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for Sculptor Tony Price

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Tony Price looked to worldwide religions to base sculptures off of their "good energies," using repurposed parts from nuclear bomb machinery to reconstruct a warning and appeal for peace, as in *Nuclear Crucifix* (1987), steel, brass, and copper. Opposite: Price with one of his large sculptures in 1988.

Atomic Resurrection

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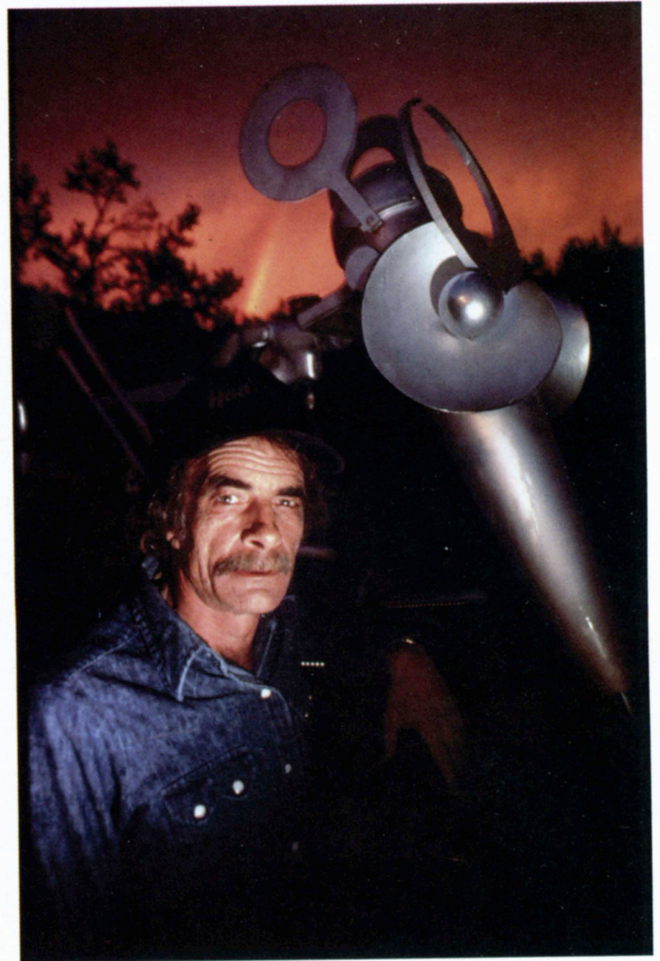
fter artists die, we know them by the works they leave behind. In the case of Tony Price, an assemblage sculptor who mined his materials from the former salvage yard of Los Alamos National Laboratory, we can also know him by his friends. Like Price, they were the original hipsters of the post-Beat Generation, spiritual explorers and political activists

who predated hippies and were shaped, like no generation before, by the lingering resonance of a bomb that went off when they were still children. It was a bomb born in New Mexico, one that put humanity at its own mercy with a power previously known only to the Sun. For Price, who was eight years old when the atomic bomb was first tested at the Trinity Site, it embodied a new psychological archetype that he'd spend the rest of his life trying to fight—the ability for humans to cause absolute destruction.

When Price died in 2000 at the age of 62, he left behind more than three decades of work, including hundreds of sculptures made of heavy-metal and rare plastic that came from the very machinery that spawned this archetype. He also left a will stating that 144 unsold pieces in his collection must stay together, be made available to the public, and benefit the three children he left behind, two of whom were still teenagers when he died. For nearly 20 years, his friends have collaborated to carry out his intentions. They formed a nonprofit, the Friends of Tony Price, which has protected, maintained, and promoted his work ever since. Now, the Friends are on the verge of realizing Price's dream, with plans—and the help of a benefactor—to create a museum that will permanently display his work in Santa Fe, where Price spent the more settled years of his life.

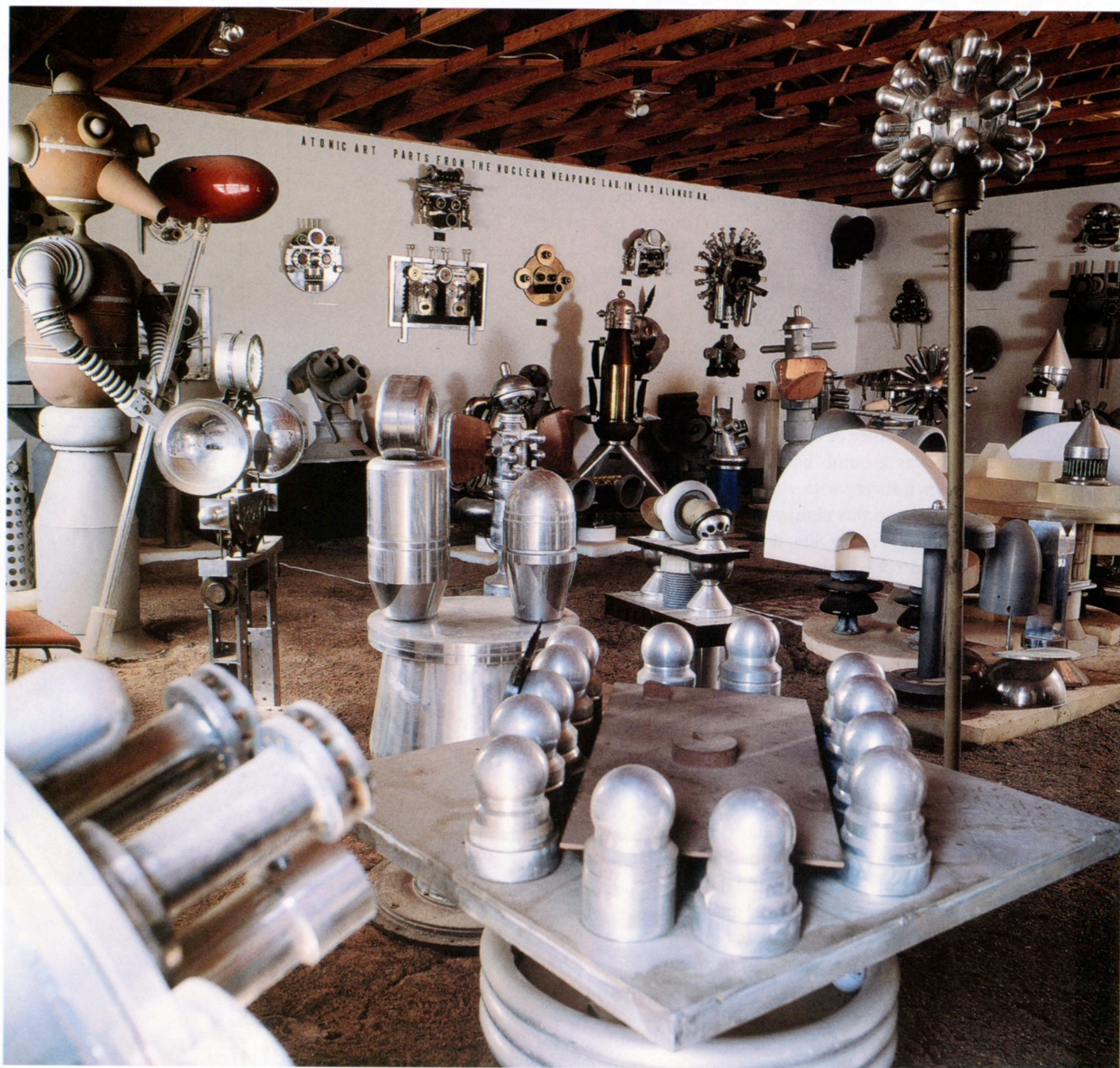
Death was part of Price's existence from an early age. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York, along with his fraternal twin brother, sister, and parents, but his father passed away when he was 12, and he was subject to the duck-and-cover drills that sent schoolchildren scurrying under their desks in the 1940s and '50s. The Price family was well off, and Price was sent to a private boarding school, where, as schoolmate Jonathan Richards has described, he was "sort of a legendary figure, even in his middle teens. He had a kind of aura about him . . . somebody who seemed to really be able to give the finger to authority and not care what happens to them."

After graduating in the mid-1950s and at the encouragement of his stepfather, Price joined the Marines, where he applied his innate talent for drawing to military portraits and murals. Records show he was honorably discharged in 1960, though in more intimate company Price would tell of how his supervisor used to have to scream his name to wake him, and how he once punched the guy in his sleep. Following his service, Price went on to travel for a couple of years throughout Western Europe with a guitar over his shoulder, always

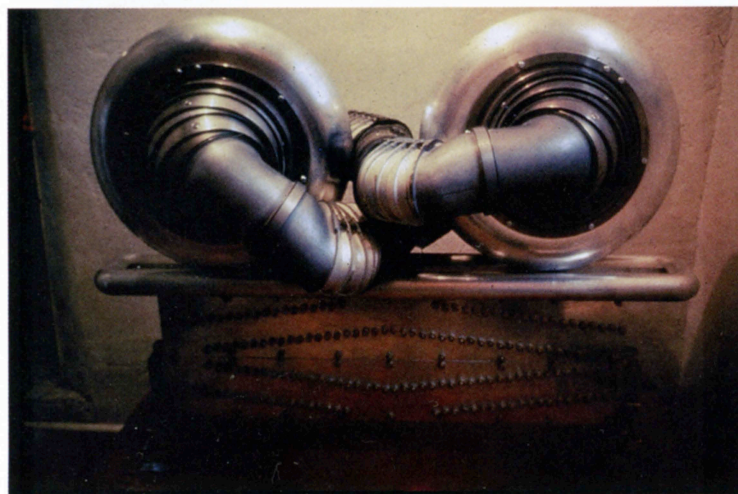
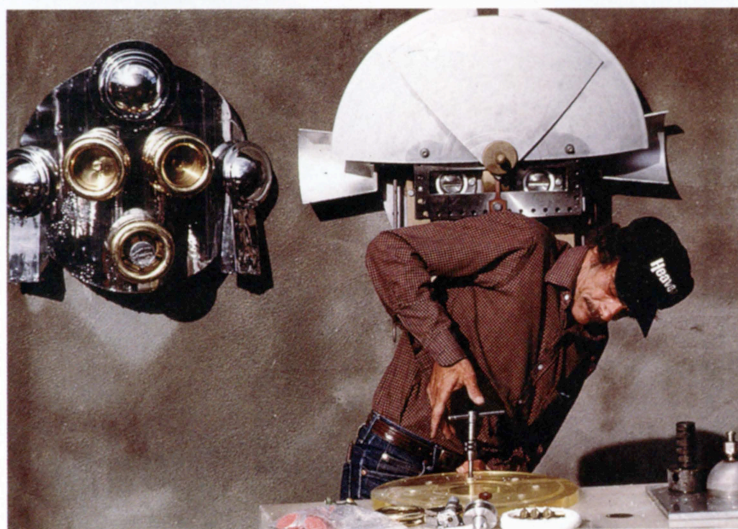


Los Alamos artist
TONY PRICE
transformed artifacts
of destruction into
vehicles for peace

BY CHRISTINA PROCTER
PHOTOS BY BYRON FLESHER
AND FRIENDS OF TONY PRICE



"These sculptures act as valves, bringing the dark and light energies together to balance and thus hold the peace."



Left, from top: *El Rancho Piano Box*, glass, steel, and piano harpsichords, was an immersive sound experience; due to the risk of heating metals that could release radioactivity, Price bolted and glued parts for his assemblage art; *Untitled* is both a show of strength and a reference to futility of nuclear power, and how it pits us against ourselves. Right, from top: Price believed in a fifth dimension that perhaps had the capacity to save us and tried to open portals to it in his work; Price got his materials at the former Zia Salvage Yard of Los Alamos National Laboratory; *The Last S.A.L.T. Talks* were built in 1975. Opposite: Price's "atomic art" at the studio he built in Reserve, New Mexico.

"Tony's works are like a Hydra head that is really one piece. If you want to hear the voice of the choir, you have to have all the members."



Price painted this Yucca Flat backdrop in collaboration with Elliott McDowell, who took this iconic photograph in 1982. Opposite: The core ranks of the Friends of Tony Price nonprofit include, from left in front, Andrew Ungerleider, Norma Cross, Jamie Hart, and from left in back, Godfrey Reggio, Linda Cohen (holding a photo of her husband, the late Rosé Cohen, who started the group), Ray Jimenez, Bob Palmer, and Reno Myerson. This summer, Hart solidified a new group of board members to take over as the nonprofit prepares to secure a permanent museum space for Price's work.



drawing and quick to tell a yarn. He also spent time in Mexico City and at Hopi.

Yet it was in San Francisco that Price met his most kindred spirits among the communes and counterculture of Haight-Ashbury. He also spent time in Woodstock, New York, where he synched up with poets and musicians and hung out with Bob Dylan. Music was a fundamental part of Price's life, and his eldest daughter, Rosanna Maya Price Herman, recalls that he would simply strum his guitar for hours, like he was taking part in a Gregorian chant. It was in Haight-Ashbury that he became friends with Reno Myerson, a music producer and political activist whose band opened for the group that became the Grateful Dead. Myerson led Price to New Mexico in 1968, where the artist met his muse.

Price and his partner at the time, with whom he had Rosanna, moved to New

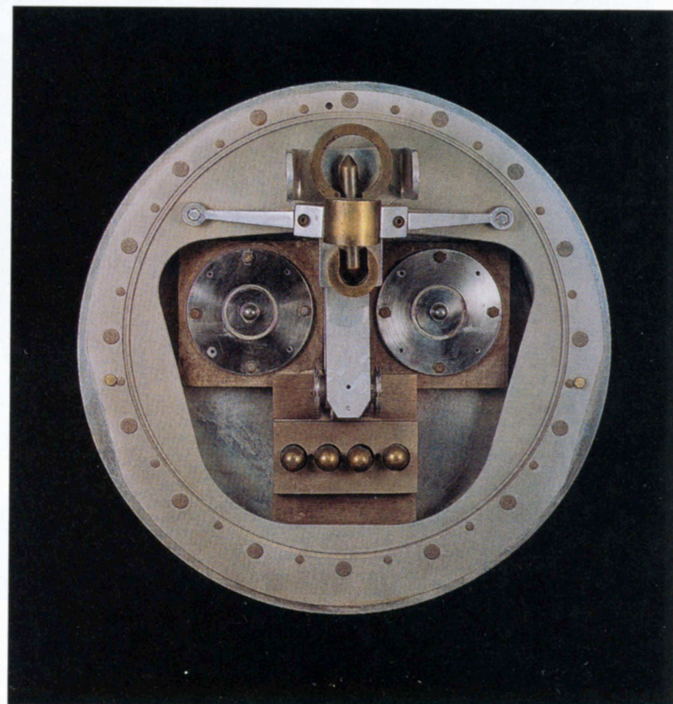
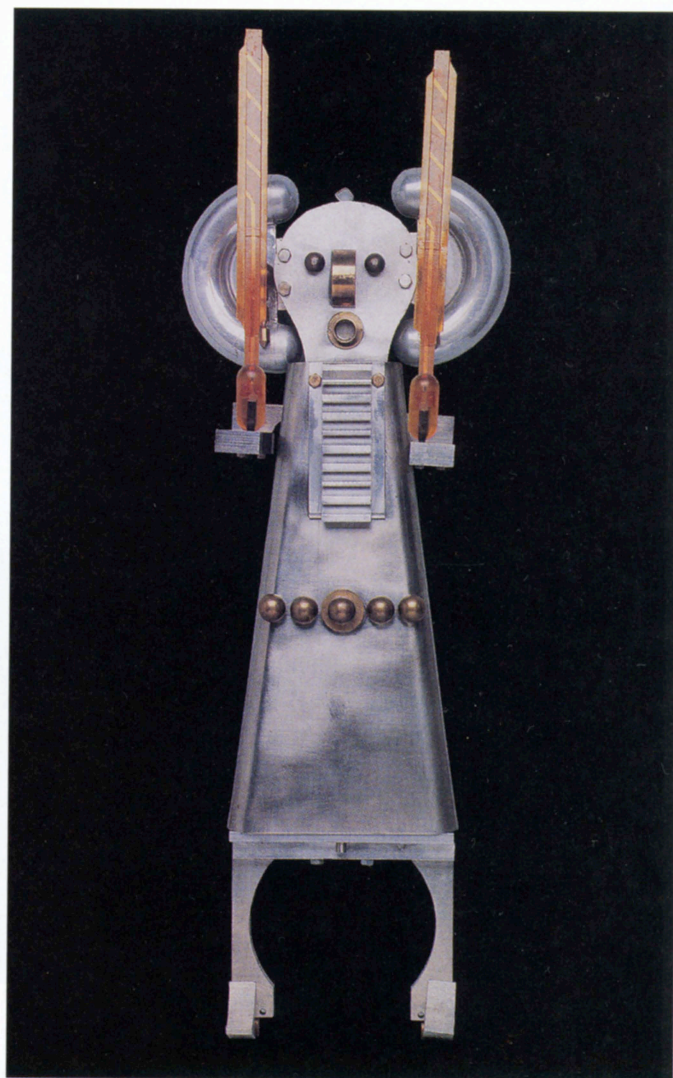
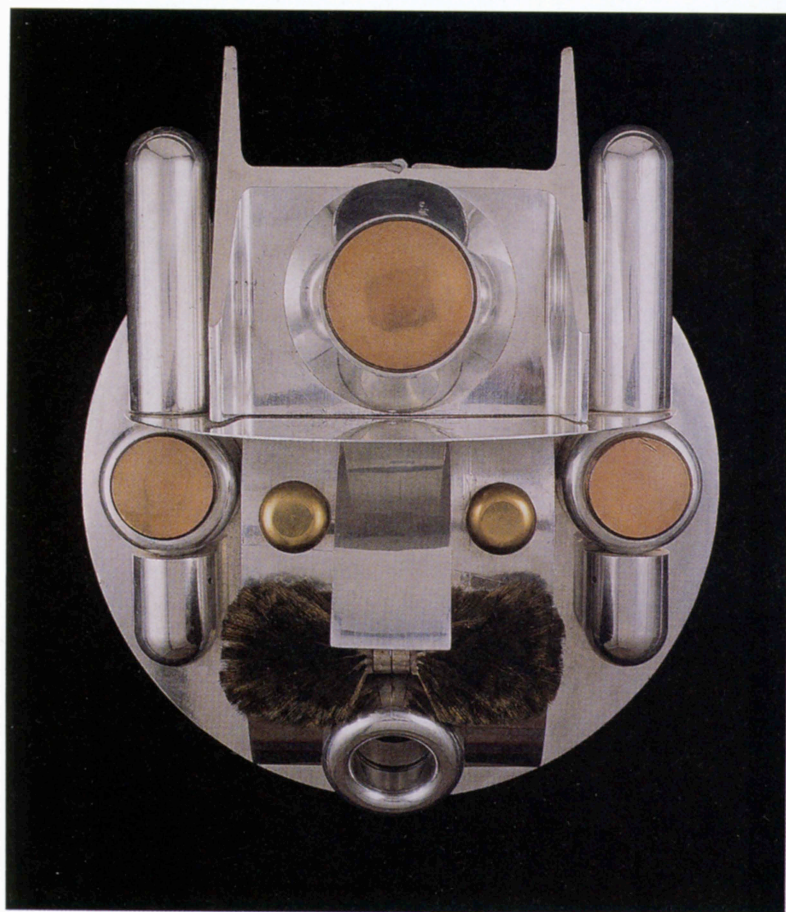
Mexico. They split up soon afterward and his daughter and her mother went back to the West Coast, though Rosanna would visit him each summer. Price went to live in El Rancho on the same property as Norma Cross, who had previously owned a restaurant in Woodstock. Her son, writer James Rodewald, recalls Price as a charismatic type who, when Rodewald was nine, would make him take the wheel whenever Price paused to light a Camel cigarette. Often they were on their way to the Zia Salvage Yard, where the Los Alamos National Laboratory used to sell its scrap to the public by the pound. "Los Alamos to me was finding a place of just pure raw material and fantastically, beautifully shaped metals," Price has said. "I found it a perfect mountain of art to experiment with."

Every Thursday at noon the yard opened, and Herman recalls her father

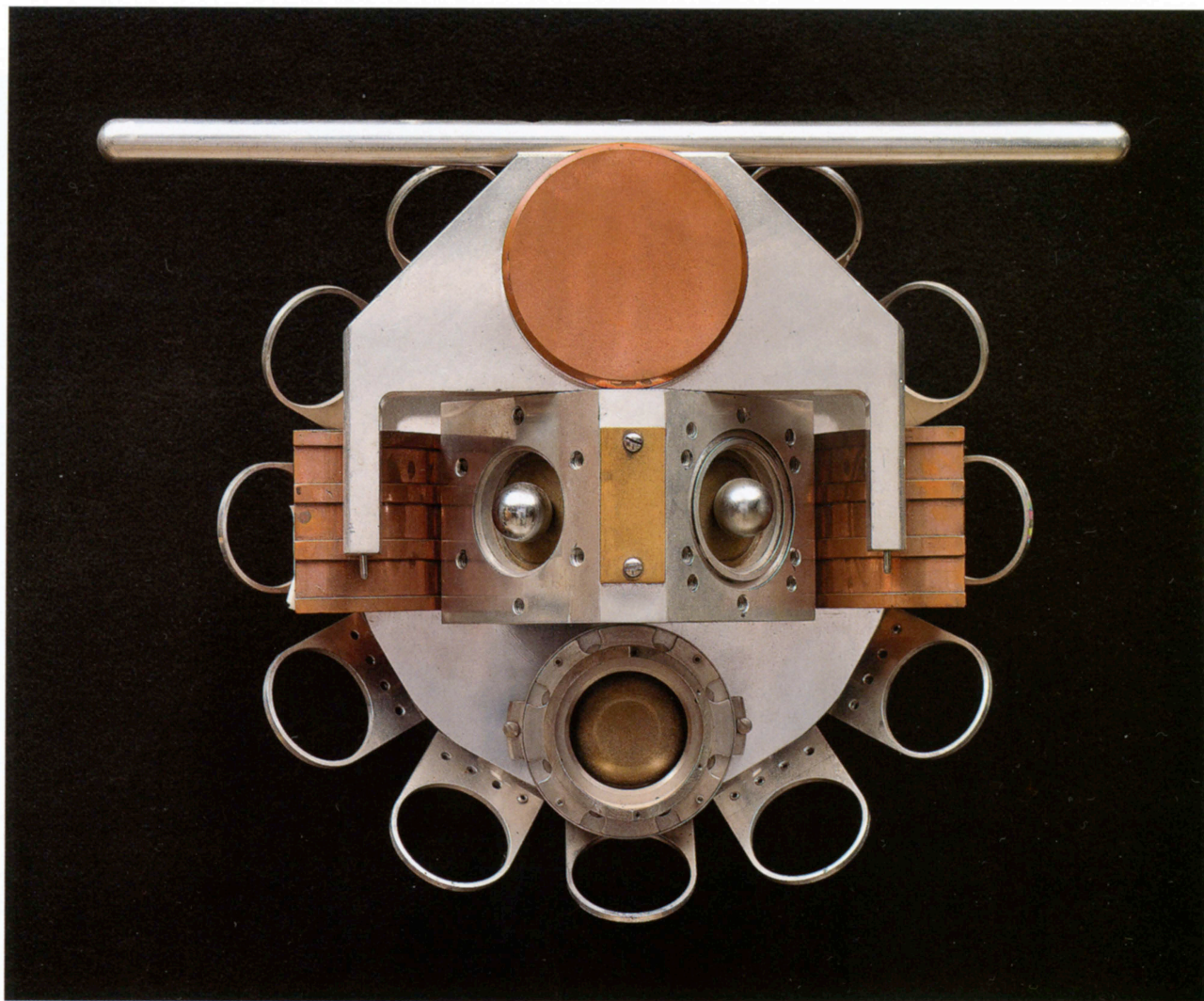
speed walking to the piles. Filmmaker Godfrey Reggio, who became a close friend of Price, recalls, "Tony was the fastest. His eyes were like digital spot- ters." Early on, Price made work that was primarily musical, including a 30-foot- tall set of pipes that became chimes that he named after his eldest daughter and various "atomic gongs" that, when struck or moved by the wind, released a rare vibrational sound into the atmo- sphere. He also created *El Rancho Piano Box*, a mirrored room in the middle of a field with interior walls and a ceiling decked out with piano harps, which could be played by visitors to create otherworldly sounds projected by an antenna of speakers.

James Rutherford, another close friend and former director of the New Mexico Museum of Art's Governor's Gallery, says, "There was this genius in Tony's

"His vision was that if he could create spirit masks made of parts meant for destructive purposes, that when you look into the eyes of the spirits, that energy would be inverted."



Clockwise, from left: *Beware of Mad Generals*, steel, brass, and aluminum; *Hopi Nuclear Maiden* (1987), plastic and metals, from the collection of Museum of New Mexico; *Pharaoh's Curse: "Nuclear Weapons Are The Curse For Falling So Deeply Into Matter,"* steel, aluminum, brass, and copper. Opposite: *Nuclear Crown Prince*, steel, aluminum, bronze (circa 1982)



work. He'd find individual parts and he'd be able to see something else in them. He'd take a metal disc and it would become an image of an ancient Mexican god." Whenever Price had a spare penny, which wasn't often, he spent it on materials. These he built into a pantheon of sculptures inspired by deities and spiritual entities from religions around the world. Today, some might question the appropriative nature of his work. Stuart Ashman, who was a friend of Price and who served as director of various arts institutions in Santa Fe before becoming the CEO of the International Folk Art Market, says Price was influenced and inspired by the belief systems he studied. "I think we all draw from each other's cultures," Ashman says. "That's different from misappropriation."

Price was as interested in the occult as organized religion. Essentially, he sought something beyond reality, and he looked to

many cultures in search of that. Price said he knew "vast energy banks of super-good energy" existed, and explained that, "Each religion is like a giant capacitor in the fourth dimension, holding and dispersing the energy of its followers. Now all I had to do was create symbols corresponding to the energy banks of these religions, using the material of the nuclear weapon's energy system. When the vibrations of the nuclear scrap have been shaped into spiritual energy images, a vibrational tunnel or bridge is formed . . . and an automatic balance of energies would be established. These sculptures act as valves, bringing the dark and light energies together to balance and thus hold the peace."

In 1969 Price had a show hosted by his friend back in New York, the late poet Rosé Cohen, who also ended up in Santa Fe a few years later with his wife, Linda Cohen. There were stretches of time when Price

lived with the Cohens, and as Linda recalls, "There was something about Tony that connected people. There was some kind of energy when the three of us were together. It felt right." They loaded up a truckful of the artist's work in New Mexico and took it to Manhattan, where Rosé had a loft space called The Liquid Wedge Gallery. "I remember opening night, champagne in test tubes from Los Alamos, and we just blew everybody's mind," Rosé said in an interview with Rutherford. Price got some press from this exhibition, and he went on to show at contemporary art galleries in Santa Fe and was included in an exhibition of regional sculptors at Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts, now the New Mexico Museum of Art, in the late 1970s. (There would be another, solo show for him at the museum in 2004.)

In 1982, Rutherford showed Price's work alongside Linda Fleming's at the former Heydt/Bair Gallery in Santa Fe. An aspiring





For the first time in decades, a large group of Price's masks and sculptures are now showing at James Hart's Phil Space Gallery in Santa Fe. Among the masks is a standing figure, *Anti-Nuke Warrior Kachina*.

curator at the time, Rutherford says, "Tony's work changed me. It changed the way I viewed art, because I understood in a visceral way that art had the power to change a person, to change perception, maybe even change the world." At the exhibition, documentary filmmakers Glenn Silber and Claudia Vianello screened *Atomic Artist*, a short film about Price that later aired on PBS. The next year, Price was invited by the City of New York to install his *Atomic Wind Chimes* and *The Last S.A.L.T. Talks*, a group of sculptures based on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, at Battery Park in lower Manhattan. Rutherford also curated a pop-up show in SoHo in a space that became known as the Atomic Art Gallery. *The Last S.A.L.T. Talks* sculptures were eventually purchased by Biosphere 2, an Earth-systems science research facility in Arizona that, in its time, echoed many people's fears about nuclear destruction and their hopes for a sustainable future.

By this time Price had met artist Donna Lubell, who became his wife and mother of two more children, Zara and Jed. The couple lived together for 12 years but then split up, and Lubell moved to Reserve, New Mexico. Price later followed to be near his kids, and there he built a studio and large display room that still houses much of his work and has been tended faithfully by the Friends over the years. Price lived and worked there in relative solitude until 1998, when he had a major stroke. His friends raised money for his care but he never fully recovered. He returned to Santa Fe and lived the remainder of his days in a house owned by Norma Cross.

Over the decades Price mounted many gallery shows and even received a blessing from the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet when he showed some 100 pieces at a Santa Fe dojo-turned-gallery created by the non-profit TENGAM, which supported Tibetan refugees. Yet despite this experience, Price remained a relative stranger to the major art markets. "He was an outsider," says multimedia artist Erika Wanenmacher, who cites Price as an influence. "He was not addressing things that were contemporary in the art world. He was just doing his own weird



Some of Price's work is owned by Andrew Ungerleider, one of the Friends of Tony Price, including *Nuclear Hummingbird* in the right foreground and a black slate with a small mask, which was a wedding present from Price.



thing.” As Reggio puts it, “He was committed, like to an asylum. He was consciously trying to transmute all these elements that went into making something monstrous into something positive. And he did so with a great sense of humor.”

Indeed, several of Price’s friends have sworn that he was the funniest person they knew, and all of them testify to his ability to captivate a room with his storytelling. Musician and activist Wavy Gravy of Woodstock fame, and who spent time in New Mexico with the Hog Farm traveling commune, has said, “Tony had a sense of the divine goof.” As Rutherford points out, humor was a kind of release valve for the seriousness of Price’s message. Jamie Hart, who only knew Price peripherally and yet was inducted by the Friends and later became the nonprofit’s president, currently

shows about 50 of his works at Phil Space gallery in Santa Fe. “His vision was that if he could create spirit masks made of parts meant for destructive purposes, that when you look into the eyes of the spirits, that energy would be inverted,” says Hart.

“The work was meant to be shown together,” Hart adds. “Tony believed the pieces are more powerful when they are together.” Reggio explains this idea: “Tony’s works are like a Hydra head that is really one piece. If you want to hear the voice of the choir, you have to have all the members present. The visual impact becomes visceral instead of intellectual when it’s presented in this manner.”

It’s an issue the Friends of Tony Price and his children have faced over the years, negotiating conflicting ideas about what to do with the work. Sell it off to collectors?

Break it down into traveling shows? Get a portion of the work into major museums to secure Price’s reputation? Myerson and others in the group shake their heads at this. It wasn’t the artist’s will. Andrew Ungerleider, one Friend who has provided financial support over the years, cites a term coined by Buckminster Fuller, whose events he used to organize: “Tony was turning weaponry into ‘livingry,’” he says, “into something you want to live with.”

Indeed, the Phil Space show, which includes dozens of masks hung on a black backdrop, evokes a physical response. The remnants of the atom bomb’s components are concentrated here, arguably emanating a force for peace. The response, several of the Friends have said, is precognitive. In addition to his ideas on the fourth dimension, Price often waxed lyrical about what he considered the fifth dimension, something Rutherford explains as his belief in “a layer of life that exists beyond our cognitive ability, one that Tony thought of as vibrational.” Wanenmacher says, “The first time I walked into that show I got goose bumps. Tony was a mediator, someone who’s making the connection between the gods and the community.”

Five years after Price passed away, his work was installed at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, where it was temporarily exhibited in the lobby of the visitor center. Meanwhile, back in New Mexico, plans are underway today to build new pits for advanced nuclear war-head production at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Greg Mello, founder of the Los Alamos Study Group, an activist organization opposing nuclear power, recently spoke to a group in Santa Fe, stating, “This is one of the largest programs proposed since the Manhattan Project. Our community needs to take a stand. They need our silence, our compliance, to proceed.”

Among the loudest voices are the silent, open mouths of Price’s atomic masks. They await the viewer to give sound to their chorus, to resurrect, as Price would have it, a new old world, one that is pre-nuclear—even if it takes one atom at a time to change our minds. ♦