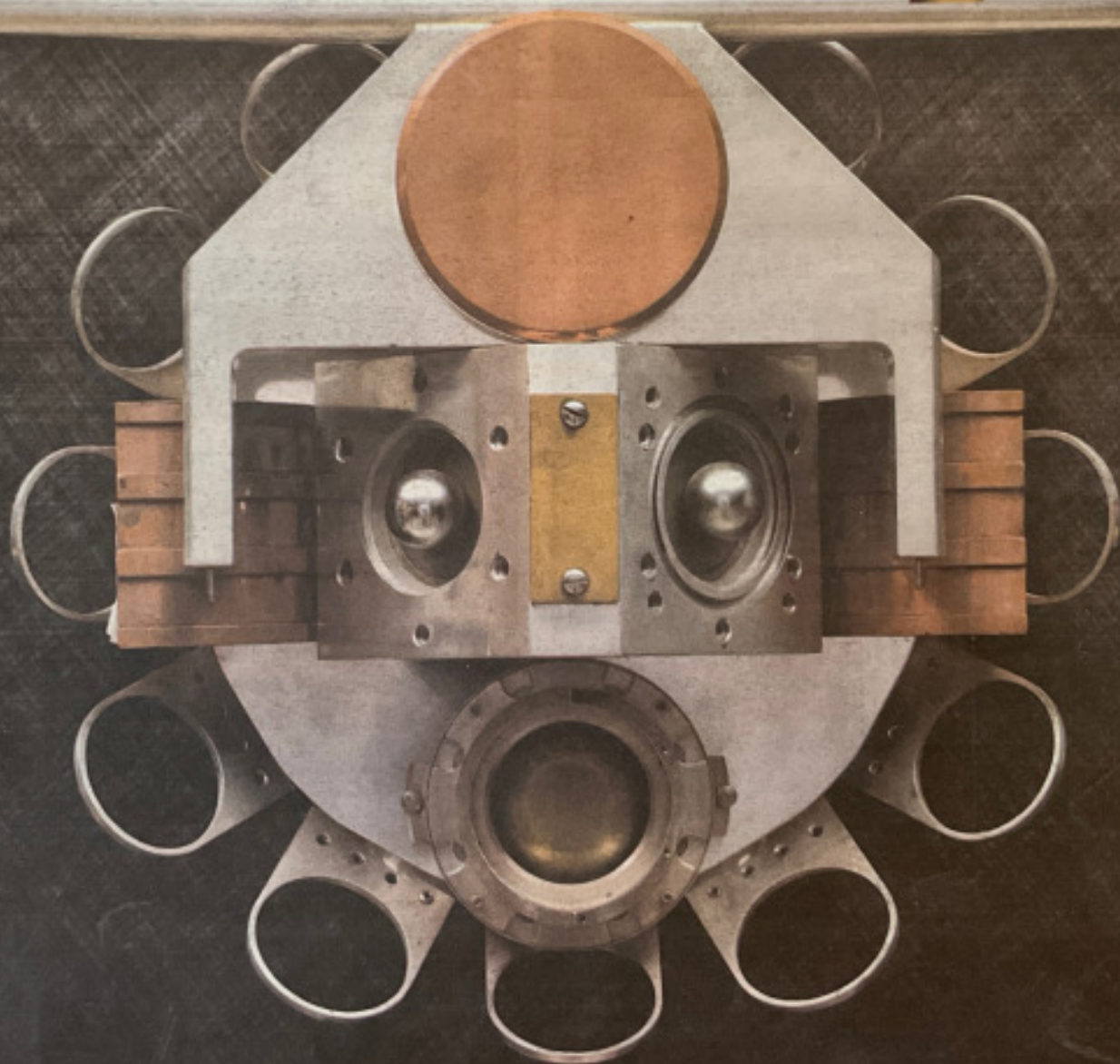


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Pasatiempo



DOCTOR ATOMIC COMES HOME

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THE LEGACY OF TONY PRICE



Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican

AN ANTIDOTE TO NUCLEAR NOSTALGIA



THE WORK OF TONY PRICE

THE Manhattan Project reached its penultimate juncture when, on July 16, 1945 — mere weeks before the U.S. military unleashed hell on Earth on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — the project team detonated the world's first atomic bomb at Trinity Site. Some of the scientists who worked on the project were plagued by their consciences, while others seemed to have no qualms at all. That moment in time has become celebrated and mythologized — never mind that the threat of nuclear annihilation has loomed like a shadow over humanity ever since. “That day all of mankind became nuclear hostages,” wrote artist Tony Price (1937-2000) on the 40th anniversary of the first atomic

bomb test. “For forty years now, as the technology developed into its awesome present display, thousands of these devices have been exploded all over the world.”

We may assume that good and its opposite — whether that be called evil or indifference — exist in equal measure as flip sides of the same coin. But we might well ask: What is the countermeasure to a destructive force that can end hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives in mere moments — and a force that has proven to affect millions more in the aftermath of its use? For some, the answer lies in religion. “There but for the grace of God go I,” we say, thankful for our lot. But which god? Whose god?

If a countermeasure to these nuclear horrors exists, it is no doubt that for many, it lies in the realm of the spirit. Price knew this. Remembered for his luminous sculptures crafted from the detritus of the nuclear weapons program, plucked from the salvage yard at

Los Alamos National Laboratories, Price transfigured symbols of death into reflections of the spirit that animates all life. Though his enduring works embody the mythic realities of peoples the world over, he focused on the Hopi in particular, as well as other indigenous cultures of the Southwest. From the myths of the Pueblo Indians, he developed a direct response to nuclear arms, birthed in the very region where the Manhattan Project blew the lid off of a literal Pandora's box.

As artists and collaborators Meridel Rubenstein and Ellen Zweig, quoted in James Rutherford's essay “Tony Price — Atomic Artist,” put it: “If you boiled it down, there's this amazing binary of different mythologies going on on the Pajarito Plateau — the myth of eternal return with the indigenous peoples and then the myth of the end of the world with the scientists that have come here. There's a weird fable being enacted. We've got this population coming through in flight



Inset, 1st Mutant Man Born Without an Asshole (mask), circa 1980s; mixed media, steel, brass, aluminum; photo James Hart; top, Tony Price on site at Yucca Flats, 1983; photo Elliot McDowell

from Europe butting up against the ancient culture. Tony's sculptures embody all of these ideas at once."

In an effort to lift the veil on the normalizing and romanticizing of our nuclear legacy, the Friends of Tony Price, a group dedicated to preserving his memory and art, has partnered with the gallery Phil Space for an exhibition of Price's works. The show, *The Work of Tony Price*, provides some counterbalance to a series of events planned around the Santa Fe Opera's production of *Doctor Atomic* and promoted by the city's tourism department as "Atomic Summer." Price's exhibition opens the door to a more critical discourse, challenging the myths surrounding the Manhattan Project and its key players. The gallery's attendant events for the Price show included last week's panel discussion "Resist the Romance: Nuclear History in the Land of Enchantment," hosted by the gallery and led by Greg Mellow, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, with documentary filmmaker Godfrey Reggio. "I've put this talk under the auspice of *Doctor Atomic* meets *Doctor No*," said Reggio in his introductory comments, noting that Price was staunchly antinuclear. On Saturday, July 14, Dine activist Leona Morgan of Nuclear Issues Study Group gives a talk, "The Dilemma of Indigenous Resistance Against Nuclear Colonialism," also at the gallery.

"He was like an alchemist who takes pieces from the beast and transforms that energy into something else."

— writer James Rutherford

Phil Space is showing close to 50 works by Price, selected from nearly 150 works that are currently maintained by the Friends of Tony Price at a secure location in Reserve, New Mexico. It is the largest exhibit of his work to date in terms of the number of pieces, several of which have rarely been exhibited. They include numerous standing sculptures as well as his masks and hanging pieces. Many of these reflect the artist's penchant for witty titles, such as *Beware of Mad Generals*, a mask with a circular tube mouth resting below a bushy mustache. "What I, early on, came to think of as the central tenets of Tony's work was that he was trying to counterbalance the negative energy of nuclear weapons by plugging into the energy of indigenous spiritual traditions and connections to the land," said Rutherford, the advancement services manager for the Office of Institutional Advancement at the Institute of American Indian Arts. "He did it with humor and satire and sardonic commentary."

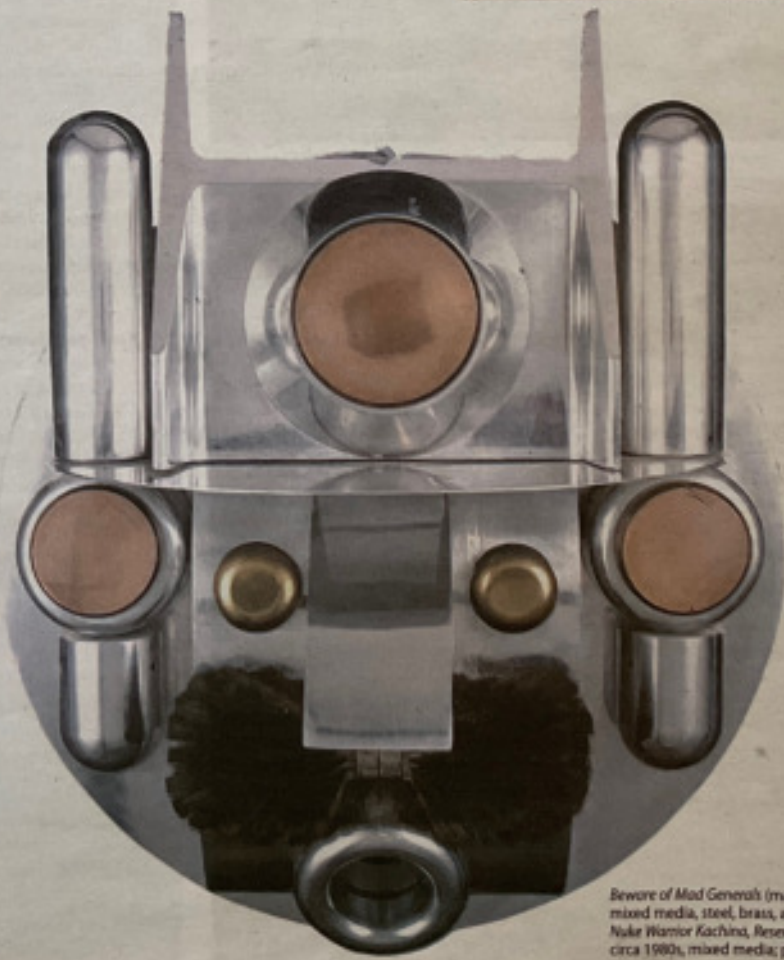
Price, who began working in stone sculpture and bronze early in his career, settled in El Rancho, New Mexico, in 1968. He developed an interest in the salvage yard in nearby Los Alamos, where he discovered precision-machined metal parts made of steel, brass, and copper, soon to be highly polished components of his figurative sculptures. In the mid-1970s, he started purchasing materials from The Black Hole, an atomic surplus store in Los Alamos owned by Ed Grothus, a former machinist and technician at Los Alamos National Laboratory who was known to his friends as "Atomic Ed." The salvaged metal became the primary medium for what Price called his "atomic art."

Also in the mid-70s, he discovered that at least one of his pieces was contaminated by radiation. After

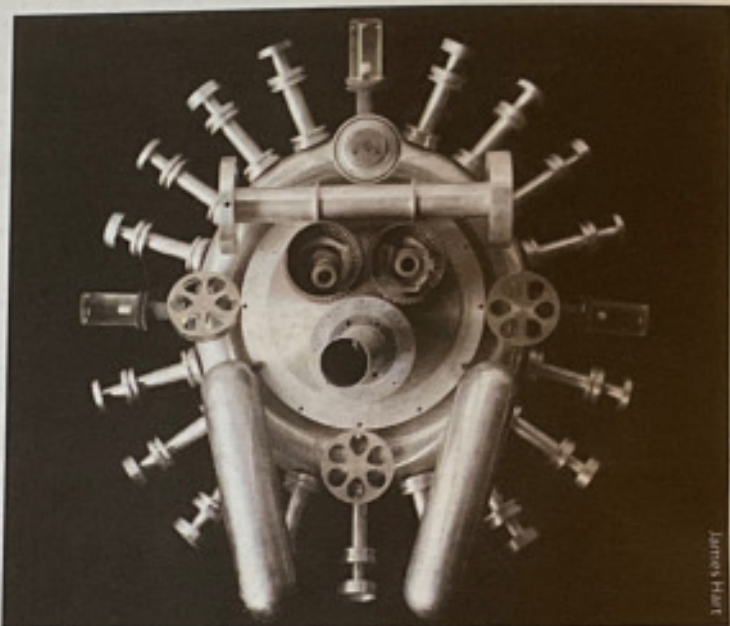
investing in several Geiger counters, he carefully scanned all of his metal parts thereafter. Making a person sick from his art, after all, was antithetical to his purpose. "He was like an alchemist who takes pieces from the beast and transforms that energy into something else," Rutherford said. "There's no better way to sum it up than to think of the way he took an A-bomb casing and turned it into a temple bell." Price, who was also a musician, constructed elaborate large-scale chimes and gongs from cylindrical metal objects that could be struck to emit ethereal harmonics. "I would call him a compositional artist," Reggio told the audience at the panel on July 7. "Sound was his medium." Early on, he also used the salvaged materials to construct furniture and other utilitarian objects, eventually abandoning the practice to work on his abstract sculpture.

Price's masks were often reinterpretations of iconic figures from various traditions. But even if the viewer didn't make the connection to the Atomic Age from seeing the materials they were crafted from — which served who-knows-what mysterious purpose as part of the nuclear weapons projects, and which Price made even more unrecognizable — he often made

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Beware of Mad Generals (mask), circa 1980s; mixed media, steel, brass, aluminum; top, *Anti Nuke Warrior Kachina*, Reserve, New Mexico, circa 1980s; mixed media; photos James Hart



Nuclear Warrior Kachina (mask), circa 1980s; mixed media, steel, brass, aluminum

no attempt to obscure the atomic association in his titles. He gave them names like *Nuclear Kachina*, *Nuclear Ganesha & Rat/Hindu God of Wisdom* (a diptych), and *Atomic Quetzacoatl*. His purpose was to take the raw materials of the industry and transmogrify them, to engage in acts of metamorphosis. "I grew up in New Mexico, and there was always this dark cloud that was holding people hostage to this negative energy," Rutherford said. "In Tony's work, there was this moment where it allowed the release of that. In that moment, when you encountered the statement he was making, you at once understood the absurdity of nuclear weapons, while, at the same time, being able to laugh at it. That laughing deflated the energy of it. In his own way, he put that stake in the ground of the counterpoint."

Rutherford, who had been living in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, returned to New Mexico in 1982 and met Price that year. His first endeavor as a young curator was a show of works by Price and artist Linda Fleming, which was mounted at the Heydt-Bair Gallery, then on Garcia Street. "I wanted to experience art that was transformational on the viewer," Rutherford said. "In the way that standing in front of a Tibetan *thangka* realigns the energy fields of the viewer, the same thing happened with Tony Price — the idea that his sculptures created a vibration that affected the people who encountered it."

For Price, the spirit realm was very real. In seeking to pierce the veil between dimensions, he took the guideposts offered by Hinduism, Christianity, Native American religions, and other traditions, melding a collective artistic vision of universal human experience that became his life's work. He recognized that the only thing that could counteract what was created in the desert back in 1945 was something ancient and alive that he channeled into his masks. In his July 16, 1985, statement — "Atomic Art: Sculpted From Our Nuclear Nightmare" — he wrote that "these sculptures act as vibrational tunnels in energy transference, allowing the two energy systems to become doorways to each other. These sculptures act as valves bringing the dark and light energies together to balance and thus help to hold the peace." ◀

details

- ▼ *Land of Enchantment/Atomic Summer: The Work of Tony Price*; through Aug. 19
- ▼ Leona Morgan: "The Dilemma of Indigenous Resistance Against Nuclear Colonialism"
- ▼ 5 p.m. Saturday, July 14
- ▼ Phil Space, 1410 Second St., 505-983-7945