



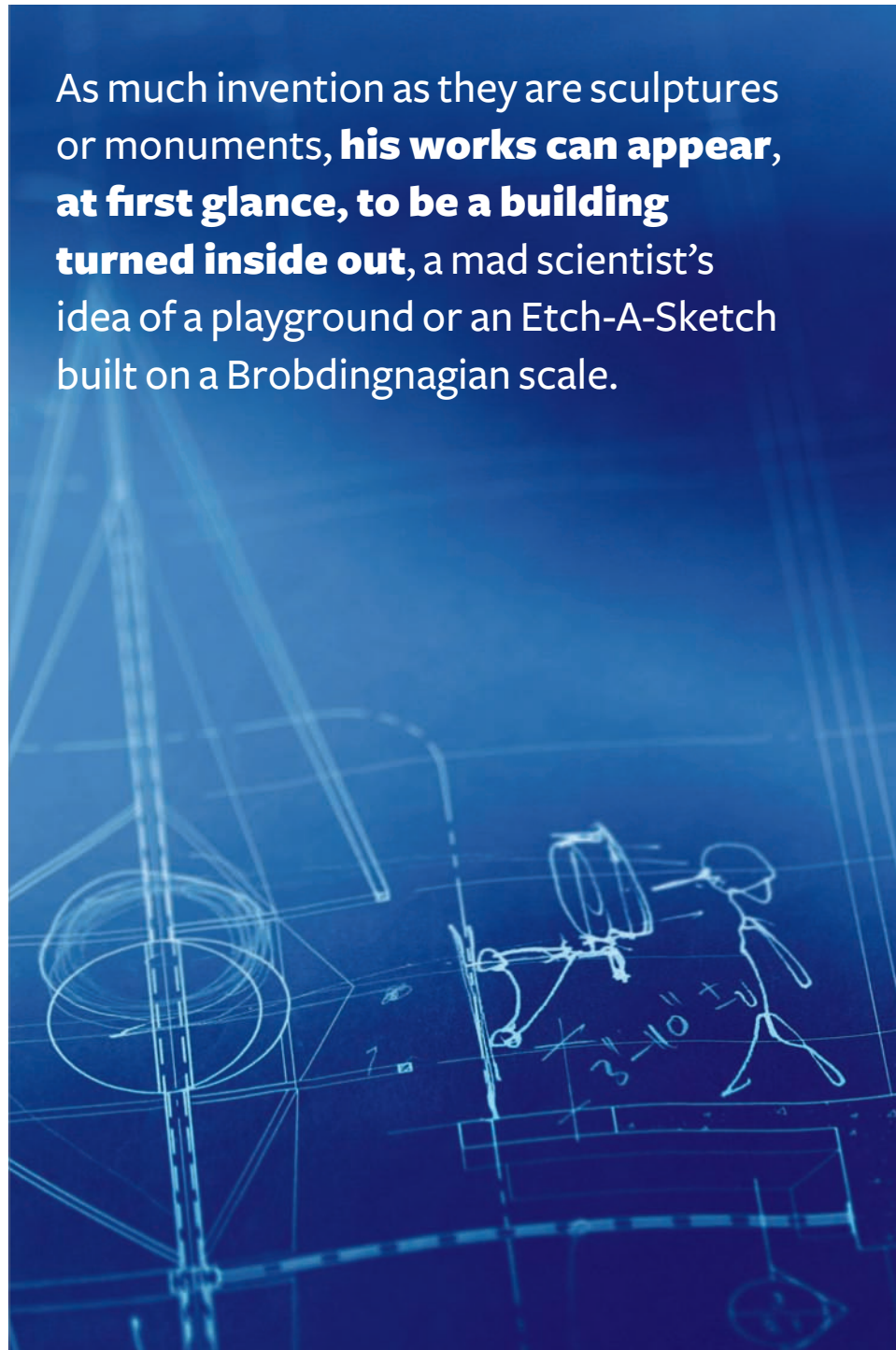
The Big-Idea Guy

ROBERTA
STALEY
PROFILES
ARTIST

Alan Storey

Photography **Mark Mushet**

As much invention as they are sculptures or monuments, **his works can appear, at first glance, to be a building turned inside out**, a mad scientist's idea of a playground or an Etch-A-Sketch built on a Brobdingnagian scale.

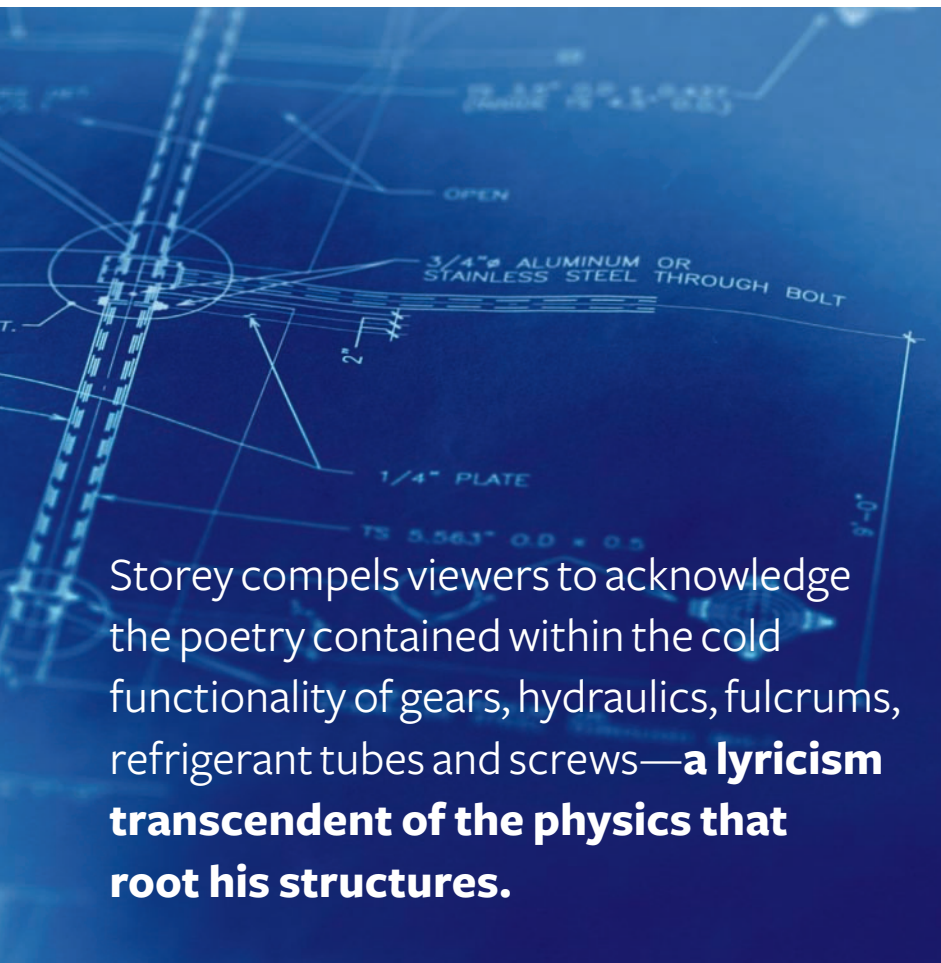


IF THERE'S ONE Vancouver public-art installation most commonly associated with its maker, it's *Pendulum* in the HSBC Building atrium downtown. The 31-metre, burnished-aluminum colossus, its swinging column arcing like the ponderous yet graceful stride of a mastodon, was designed by Vancouver artist Alan Storey when he was only in his mid-20s—then a tall, serious young man with an unruly mass of curls.

Now 49, Storey has a greying corona of still-errant hair, implying a certain absentmindedness, and an air of shy cordiality that makes him approachable despite his daunting intellect. The public and private works of art that he's created since his 20s—exhibited in Europe, the United States, United Kingdom and Canada—are all as physically imposing and imbued with social commentary and nuance. They bear the unmistakable stamp of Storey's creativity, drawing the viewer into a conversation about man's relationship to technology and nature.

Pendulum is a conundrum, its silent, 9.2-second arc seeming effortless despite its sheer mass. Viewers call it mesmerizing. This isn't just imagination, says Storey; the column's trajectory matches almost perfectly a harmonic of the brainwaves associated with the sympathetic nervous system—a primordial rhythm of calm.

Born of Storey's rarefied intuitiveness, *Pendulum* (originally titled *Broken Column*) required the endorsement of several engineers before insurers were convinced it was sound. Storey muses that the artwork's controversy has not diminished, in that it's taken on fresh irony following the near-collapse of the American banking system a year ago. "It is mocking one of the columns falling out of place in what is perceived to be a very solid structure—a bank," says Storey, seated on a stool in his 2,500-square-foot Forty Functions Studio, which is filled with a chaotic mix of piping, metal sheeting and pieces, drawings and prototypes. "Perceptually and physically, the banking system was perceived as a pillar of strength."



Storey compels viewers to acknowledge the poetry contained within the cold functionality of gears, hydraulics, fulcrums, refrigerant tubes and screws—a lyricism transcendent of the physics that root his structures.

Art, of course, is expected to proffer such profundities and observations; its function is to jolt our corseted thoughts onto new pathways. Storey's special genius, however, lies in how he integrates technology into the creative process. As much inventions as they are sculptures or monuments, his works can appear, at first glance, to be a building turned inside out, a mad scientist's idea of a playground or an Etch-A-Sketch built on a Brobdingnagian scale.

Storey's creations eschew, rather than embrace, the whimsical. Some consider his works slightly subversive, since they lack the decorative quality most associate with art. Instead, Storey compels viewers to acknowledge the poetry contained within the cold functionality of gears, hydraulics, fulcrums, refrigerant tubes and screws—a lyricism transcendent of the physics that root his structures. "What I like to see in a work is the beauty of an idea," says Storey. "There is beauty in enlightenment—the notion of an idea."

A scale model, called a maquette, sits to one side on a workbench amidst paper, tools and metal bits in his shabby-chic studio, located on Railway Avenue in an area near the Downtown Eastside that's fast losing its edginess through

gentrification. Barely half a metre high, the light grey, graceful form is the embryo of the silvery sentinel that stands 24 metres high outside Bellevue City Hall in Washington State. Called *Compass*, the needle-shaped installation, like *Pendulum*, is a conundrum, appearing too delicate to support its soaring height. The frailty is a mirage; it's designed to withstand the most powerful wind gusts recorded in the region.

The artwork was commissioned as part of a renovation to transform an existing building into a new city hall a decade ago. Storey won the job on the strength of his portfolio. To see *Compass* up close, visitors tread a 100-metre-long terrazzo floor interlaced with lines of silver, luminous with iridescent glass chips, shells and semi-precious stones. It guides visitors past offices to doors opening to an outdoor deck, curved to hug one side of the giant sculpture. The spire itself has an intricate and complex structure: an inner disc with faceted mirrors spins in the wind, reflecting the scenery behind viewers as they gaze out upon Mount Rainier and eastern Bellevue. A large bronze eyepiece travels back and forth along the curved balcony rails, always focused on the disc's mirrors; its movement connects electronically to the front doors via two continuous metal lines meandering through the terrazzo floor, triggered by people entering or leaving the building.

"The act of coming into city hall changes your vision of the future in a poetic way," says Mary Pat Byrne, the municipality's arts specialist. Storey builds layers of complexity into his work, much as the thin growth rings of a tree contribute to its strength and stature. He takes into account social, historical and political context, which gels with the technological and interactive ingenuity of each installation. Nothing is coincidence. He chose the compass as the Bellevue sculpture's iconic form due to the instrument's key role in the city's history. The city sits on freshwater Lake Washington, which became accessible to whaling ships in 1917 when a canal linked it to Puget Sound. The navigators needed compasses, and their creation became Bellevue's first, and still thriving, industry.

It's a nod to both Bellevue's history as well as its future that *Compass* celebrates the iconography of navigation. As Storey explains, the installation's mirror functions in the same way that a sextant does—both technically and metaphorically. As a navigational invention that determines altitude, a sextant allows wayfarers to calculate their position on a nautical chart; at its mirrored heart, the sculpture expresses council members' pledge to Bellevue citizens that the future will be charted together. What *Compass* accomplishes in a literal as well as symbolic sense fulfills the *raison d'être* of public art, which is to expose the inner workings of governments and institutions while engaging citizens in dialogue about community—a vital component of a healthy democracy.

How ordinary citizens affect *Compass*—by the simple act of opening doors—is also a powerful metaphor about accessibility, the importance of civic responsibility and the need to be an active participant in society. "*Compass* brings people in and gets them thinking about how they want their community to function," Byrne says. It's a matter of pride to Bellevue, she adds, that the installation received recognition from the prestigious organization, Americans for the Arts, which in 2006 declared it one of the top 20 public artworks in the US.

Storey addressed similar issues, including transparency and accessibility, with another outdoor work called *Public Service/Private Step*, located outside the Environment Canada and Fisheries and Oceans building at 401 Burrard Street in Vancouver. The 21-metre sculpture is interfaced with the building's elevators; its movements parallel their rise and fall inside. A sensor pad in the floors of the interior elevators transfers real-time footprint information from passengers to LED screens that are part of the installation's mock elevator cars.

The messages and purpose of this artwork may not be immediately obvious to the average building visitor. It can be appreciated, first and foremost, "as a purely kinetic piece of sculpture," says its maker. However, the installation's relevancy goes beyond its mechanical structure. While it may mean different things to different people, most importantly, it increases "one's awareness and critical analysis of things that are going on around us," Storey says. A sculpture that

works on the subconscious, its message as tantalizing as a word dancing just out of reach on the tip of the tongue, is still highly effective both as art and colloquy, he adds. “I like it when people look back over their shoulder and are confused, and maybe look over their shoulder again and go, ‘huh, ok.’”

Storey also uses computers to build interactivity into his public-art installations. He’s made extensive use of that quintessential networking tool, the World Wide Web, especially in conjunction with his massive drawing machines. One of these, *Machine for Drawing All Over the World*, was exhibited in 1996 at Indiana State University at a time when the Internet was still nascent. It was sublime in its simplicity. A Mercator Projection map of the world was printed onto a 14-by-20-metre area of velum glued to the floor. A finely wrought drawing machine with two pens and a webcam responded to hits from computers all over the world. As individuals input their latitude and longitude, the drawing machine travelled to that point on the map. The lines of this “web” drawing gradually blackened the velum with pen marks from thousands of hits—a profound comment on the interconnection of the global community.

Storey’s limitless creativity has been fed by many sources. His virtuosity at blending art with technology flows from the rich springs of his boyhood. Mowry Baden, one of Storey’s University of Victoria art professors, says that his former student is “unthinkable without the platform of his father.” Adds Baden: “Alan is enormously fortunate to have been raised in an art family. That’s a big head start.”

Storey’s background, indeed, seems more the stuff of fable than fact: “crazy and fantastic,” in the artist’s own words. The youngest of four siblings—a brother, David, is now a surgeon in the Yukon; sister Gina holds a PhD in business; another sister, Janet, died early of cancer—Storey grew up in Summerland, in BC’s Okanagan. His father, Kenneth, held degrees in physics and geography and initially taught photography at an art school in England. A decade after World War II, Ken and his wife, Freda, immigrated to Canada. Ken became the local high school math and physics teacher, and began constructing a new home. Taking advantage of Summerland’s hot, arid weather, he left it open at the back to shelter the eight-metre sailboat he was also building.

Ken was an inventor as well as an amateur shipwright and architect. In the early 1970s, when science and psychology journals first embraced the concept of biofeedback (the ability to control the physiological activity of one’s own body, such as the heartbeat), Ken made a machine that amplified the sound of beta and gamma waves in the brain. He would stick electrodes to his head, attach them to the machine, then plug it into an electrical outlet. By listening to the schematic patter of the brain, Ken was able to control his body’s natural rhythms, manipulating them into a state of relaxation or stimulation through thought. “I remember one night quite well,” says Storey. “My brother was there too, shaving little spots on our father’s head so he could stick the electrodes to them. It kind of freaked my mother out.”

In reality, Freda’s tolerance was high. Family lore recalls Storey’s first large art installation—at the age of three—in which he piled the fireplace ashes into the middle of the sunken living room, elaborately positioned the kindling logs around them, and then, in a final artistic flourish, unravelled several rolls of toilet paper around the logs. Freda proudly declared her son an artistic genius, then dragged out the vacuum cleaner.

Ken was also a musician and builder of baroque and Latin instruments. At one point, says Storey, there were 15 keyboards in the house, half a dozen harpsichords, clavichords, a piano, an organ and a marimba—all built “because someone gave my dad a bunch of Brazilian rosewood.” As a boy, Storey spent many hours making harpsichords: keyboards with intricate internal jack and string mechanisms that were once fixtures of elegant 16th- and 17th-century European parlours.

But it was the house blueprints that most intrigued the young boy. Despite being of kindergarten age, Storey was “completely involved” with his father and an architect friend who were constructing the home. “How the units of bedrooms and bathrooms interacted in this structure, how the bathrooms were on top of

each other so the plumbing was all in one place, how the electricity was fed and distributed through the house really interested me,” Storey says. “I have a completely perfect memory of where all the plumbing and piping was in the concrete foundations and where the electrical wiring crossed over. From that moment, I was interested in architecture.”

Throughout his youth, Storey remained fascinated by how a “living space works. I wanted to play with things in the future and so, right up until the end of high school, I was doing lots of drawings of buildings and bridges.” As his education progressed, Storey entered Okanagan College’s visual-art program. Although he painted extensively, he eventually gave it up, due in part to his colour blindness. At the time, his paintings were critiqued for exhibiting a violent nature. “In my mind, it was quite a peaceful painting, and I came to realize that the colours I perceive are quite different from what other people perceive.”

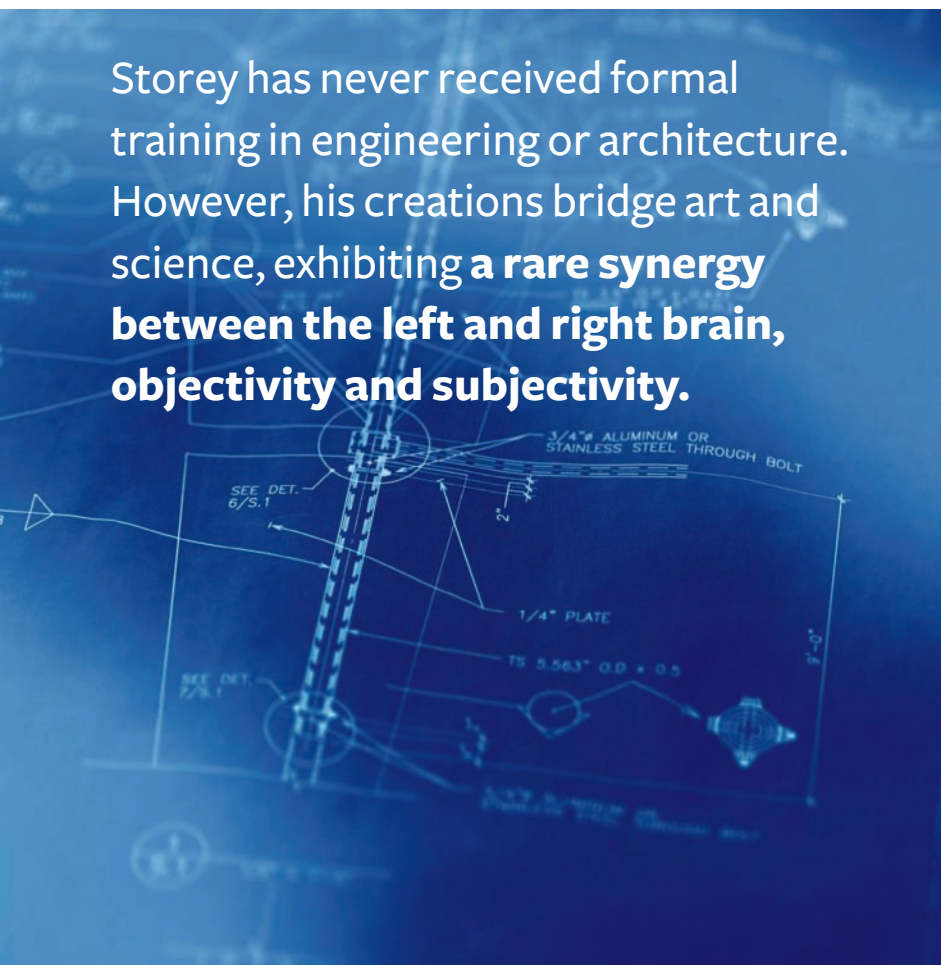
Storey may have developed refined technical skills by building baroque instruments as a youngster, **but it was his years spent working with shipwrights on sailboats** that gave him a deep understanding and instinct for immutable physical laws.

Storey doesn’t view his switch from paint and canvas to metal and mechanics as a huge artistic transformation. Even to the untrained eye, the works of Degas, Cézanne, Van Gogh or Monet, artists of the 19th-century Impressionist movement, are blatantly lovely. Yet what these artists were trying to accomplish, says Storey, is not far removed from what he tries to achieve with his sculptures and kinetic machines, despite the physical disparity. “Impressionist painters wanted to evoke or create a feeling. It’s about perception, the perception of ideas, and I’m just using different materials, styles and tools.”

Storey’s machines gave him a bigger, more dramatic canvas. By 1980, the year he graduated from college and entered UVic’s fine-arts degree program, Storey had begun constructing the large, adroitly engineered and intellectually inventive works that would become his trademark. One of his creations, *Timepiece*, which

sits in front of the library at Kelowna's Okanagan College, is a three-metre stylized book with open pages made of Corten steel. The installation also acts as a sundial, but instead of the usual bar of shadow, a ray of sun shines through the metal flanges to mark time. The artwork captures and expresses natural phenomena while implying that enlightenment is achieved through the acquisition of knowledge. Storey was only 20 when it was installed.

Storey has never received formal training in engineering or architecture. However, his creations bridge art and science, exhibiting a rare synergy between the left and right brain, objectivity and subjectivity.



Liane Davison is the director and former curator of the Surrey Art Gallery, which has showcased many of Storey's installations over the years. While Storey's creations have many attributes, she believes the most unique thing about him and his works is the level of inventiveness. If a desired effect can't be achieved with existing technology, Storey will devise something entirely new to do the job. "When Alan has an idea, the technology doesn't always exist to make it happen," says Davison, who attended UVic's visual-arts program with Storey. For one of his interactive sculptures, *Out of Thin Air*, which is in the gallery's permanent collection, Storey invented a device that created frost on a metal surface. Five-metre copper panels display frosted growths of words: "dream" in six different languages, as well as "taste," "scent," "hear" and "I felt." The five panels have counting sensors; whenever 100 people have walked by, the panel defrosts and a new word appears.

If, as Baden says, Storey's father was the platform for his growth as an artist, sailing cannot be excluded from the myriad experiences that influenced and refined his artisanship. As a boy, Storey learned how to manoeuvre a sailboat on nearby Lake Okanagan. When he reached university age, he began racing sailboats with another one of his art instructors, Roland Brener, who, with shipwright Bent Jespersen, had turned a 1935 hull into a modern racing sloop 17 metres long.

Storey may have developed refined technical skills by building baroque instruments as a youngster, but it was his years spent working with the shipwright, as well as with his father Ken on their own, smaller sailboat, that gave him a deep understanding and instinct for immutable physical laws.

Anyone who steps onto a sailboat, in fair weather or foul, quickly finds that modern technology—GPSMAP locators, digital compasses or wireless microphones—while highly useful, take second place to a knowledge of applied physics—pulleys, fulcrums, velocity, pressure and vectors—that work to keep the vessel afloat, moving forward or tacking sideways. It's often the only thing that stands between a sailor and an ocean dunking.

On the ocean, reality is expressed on a grand scale. The horizon has no end; movement is eternal. Sailing on this vast, unpredictable, kinetic machine is a physical struggle and an intellectual challenge that tests the relationship of man to nature as well as to technology. It is freeing, in that it cultivates fearlessness. Unfurling a spinnaker in high wind is a heart-stopping *pas de deux* between man and sea. "For Alan, sailing is a way of *being*," says Davison, who crews with him on the racing vessel *Chimera*. "A sailboat is a very big machine that has both the physical elements and the ability to respond in the same way that his sculptures do," she adds. "But while a sculpture is fixed, a finished thing, a sailboat moves and needs to be adjusted, so in that sense the sailboat is never finished."

Sailboats are not the only places where Storey conspires with the wind. His *Climatic Drawing Machine*, which was located in Toronto at the Power Plant Gallery on the shore of Lake Ontario for six months last year, uses the wind both as a source of kinetic energy and a creative force. A drum at the base of a weather vane holds paper that presses against a pen. The wind direction rotates the position of the drum and the pressure moves the pen up and down: a southwesterly gust moves the drum to the lower left, a northeastern blow moves the drum to the upper right. The results are bleak, stormy landscapes of deep horizons and movement both serene and frenetic, as if sketched by Zeus, the Greek god of weather.

Sailing, too, meshes with Storey's remarkable insights into physics—that "peculiar intuitive sense that I have that I wonder about sometimes," he says. This sixth sense, as well as his experience on the water, was crucial to securing *Compass*'s great height. When he works on enormous pieces, he makes a point of consulting with an engineer to ensure that they are sound under the most extreme stress—something few artists have to worry about.

The engineer hired to consult on *Compass* used Computer Aided Design (CAD), a revolutionary software program that allows architects like the renowned Frank Gehry to three-dimensionally model and engineer abstract buildings, such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain. Yet the program, says Storey, "spat out some outrageous numbers," indicating that *Compass*'s metal structure needed to be thicker by about 30 percent. This would have made the sculpture almost too heavy to hold up its own weight. "Out of my experience with sailboat masts, I know what kind of loading they can take under what tension and compression." So he modelled a maquette based on his own computations, unequivocally proving the spire's resilience, and the engineer gave both a *mea culpa* and his blessing.

Storey has never received formal training in engineering or architecture. However, his creations bridge art and science, exhibiting a rare synergy between the left and right brain, objectivity and subjectivity. This integration is not new—it's dramatically evident in Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings, which were shown this past spring at the Vancouver Art Gallery. As part of the exhibit's interpretative signage, curators included this perspicacious statement: "Science cannot be separated from other cultural forms."

Storey's virtuosity at blending art and technology in creative partnership has been noted even in the scientific world. In 2003, the National Research Council Canada (NRC) designated him artist-in-residence at the Institute for Fuel Cell Innovation, located at the University of British Columbia; he was one of two Canadian artists who participated in a two-year fellowship created by the NRC and the Canada Council for the Arts. "Real innovation comes from breakthrough,

and I've always believed that breakthroughs come from another part of the brain," says the institute's operations director David Senczysyn. With an artist's right-brain intuitiveness and pattern recognition, Storey was invited to help open scientists' left-brained, logical minds to "look at things with different eyes."

Progress in science is incremental; technology evolves over years and decades, with very few eureka moments. Fuel-cell technology sits on the cusp of momentous change as a viable alternative energy source, replacing carbon-based fuels. Governments, institutions and private businesses around the globe are racing to create the first practical and cost-effective fuel cells, which generate electrical power from hydrogen quietly and without pollution. The NRC institute, which Senczysyn calls the top centre in the world for fuel-cell R&D, is looking for the missing link to reach commercial viability.

One of Storey's roles at the institute was to analyze the natural patterns caused by vibration, such as the ripples left on sand by ocean waves, the wash-boards on dirt roads, or even cloud formations. One of the issues with fuel cells today is that the inside membranes can become rippled due to vibration in the manufacturing process, causing them to break down or deteriorate, sometimes after only 3,000 hours use, says Storey. A solution to this problem might be the innovation that researchers are looking for. While the project ended with no dramatic insight, Storey hopes that the collaboration will resume in the future.

Storey is one of only a tiny number of public artists in Canada who hasn't had to fall back on a college or university professorship to keep body and soul together. Still, being an artist of his stature is not an easy path; he's grateful to his wife, Emmy-nominated costume designer Jori Woodman, and their two daughters, 22-year-old Colette and 16-year-old Lola, for their patient support. A self-professed perfectionist, Storey, unlike many public artists, builds every element of his installations himself—the complex and intricate engineering requires months and even years of work. Despite the length of time this takes, Storey is extremely prolific; a dozen of his works dot just the Vancouver landscape.

Not all are quite as monumental as *Pendulum* or *Compass*. Some, like *Password*, located in Vancouver's Yaletown at Pacific and Drake streets, is subtle, almost camouflaged by its concrete surroundings. Its rotating letter blocks, set into ventilation ducts at street level, spell words at random—a pleasant and startling diversion for passing pedestrians. Another creation, *United Steam Works* located at 13th Avenue and Willow Street, is an idiosyncratic outgrowth of a very practical aspect of Vancouver General Hospital's infrastructure, the boiler plant's cooling system. A collection of steam-spouting pipes connects to a bullwhip of metal that is planted on standards in the boiler's water bunker reservoir. Holes, located along the graceful curl of pipe, create a delicate waterfall of water above the reservoir. For works like these, Storey was honoured in 2009 with a Vancouver Mayor's Art Award for Public Art. According to Bryan Newson, Vancouver's public-art program manager, they add enormously to the city's international stature, helping to "play an increasing role in distinguishing the city as a place of innovation, ideas and creativity."

By creating such singular and massive pieces of art, Storey invites the public to share in his awe of the natural world and the artistry of man and machine. He also offers glimpses into man's great potential for invention. It's a conversation started by Storey's beloved father Ken, who died seven years ago at the age of 84. Through his son, we're all invited to engage in an ongoing exchange of ideas about how we want our world to be, how it should be shaped, and the important role that art and beauty play in society. Storey's works illuminate our path as we chart our own journey towards responsible citizenship. And if that's too much seriousness for one day, then sit and contemplate *Pendulum*'s unerring flight. The calm it offers can be as profound as any epiphany. ⑤



United Steam Works



United Steam Works



Compass



Compass



Password