



Murray Favro
Lever and Wheel

Introduction

"Foremost, I am interested in creativity itself, in the process of invention and in how it forms a material expression."

– Murray Favro

Murray Favro, one of Canada's most significant senior artists, works in old ways to realize new things. Using processes of fabrication, reconstruction and invention, he raises poignant questions about the art object, technology and the nature of representation. The MacLaren Art Centre is pleased to present *Lever and Wheel*, a solo exhibition that surveys Favro's bicycle-related works from 1988 to the present. The exhibition, which runs from July 9 to November 1, 2015, was programmed in celebration of the 2015 Pan Am Mountain Biking competition in Oro, just north of Barrie.

Lever and Wheel features "homemade" machines: some incorporate bicycle parts in their construction; others comprise deft modifications to existing bicycles. The true power of these exploratory works lies in the discoveries and intricate technologies embedded in their making. With earnest curiosity and masterful technical skill, Favro's bicycle sculptures refute mass-production and reinvigorate the histories of industrial tools and vehicles.

Lever and Wheel is complemented by an essay by Toronto-based art writer Bryne McLaughlin. His response foregrounds Favro as a pivotal figure in the author's own initiation into contemporary art. In the essay, McLaughlin highlights the "suggestive potential and cumulative power of the objects [Favro] dreams up." He and Favro corresponded at length in preparation for the essay, fostering a dialogue that lends a personal, biographical tone to the essay. McLaughlin's admiration for the material fabrication and innovative spirit of Favro's work rings clear throughout the text. As he reminds us, "Favro's works are and are not what they seem: they give physical shape to the realms of imagination where the ordinary becomes extraordinary."

RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD, Exhibition Curator



Murray Favro: Builder and Dreamer, an Appreciation

Murray Favro and I know each other well—at least that’s what I like to think. The truth is, we’ve never met. Our relationship is one that in many respects epitomizes the rare connection viewers of art experience when they come face to face with a work or a practice that seems to “speak” directly to them. It’s a feeling that’s hard to pin down, yet you recognize without a doubt when it happens. You enter a gallery and it’s as if there is an electric charge, a surge of adrenaline, which hits you straight from the work. You implicitly know that there’s something here for you, but it’s not always clear why or how. Maybe you feel your own history or interests in the work. Maybe it activates something new and unexpected that starts to cohere around thoughts or ideas that you weren’t sure you already had. Whichever the case, and it’s often both, at that instant a lasting bond forms between you, the work and the artist. You never quite see anything in the same way again.

Favro has played a key role—perhaps *the* key role—in how I came to be able to see and understand contemporary art. For me, his work is a model for how art can and should move you in unpredictable and unprecedented ways. Whether in the hollow shell of a fighter jet, the sonic geometries of paintings made into guitars (and vice versa), the kinetic illusions of a washing machine, waves on a lakefront or a Van Gogh still life, or the hulking mass of a diesel train engine, the suggestive potential and cumulative power of the objects he dreams up then meticulously fabricates is unmistakable. His constructions are infused with the ability to transport viewers mentally, but also mechanically, as seen in the custom-built racing bicycles/sculptures (which Favro has “supermodified” with rear-pedal drive trains, streamlined frames or chain-wheel gears to maximize speed and efficiency) and accompanying sketchbook drawings and photo documentation assembled in the exhibition *Lever and Wheel* at the MacLaren

Art Centre. It's a practice that deftly combines the hands-on material concerns of a draughtsman and builder with the experimental wonder of an inventor. Favro's works are and are not what they seem: they give physical shape to the realms of the imagination where the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

This pivoting approach between the real and the imagined, between the formal qualities of object making and conceptual flights of fancy, has been hovering at the core of Favro's practice for more than fifty years. It began in the late 1950s, when, as a teenager, Favro moved from his hometown of Hunstville to London, Ontario, to enroll in the studio art program led by John O'Henley and Herb Ariss at H. B. Beal Technical School, a formative hotbed for local art-scene luminaries such as Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe. "What I liked about the art program at Beal," Favro told me recently by telephone, "was that it wasn't theory, it was hands-on. We did things like welding, and they would see what you were working with and dig out stuff to try and get you interested and thinking about art in other ways."

After a brief stint as a commercial artist ("When I got a job—a pretty good job, too—I found out that I was just an automated pencil for somebody else, a salesman," he recalls) and then as a painter ("Within a year or so of having my first studio, the paintings became three-dimensional and things started spraying out on to the wall"), Favro started to construct what would become his breakthrough sculptural work, *Half-Scale*

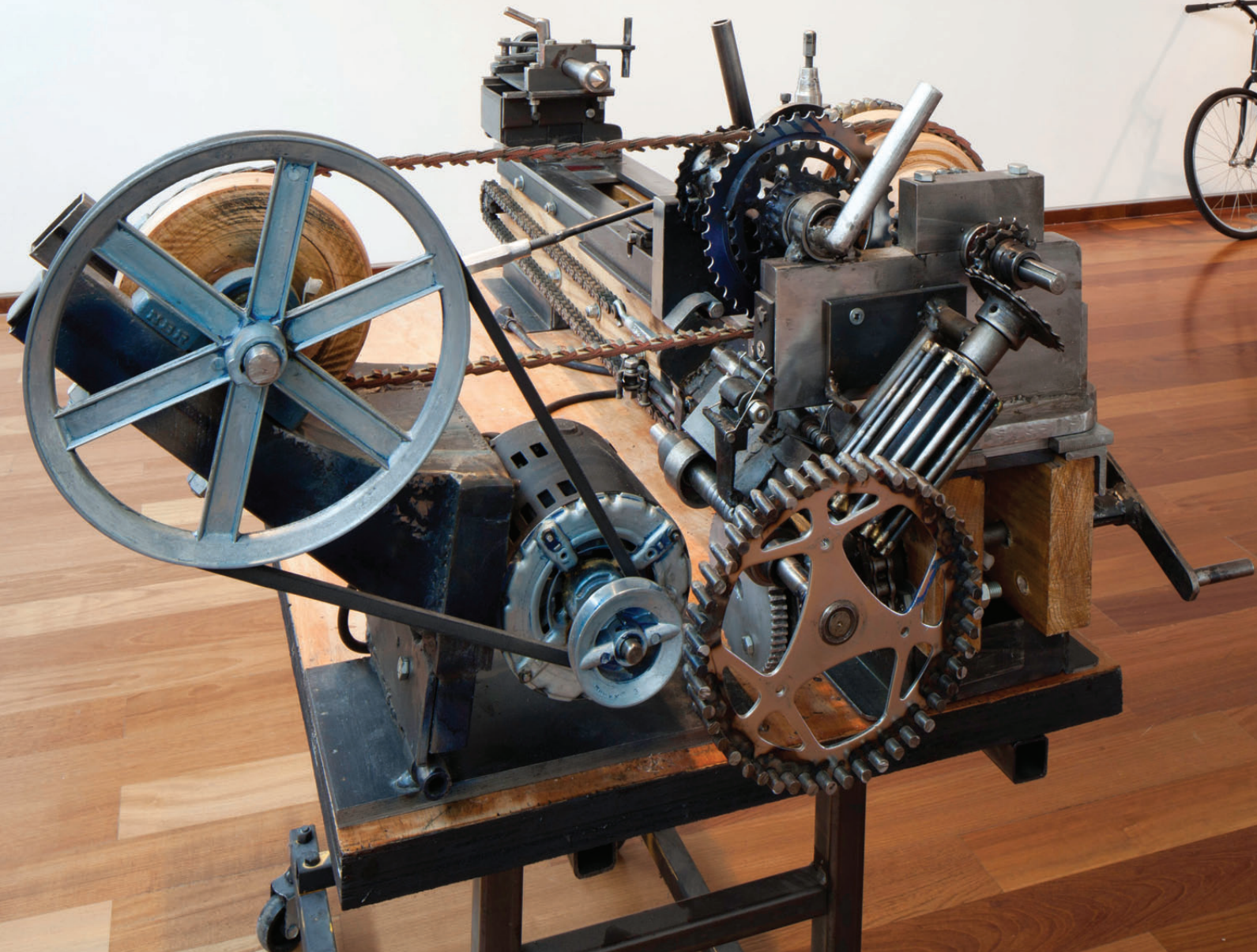


Sabre Jet (1965–68). Based on a childhood memory of seeing a quartet of Sabre jets streaking overhead, the roughly built model (sized to fit through the gallery doors, and now no longer in existence) was the centerpiece of Favro’s debut exhibition at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto in 1968. In a review of what he called “a strong and important show,” critic Gary Michael Dault pinpointed the purposefully uneasy balance in *Half-Scale Sabre Jet*’s composite parts—metal skin over wooden frame, makeshift bomb under a single wing, colourfully painted nose, instrument panel and pilot’s seat, and the wailing pitch of a jet engine—adding up to a whole that was, in Dault’s words, “An airplane then and no airplane.”¹ Favro, it seems, had invented a sculpture, and a mode of working, that for all of its intentionally “crude” material design and truncated scale, still soared with the power of memory and the imagination.

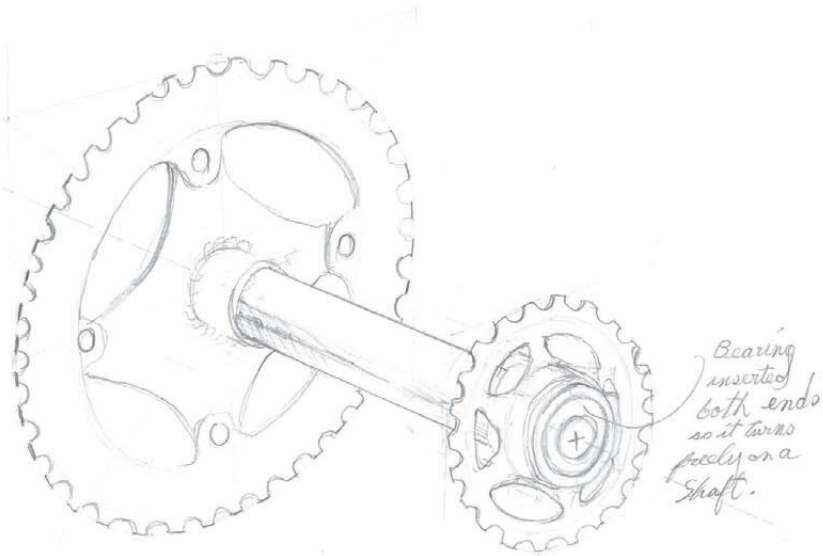
More of the same would follow. Through the early 1970s, Favro developed a series of sculptural projections featuring full-scale wooden replicas of everyday objects—a kitchen sink, a trio of light bulbs, a washing machine and a book-and-magazine covered table from fellow artist Greg Curnoe’s studio—painted white then “activated” by the projected image of how the objects would look in real life. He then moved to larger-scale works, including the modern pastoral scene (complete with the wooden shell of a Chevrolet Corvair) in *Country Road* (1971–72), the rolling Lake Huron waves of his kinetic contraption *Synthetic Lake* (1973–74) and the trompe l’oeil remake of Vincent van Gogh’s *The Bedroom* (1888) that Favro simply called *Van Gogh’s Room* (1973–74).

All the while Favro was not only tinkering with the mechanics of perception but also the actual processes of building working machines that straddled the gaps between art and technology. As a founding member of the notoriously improvisational noise outfit, the Nihilist Spasm Band, he continued to design paintings that doubled as electric guitars. Favro had also taken an aircraft-building course in the making of *Half-Scale Sabre Jet*, skills he returned to for *The Flying Flea* (1976–77), a full-scale version of the do-it-yourself biplane made famous in the 1920s and ‘30s both for its ease of construction and its tendency for catastrophic failure, and *Sabre Jet, 55% Size* (1979–83), a sleeker reprise of his earlier fighter-jet sculpture. This hands-on focus—which remains a crucial part of Favro’s practice—was not so much an attempt to perfect his mechanical technique as an artist and builder’s curious drive to push at the conceptual peripheries of form and function.

Many of these objects and installations, and a few important others, form the basis of my own eureka moment(s) with Favro’s work. I’m not an artist and I didn’t study art history, but in the roundabout way that things tend to happen, in the late 1990s I found myself working as an aspiring young art writer at a national art magazine. It’s a personal trajectory that is not all that different from the way Favro’s practice has evolved—following curiosity, intuition and inspiration, learning on the fly and improvising on the means to communicate ideas, often without a clear notion of how it all might turn out.



Back Gears.
(made from Sprockets)



Bearing inserted
both ends
so it turns
freely on a
shaft.

fabricated from tubing and welded where necessary
sprockets from bicycle.

Murray Favro 2008

Perhaps that's why when I discovered Favro's 1998 retrospective exhibition at the London Regional Art and Historical Museum (now Museum London) and McIntosh Gallery the mysterious and at times confounding pieces of the contemporary art puzzle in front of me suddenly started to make sense. *Sabre Jet, 55% Size* was there, as were a selection of early sculptural projections and wall-mounted paintings/guitars. But it was two recent works in the show that really caught my attention.

Snow on Steps (1994) reimagines Favro's own front porch in winter as a noirish sculptural mise en scène. Footsteps traced in snow lead up the steps of the half-built structure, stop before the bottom of a front door, then turn and descend. It's easy to imagine the feet trudging, snow brushed off, a knock on the door, yet there's no indication of who was there, or why there seemed to be no answer. It's a fiction not fully resolved, a moment in time only half-remembered and left for the viewer to complete. That same power of suggestion charged Favro's *SD40 Diesel Engine* (1998), a masterfully crafted wooden remake of the massive train engine manufactured at the time in London. Approached from the front, the looming sculpture carried all of the majesty and menace of the real thing. Looking down its 18-metre length, perspective started to narrow and skew, tapering off at an unfinished end. A later, more complete version includes tracks, but even here Favro's engine seemed to thrust forward with a similar perceptual force that scattered Paris audiences of the Lumière Brothers' first moving picture shows a century earlier.

The startling impact of those works and that exhibition had an immeasurable effect on my creative sensibility. I started to understand how the everyday could become monumental in the imagination. Yet it seemed to me that this was not only a question hinged on the capacity of the mind's eye, but also the ingenuity of a builder's hands. I was fascinated by what Favro made me see, but even more so in how he made me see it.

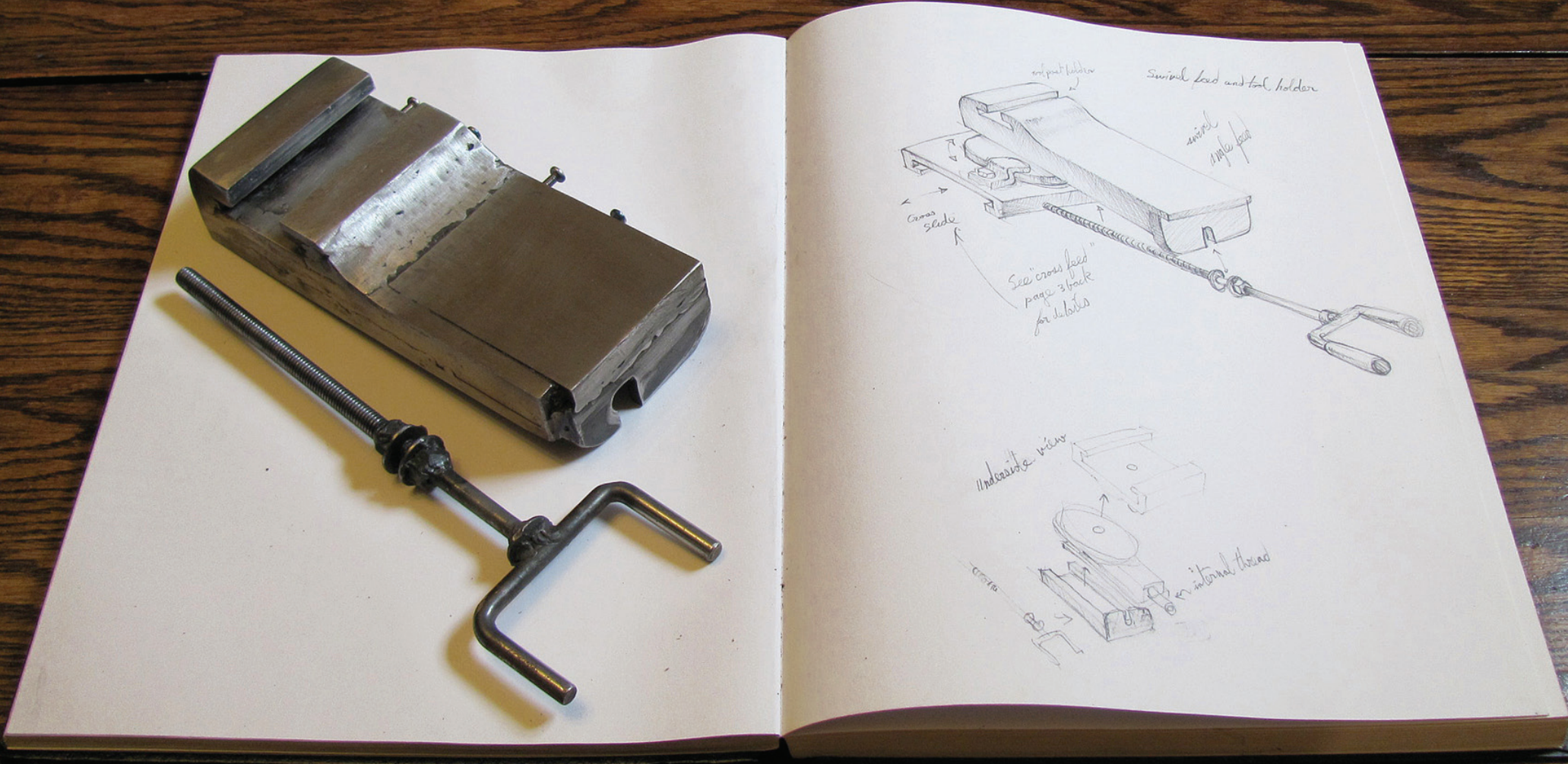
In 2010 I saw another Favro exhibition, this time at Christopher Cutts Gallery in Toronto, which brought together the conceptual and mechanical threads that run throughout Favro's career. The show assembled a series of Favro's hand-made "tools"—a blacksmith's vise, saw, hammer, hand-drill, lawnmower, shaver and potato peeler—as a kind of workshop counterpoint to the bland uniformity of mass production and the loss of industrial pasts. The anchor to all of this was *Lathe* (2010), a metal-turning machine that Favro designed and constructed from, among other things, the sprockets and gears of a bicycle. A feature work in *Lever and Wheel*, the fully operational sculpture is another icon of industry with a historical use-value that, even in the few years since Favro built it, has been further eclipsed by 3D printing technologies.

But what drew Favro to the lathe wasn't so much its place in the past, or in the future for that matter, as its fundamental ability to generate discovery and meaning in the present. A lathe can both make and be made by the parts it is designed to produce—"It helps to make itself," as Favro puts it. It only becomes a sculpture when the composite pieces have found their place, activating

another sense not only of the object but also of the potential it contains. Art as machine or machine as art—it's not the result, but the path that takes you there that matters. Like *Half-Scale Sabre Jet* so many years before or the supermodified bicycles also on view in the exhibition, it is the sum of *Lathe's* parts that make it fly in the mind. This is what Favro's work has taught me. Long may our friendship continue.

— BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN, Guest Essayist

¹ Gary Michael Dault, "Murray Favro: Half-Scale Sabre Jet," *artscanada*, February 1968, http://ccca.concordia.ca/resources/searches/event_detail.html?languagePref=en&vk=7433.

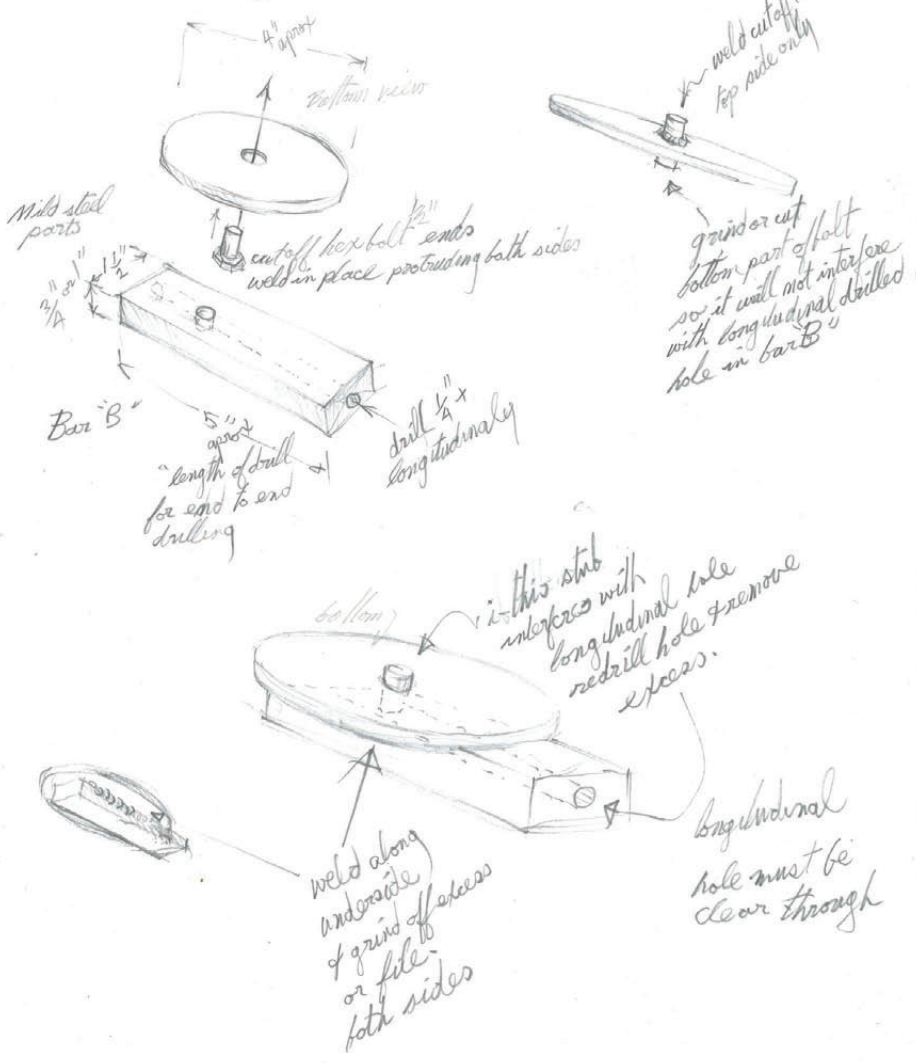


MURRAY FAVRO was born in 1940 in Huntsville and lives in London, Ontario. A pivotal figure in the London Regionalism movement, Favro has garnered numerous awards including the Gershon Iskowitz Prize (1997) and the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts (2007). His work has been acquired by major institutions including the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Favro is represented in Toronto by Christopher Cutts Gallery and in London, Ontario by Michael Gibson Gallery.

BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN is a Toronto-based editor and art writer. He has edited numerous catalogues and exhibition essays for national and international museums and galleries. His writing has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *Artforum* and *Art in America*. He is the managing editor of *Canadian Art*.

Compound Swivel Base (Swivel part)

Fabrication drawings



Acknowledgements

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Murray Favro, *Lever and Wheel*, 2015, installation view, MacLaren Art Centre (Cover, page 7)

Murray Favro, *Future Bicycle*, 2015, steel, bicycle hardware, black paint, Courtesy of the artist (Page 3)

Murray Favro, *Lever and Wheel*, 1997-1998, wood, metal, paint. Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift from The Peggy Lownsbrough Fund, 1999 (Page 5)

Murray Favro, *Sketch Book of 29 Drawings* (detail), 2010, graphite on paper, glass box and plinth (Pages 8, 12)

Murray Favro, *Swivel Feed and Tool Holder*, 2010, c-print. Courtesy of Christopher Cutts Gallery (Page 10)

Photography: Cover, pages 3, 7, André Beneteau; Page 5, Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario; Pages 8, 10, 11, Courtesy of Christopher Cutts Gallery

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MACLAREN ART CENTRE

37 Mulcaster Street
Barrie, ON L4M 3M2
www.maclarenart.com