sculpture is becoming gradually, and sometimes I change pieces. But there can be pieces I really need, and if they're not in my objects in my studio I have to wait to find them."

"For some pieces, I have to wait months. I had to wait 15 years to complete the dragonfly. I had the idea, but couldn't find the right pieces to make the sculpture so that it would correspond to my original idea. But I got there, and the dragonfly was displayed at my last exhibition at the Sladmore Gallery in London."

Edouard Martinet works at night and his fabrication process requires relatively few tools – essentially a drilling machine, grindstone, pliers, screwdrivers – because he uses parts that will fit together naturally. And he keeps them in their true found state, which could be almost new, well-worn, or even rusted.

If he has the right parts to fit his vision for a sculpture, even those that seem relatively simple," he says. "The most difficult thing is to find the right part, the one that will seem obvious – as if it had been manufactured specially for the sculpture."

Metinet is beginning to consider new subject matter. "I have other plans that I have not experimented with yet," he says. "For example, I

would like to cast my sculptures in bronze, and work on the chimera theme. I am interested in the combination of animals and human beings, or different animals together, like the Greek sirens – half bird, half woman.

"It's another kind of sculptural story that you tell with the chimera. They are oncoic, the material of dreams." He fails to mention it, but his idea touches on another specifically Breton connection: in 1870, the region's Carls minted coins which showed a character whose horse had a human head.

Metinet's sculptures convey "a poetry of the past," as he puts it. Can it be long before one of his customers is provoked into verse by a glittering centipede, or a terribly poised praying mantis? The 19th-century German philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche would surely have responded to the upland-type bars of Martinet's Cooq. He bought one of Rasmus Malling Hansen's strange Writing Ball machines in 1882 and used it to tap out this dull poem:

The Writing Ball is a thing just like me of iron
And yet easy to twist, especially on journeys.
Patience and tact are most richly proved
And fine little fingers to use us.

It is, perhaps, something like patience and tact that gives Edouard Martinet's sculptures their fundamental value in terms of form. He certainly knows how to take ostensibly conflicting bits and pieces and sculpt them into something that is figuratively refined, yet also full of surprising inflections of fact. This, ultimately, is where true resonance of his art lies. His sculptures force a re-imagining of the obvious in which a beautifully finished object glows not with perfection, but with character. □

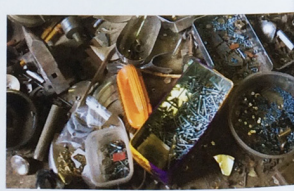


Left: every piece is unique, this bird is made predominantly from parts from a Honda CBR1000 motorcycle

Right: what seems like junk is turned into masterpiece artworks by Edouard Martinet

Far right: detail from a dragonfly and Cooq, two of his most famous pieces

Above right: detail from a dragonfly, showing the intricate mechanical parts that make up the sculpture



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