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WILLIAM HAWKINS • MARCUS SCHUBERT • MARTINE LUSARDY • OUTLIERS



**M.T. LIGGETT (1933–2017)**

On August 17, 2017, Kansas artist M.T. Liggett died at the age of 86.

Widely known for creating politically charged metal totems, M.T. Liggett was an outspoken curmudgeon who didn't shy away from confrontation. Whirling and spinning along miles of pasture fence line along US Highways 400 and 54 in southwest Kansas, his work was a bright spot of belligerence in an increasingly bucolic world.

Born Myron Thomas Liggett on December 28, 1933, he joined the Navy in 1948, and then served in the United States Air Force from 1957 through 1971. In 1987, he settled in Mullinville, his hometown, where he would create his ever-expanding art installation. His formal education focused on political science, an influence reverberating throughout his work.

His 20-acre roadside property became home to over 300 metal totems lampooning politicians, officials and anyone else who caught his critical eye. The subjects of his work ranged from local councilmen to international figures, changing with election cycles and societal tides. Often mistaken for a conservative, M.T. was an equal opportunity offender, pointing out hypocrisy and indiscretion regardless of party affiliation. His figures reflected his personality – smart, witty, sometimes biting, but always with a genuine heart at the core.

Continually questioning and provoking, Liggett's work expands beyond politics. The pieces reference Greek mythology, personal biographies (including numerous portraits of his romantic interests) and bold statements designed to make visitors question their place in the world. He had a deep desire to provoke not just thought but action. In a 2013 interview, he explained the power of the creative:



photo: Ted Degener

“See, where you're an artist, you can just do any damn thing you wanna do. And you're a damned fool if you don't.”

Liggett was happy to guide people through his roadside commentary, revealing an approachable engaging man. His health had been on the decline in recent years, slowing his creative output but not the desire to share his work. Before his death, M.T. set up a board of trustees to make sure his work would be preserved in situ, continuing their whirling, clanking, glorious cultural critique on the sweeping Kansas prairie.

**Erika Nelson**



photo: Edward M. Gómez

**VALTON TYLER (1944–2017)**

Valton Tyler, a prodigious, visionary, self-taught maker of prints, drawings, and otherworldly paintings, died in Dallas, Texas, on September 25. He was 73 years old and had suffered from respiratory and other ailments. Born in Texas City, on the Gulf of Mexico coast, Tyler was a child when a chemical explosion in the town's port set off massive fires there and at nearby oil refineries in what became known as the largest industrial disaster in US history. Later, Tyler spoke about that terrifying event and his family's escape from the burning town, sometimes hinting that his strange landscapes' fiery skies reflected his memories of the Texas City Disaster. Paradoxically, at times he also denied any such allusion in his art's unusual imagery.

As a teenager, with his mother and sister, Tyler moved to Dallas,

where his older brother, Robert, worked as a draughtsman in an architectural firm. A prolific maker of drawings whose semi-abstract forms suggested plant-like, organic forms, Valton often gave them away. Advising him that he would never be taken seriously if he did so, Robert showed his brother's India ink drawings to Donald Vogel, a painter who, in the 1950s, had founded Valley House Gallery & Sculpture Garden, Dallas's first high-quality, modern-art venue. Vogel became Valton's dealer and champion, acquiring much of the young artist's output and arranging for him to use the printmaking workshop at Southern Methodist University. There, in the 1970s, in just two years, Tyler produced a series of 50 sophisticated etchings featuring complex compositions.

He also created oil paintings whose futuristic, partly architectonic, partly mechanical-looking, techno-baroque structures loom against richly coloured backgrounds. Tyler called them “my shapes” and suggested that they had “feelings”. He said, “I try to make them communicate with each other.” After ending his relationship with Valley House Gallery in the 1990s, he made many large-scale paintings for private collectors, while refining his drawing technique in images of his bizarre “shapes” rendered in plain pencil or red coloured pencil on paper. A friendly eccentric who once spent nine years eating only baby food to avoid choking, Tyler was admired by other artists who knew his work.

Tyler lived to see a superb exhibition of his etchings of the 1970s presented at the Amon Carter Museum in Forth Worth, Texas, earlier this year, and the new film *Valton Tyler: Flesh is Fiction*, by myself and cinematographer Chris Shields, before its recent premiere at the Lone Star Film Festival in Fort Worth. Recalling his art-making as a child, Tyler once recalled, “I became aware that what I was doing was something special, something I would never want to stop doing.”

**Edward M. Gómez**