



J.W. Adkins and his wife, Martha, maintain their art studio, The Loft, where J.W. does assemblage sculpture. "He Missed!" exhibits the artist's quirky sense of humor and fascination with rusted metal.

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You can find J.W. and Martha

Adkins in their enchanted

studios at 720 East Haley Street,

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RUSTY IRON

by **Martha Sadler**

J.W. AND MARTHA ADKINS MAKE IDIOSYNCRATIC ART ON EAST HALEY.

ACCORDING to his card, J.W. Adkins, doing business as The Loft at 720 East Haley Street, specializes in sculpture, salvage, exotic dancers, wars, exterminations, condom repair, and foot care, among other things. Most of that is a lie. In reality, Adkins is an assemblage sculptor, as Martha Adkins, his wife of three decades, explains. "Or *assemblage*," she says, giving it the French pronunciation, "depending on how high up in the air your nose is."

Adkins is a fourth-generation general contractor. Like his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather before him, he built a hefty percentage of Santa Barbara County's hardscape. Now retired from that and his wood mill, he still gets up at 7 a.m. every day and works until 7 p.m. The difference is that, instead of making things to order, he uses his industrial machinery and advanced shop skills to make objets d'art. He calls it goofing off.

Men who work in the industrial businesses in the area drop interesting salvage off at J.W.'s place all the time. It's amazing what a person can do with old crankshafts, smudge pots, sidewinder missiles, and whatnot. He's crazy about rusted metal. "I really like it," he said, with feeling. By way of explanation he added, "It has a grain."

One of the first of many things to catch your eye as you enter the Adkinses' enormous industrial compound/art studio is a large fountain spilling into a goldfish pond. It appears to be a hybrid of a Rube Goldberg contraption, a model railroad, and a Japanese meditative fountain. The water pours into a variety of beautiful old metal bowls, including modified manhole flanges. It tunnels through boulders and waters into strange gardens. Besides real hyacinths and lettuce, close inspection reveals a stand of ringing flowers composed of old telephone bells; spongy-looking fungi made from metal slag, and colonies of mushrooms with squashed slugs and coins for caps. A lot of his artwork is humorous, sly.

But many of his pieces are just abstract, like jazz, especially horn music, or maybe it seems like horn music because he uses so much metal, distorted metal in particular. But the indoor studios—including his wife's quilting studios and cabinets of collected dolls—are detailed with fine ornamental craftwork. For example, when you look closely at the graceful stair-rail brackets, you notice that they are individually designed from aged rebar. They look expensive, and in fact, you can't afford them: Since he's retired, the price list in Adkins' workshop specifies \$1,923 a minute for shop time.

A little bit of his stuff is political commentary: Glistening clots and guts cling to bullets that have spilled from an oil-powered gun bearing the directive, "Consume." The gun is called "Weapon of Mass Corruption."

J.W.'s business partner and wife of forever seems very down-to-earth. She calls J.W.'s art "just a hobby that ran away with him." Martha's hobbies include quilting and making doll clothes, and some of her work is surprisingly revealing. One quilt features rows of colorful houses with unique gardens and a different hen in each window. It is a utopian vision of sorts. As Martha explains it, "I prefer to stay in the box." They are a warm couple and have amusing conflicts. As J.W. is giving a tour of the fountain, he says, "There are 22 goldfish in the pond." Martha: "Oh, really? How do you know?" J.W.: "I counted them!" Martha: "Did you mark them? Pull them out, put them in your pockets?" They both grin at the visitors. "Obviously this conversation has gone awry," J.W. comments. Besides making her own subtle art, Martha looks like a work of art. Her eyes are magnified by thick glasses, which I thought was interesting since her husband likes to emphasize and aestheticize defects, but perhaps it's just a coincidence. ■