



"CyberCraft Robots – Robot Sculptures you will Covet."

Sarah Thee Campagna

Interviewed for the HKNA Artist Enclave by Brian Lynch

Sarah has lived in Historic Kenwood with her husband Dave since 2005. Her work is currently available for purchase at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg.

How long does it usually take you to build a robot?

When all goes well, an average Robot or Spaceship takes about a week to build, and about 20% of the time is spent in gathering the parts.



What types of metal or fasteners give you the most trouble or are the most challenging?

I work with all kinds of metals and objects. For this reason and others, I don't weld. Instead I used fasteners - nuts, bolts, screws and rivets. Lots of times the objects I find do not already have a hole in the place I need one to be. My most valuable tool is my drill press. With the right bits and patience, I can usually make any part do what I need it to do.

Also, it can be tricky to connect non-flat surfaces in a way that looks really clean. Sometimes I need to alter the shape so that fasteners can be used, but I need to do so in a way that does not take away from the groovy, curved shape of the found object I'm using. The other reason I use fasteners, especially on the Robots, is this: If they were welded, they would seem lifeless to me - frozen in place. Fasteners leave the possibility of movement. They are not meant to be "poseable", but neither are they dead pieces of static metal.



Which are the easiest?

Thin walled objects used to cause me problems, but then I discovered Rivet Nuts. These are a lot like regular rivets, except they are hollow and the inside is threaded in standard machine screw sizes. With these I can make secure connections that would not otherwise be possible.



What is most reflected in the robot prices? Difficulty of construction, value of parts (difficulty to find, cost), time to construct, originality, fondness for the robot, or ...?

I think if you ask most professional artists, the two things they like least about the job are pricing and marketing their work. I have tried a number of strategies for pricing. What I have settled on is a combination of size and complexity. I may tweak that when a piece has required the purchase of a lot of new materials in addition to found objects.

With one exception, all my pieces are "original", so that does not figure in. As for fondness, if I love a piece so much that I don't want to sell it for its "normal price" then I just don't sell it. Even in the case of my all-time-favorite piece, I eventually came to a place where I wanted it to move out into the world and be enjoyed by someone who would value it enough to buy it and give it a place in her home.

Other factors I have learned to not consider are difficulty and time of construction. When I learn a new skill or create a new solution to a construction problem, that new thing and the time and expense it took to learn it, seem really valuable and important. But the second time I do it, it's old hat and I'm on to learning something new. The buyer of piece number 1 should not have to pay a premium for her piece, while the buyer of piece number 2 does not. So, I now chalk these things up to "overhead." Every new technique I learn makes the next 50 projects easier.



The Split Infinite - Industrial and Found Object Assemblage
Sculpture from CyberCraft Robots

How do you fit the pieces together? Do you start out with a shape in mind and then look for pieces that fit your mental picture, or idly dig through a pile of parts until a robot emerges? Or sort pieces as you get them into categories that make it easier to later assemble something? Or all of those? Or something else?

All of my pieces start with one found object that I find interesting. In a Robot that object will usually be either the head/face or body of the bot. In the Spaceships and Ray guns, it will usually be the beginning of the main body.

The Robots really feel like beings to me. I start with an object, and try to let the Robot tell me what piece it wants connected next, and then next, etc. When things work well, it feels like the Robot builds itself. I do not know what the finished product will be when I start. I keep adding the next right part, until I have the whole thing figured out. I will connect them temporarily as I go, but I don't usually do any tight, final connections until I know how everything will fit.

Order of operations is really important in the final construction, so that everything is secure and looks exactly right. Sometimes the legs have to be attached to the body before the head or vice versa. That final bit takes a lot of planning. If you ever run into me in my overalls, in the fasteners department of Home Depot, staring into space with four screws in my hand - I'm probably figuring out the order of operations for construction. This has actually happened with friends a few times. I'll get

home and find a facebook note saying, "I just saw you in a trance in HD, and decided not to interrupt."

It is very important to my vision that the finished product looks like all those pieces were really meant to be joined to make that Robot, Ship or Gun. Everything must fit perfectly. There is a looser style that you may see around, and I enjoy looking at those pieces - but that's not a CyberCraft Robots sculpture.

I do have sorted bins of parts. There are bins of "idea" parts - ones that may become the beginning of a piece. I have other bins that contain parts of a similar shape. All the flat round things are together, all the cup-shaped pieces in another bin, etc.

Sometimes the part I need just does not exist yet in my collection. This is especially the case for larger pieces. I have a zillion small parts, but when parts are bigger, that "just the right part" kind of fit is harder to find. Right now I have two Robots for whom I have some of the important parts but not all. Each of these guys has their own bin and I just keep waiting for the right things to show up. It probably will not be a case of knowing the part when I see it in someone's scrap barrel or estate sale. It will be something I gather in my rounds, and then discover its usefulness when matched against the special parts I've saved.



Do you form an idea and then go out looking for the pieces?

My general answer is no. That would take forever and I'd never get anything else done. The more I do this work, the more I am able to recognize a part that might be useful at some future time. Plus, there are certain shapes that I can always use more of. You can't imagine how useful cupped washers are. I didn't even know they existed before I built Robots.

That said, I am currently "stocking up" on parts for Rayguns and bigger flying saucers. So I'm on the hunt for old, metal bodied drills and pneumatic tools with handles for the guns, - and woks, etc for flying saucers.

Sometimes I know a certain kind/shape of part exists, because I've seen it, but I don't know what it's called or where to get some. This will usually be something I need to buy new to fit a very specific purpose. I'll often spend hours on the internet finding out what that thing is called, and what industry uses it so that I can find the best price, maybe a local supplier, etc.

Then as soon as I post an image of a piece using that part, someone will ask me, "What's that part?" so that they can use it without doing the same research. I have a few friends who share these kinds of secrets with me and I with them. These are people I can trust not to steal my ideas outright or copy my work. Otherwise I keep most of these things as trade secrets - they are part of what makes my work look different from someone else's.



How do robot personalities emerge? Does one dominant piece determine it?

The process I mentioned earlier (starting with one found object and building to it) is the pathway through which the personality emerges. Usually I know who I've made when the body and head come together. By the time I add the limbs, I am able to use them to solidify that personality. If I've made a cheerful Robot, I may give his arms more of a jaunty pose. A serious Robot may get an "action stance". If the Robot is supposed to be creepy, I'll add an extra joint to the arms. An arm with two elbows just gives one willies!



Have you ever duplicated robots, or are they all strictly unique? (What do you do with all those duplicate parts?)

Generally each Robot is unique. This is by design, but it is also the result of starting with singular found objects. Most duplicate parts I get are the kinds of things I use to join more important parts together. The parts I use to start a piece are usually something I haven't seen before, or they would not be interesting enough to inspire me.

I have made one exception. My price point is not in everyone's budget, so I created something I call "A Small Army of Small Robots." These are "entry level" CyberCraft Robots. Because they are handmade from parts that I modify before use, each of these guys is a bit different and no two are posed exactly the same way - but they are still essentially the same design. This is the only design that I repeat.



Here is Sarah working in the “Orbiting Laboratory”:



It is from this “semisynchronous orbit, which allows us to examine your entire planet daily. We take advantage of our passage above your home orb, to scrutinize every estate sale (poor buggers), trash heap, bar mitzvah, and bingo parlor for **Secret Robot Parts**”.



Please see more at my website:

<http://cybercraftrobots.com>

Or more robots pictured here:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/cybercraftrobots>

If you wondered why Brian asked the questions he did, Sarah has also done other interviews at:

<http://downtownpete.ilovetheburg.com/article/FAB-16-Cybercraft-Robots-Taking-Over/3335>

<http://www.e-junkie.info/2011/05/interview-with-sarah-thee-campagna.html>