

The Becoming of Snails and Landfill: The Work of Sculptor Ruta Wilson

by Chris Blan

"Why do I like this piece of artwork?" It's a question that most people ask themselves after being taken by the aesthetics of a particular, personally enthralling sculpture or painting, and for the same people, the answer is often, "I just do. It speaks to me in some way I don't completely understand." Such an answer is, of course, enough of an answer and perfectly valid, rarely hanging around in any nagging way. Yet for others, the answer can pulse, standing there as a placation, as it did for me.

The call had come late on a Thursday afternoon to write a piece about the work of sculptor Ruta Wilson of West Rock Art Metal (www.westrockartmetal.com). It was near the end of a particularly horrendous week at work, when my brain felt like dirty laundry that had nonetheless been folded and stacked back into a cupboard already too full, and I didn't have the kind of time I normally preferred to really get my head into an assignment and conduct a thorough interview. Moreover, I couldn't focus. My son was preparing to move and was due to arrive on Sunday to drop off a bunch of camping gear he couldn't take. So my emotions and thoughts were wrapped around the changes taking place, as well as the inevitable separation that would happen between us. I was, in a few words, having a bad day. So it perhaps wasn't surprising that I turned to what constituted a good day for the artist and what creatively drove her life and incredible work.

"A good day consists of a trip to the local landfill site," says Wilson, "and finding that one key piece to start a sculpture. Then I'm off and running. It may take me only moments, or many months to discover what the fate of that piece is to become, and then I dive right into the project and only then can I fulfill its destiny." Destiny. It was a word that resonated with me. Things were moving in my life, and for the changes that would happen whether I wanted them or not, slivers of fear and sadness crept deep into me. It was the unknown, of course—that hard-to-see end that, in its very obliqueness, terrifies. Yet, as I worked further, my eyes trained across the words "meant to become."

"I like to keep the integrity of the original metal so you can recognize the components," says Wilson, "but see the transformation of pieces of metal into whimsical characters and animals with individual personalities. The shape of these pieces will often show what it is meant to become, while other times I start with an idea and then find the pieces that satisfy the intent. In this way, creating a piece becomes an interplay between my mental images and the scrap pile."

Among the photographs of Wilson's work, the one that struck me was a sculpture of a snail that had been created from an old wood plane and what looked like the base of a microphone stand. "Why do I like this?" I asked myself, coming back to the sculpture

again and again. "When that wood plan and microphone stand base were originally tossed into the landfill, did they know they'd one day become welded together to become a third, beautiful, previously unimagined thing?" If great art demands questions of us, great art also elicits answers previously unimagined, and by the creation of Ruta Wilson, such an answer came to me. Life had (not for the first time) deposited my son and me in different parts of the landfill known as life, and it would be easy to wallow in that. Yet, if we welded ourselves together in the way we'd always done, we could create a new, beautiful thing together—something meant to become.

"Why do I like this piece of artwork?" was a metaphor, but it was also a tangible lesson—a piece of weighted wisdom forward-looking for the days ahead. Says Wilson, "My love of the challenge drives me to create yet more complex pieces as time goes on," adding, "When my creative force is flowing, I don't stop 'til completion." I understood that flow, and I'd perhaps always have questions, but by the work of artists like Ruta Wilson (featured at the Rocky Raccoon Café in Owen Sound, as well as the Southampton Art Gallery), I also knew I'd always find answers toward my own completion. **■**

