



**STEVE KEISTER BATZ**



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**FREDDY HASSLA**

*Freddy*

**STEVE KEISTER  
BATZ**

**TEXT BY DIKE BLAIR**

**Bats are avatars of the uncanny. In our mythologies we humans project our fears and fantasies onto these flying, nocturnal mammals. In the Yucatan peninsula bats communed with the spirits of the dead in the sacred cenotes, stone temples and tombs. It seems fitting that this survey of bat imagery should be assembled at Freddy's church.**

**The Mayan bat-God Zotz is a prince of the Underworld associated with darkness, death and sacrifice. His iconography supplies a template for this series of interpretations. His pointy ears, protruding snout and serrated wings are unmistakably spooky. The show traces my stylistic evolution over a 15-year period as I return to this subject at intervals. Since the mid-nineties my process has involved making molds from found Styrofoam and cardboard containers to cast ceramic slip. These parts are then combined to form faces and bodies. As my vocabulary of forms increases, my imagery evolves. I always start with the face, setting up a psychological nodule to anchor the gaze. The body extends the image just enough to complete an entity, an embodiment of the mystery of the unknowable.**

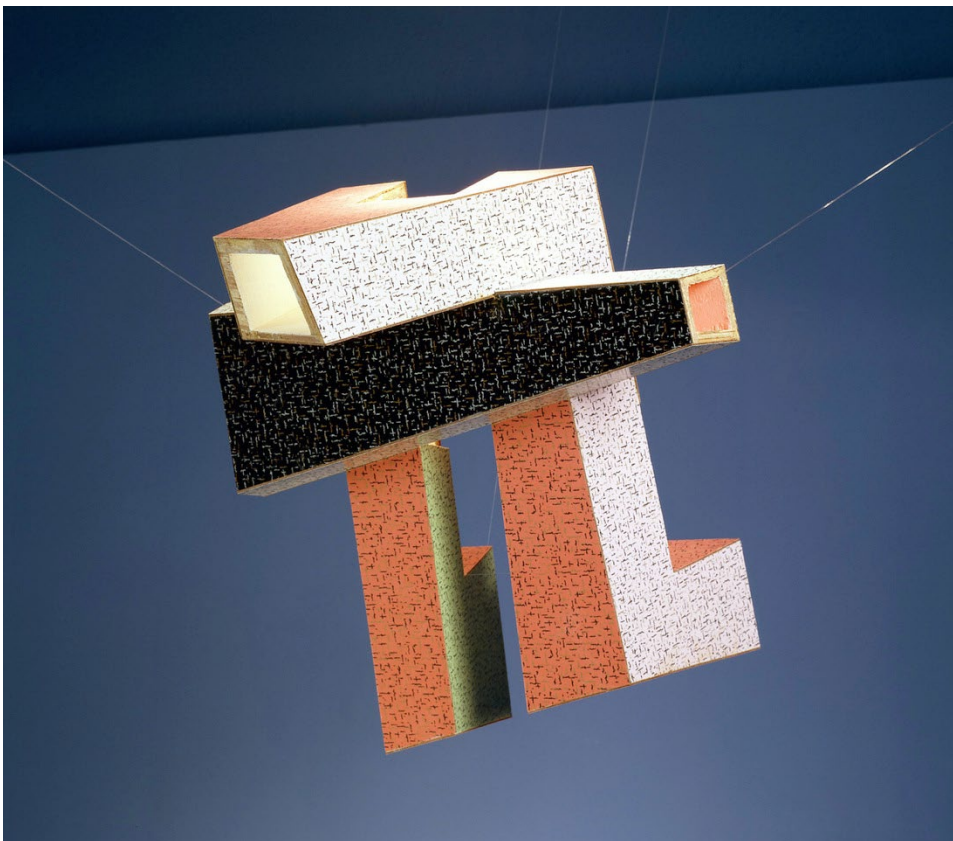
**—Steve Keister**



# DIKE BLAIR BATZ

Last July I went to see Steve Keister's show, **BATZ**, at Freddy, Joshua Abelow's (artist/writer/curator) space in Harris, NY. Steve is an old friend and colleague, Josh a more recent one. The dyslexic Z/S mirroring in the show's title, conjured a distant memory of a show that Steve curated at the Texas Gallery (Houston) in 1980; N.Y.TEOWZ. The show included Nancy Arlen, Jed Garret, Austé, Tom Rankin, and others (including myself). Steve was showcasing an art movement, monikered **Energism**, by critic Ronny Cohen. It was only a movement for a second because, among other reasons, it was totally eclipsed by the Pictures and Neo-Expressionist movements. What got somewhat lost when **Energism** flopped was a critical platform for forward-thinking abstraction, especially in sculpture. To my mind, Steve's sculpture was (is) some of the most inventive sculpture made by our generation.

Before I get to **BATZ**, I'd like to do a quick tour of Steve's highly individual sculptural moves over the last 4+ decades. The work that first grabbed attention were his **USO (Unidentified Suspended Object)** pieces. While there was an evolution of form and materials over time, these were hollow geometric forms, usually with fluorescent-colored interiors and clad with eccentric exterior laminates,



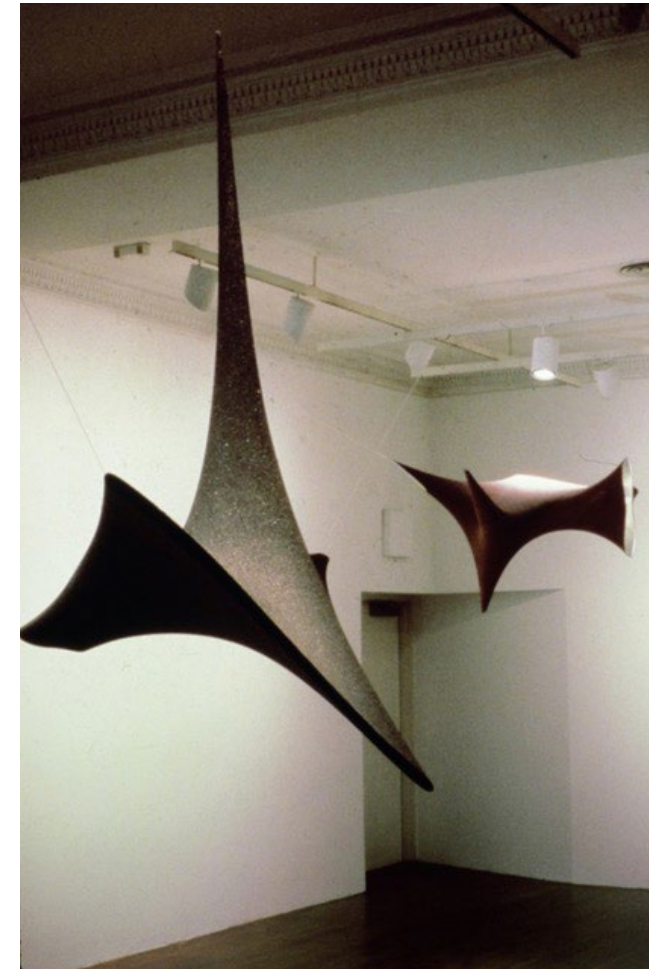
Steve Keister, Formica Man, 1980

like snakeskin, textured rubbers, fake fur, etc. He'd thread one or more strings of monofilament through the interior to suspend the object in space. In Steve's words:

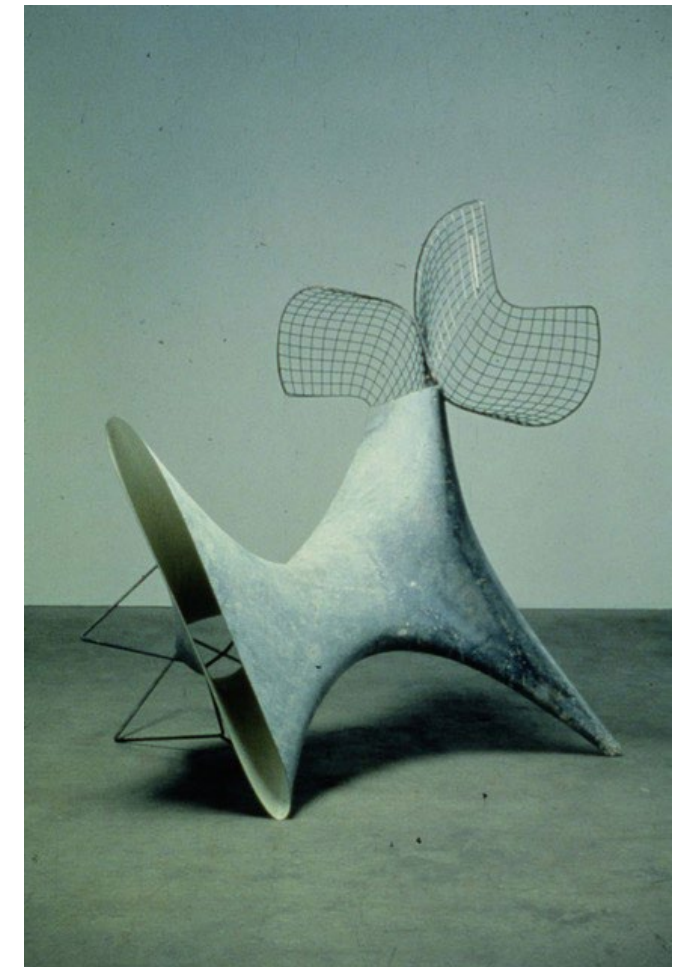
**My early suspended planiform sculptures employed the vocabulary of utopian early modernism, clad in signifiers of "New Wave" style and culture.**

His next body of work he called "stretch pieces." These were hyperbolic paraboloids made by stretching Spandex bags across his studio, then covering the surface with epoxy resin and fiberglass. He would then cut and truncate that shell to reveal contoured interior and exterior forms and coat the outside with sand. Often these pieces were also suspended with monofilament, but with some he married Bertoria wire chairs with the hyperbolic paraboloids and these were floor-based. For me those pieces also evoked Modernist giants like Brancusi, Noguchi and Saarinen, and crystallized Steve's post-modern relationship to Modernism.

The work that followed was heavily flavored by Steve's love for Mexico, particularly the Yucatan with its Mayan ruins. He visited the area for the first time, right after the opening of N.Y.TOWZ in 1980. He returned with his wife, the artist Jill Levine, in the 90's, and they have returned many times over the years. Right before their first trip, they bought a new TV and didn't throw out the Styrofoam packaging. When Steve returned, he noticed a correlation between the Styrofoam and ancient Mayan reliefs and wanted to demonstrate that correlation. He taught himself casting and mold-making techniques which he applied to various types of



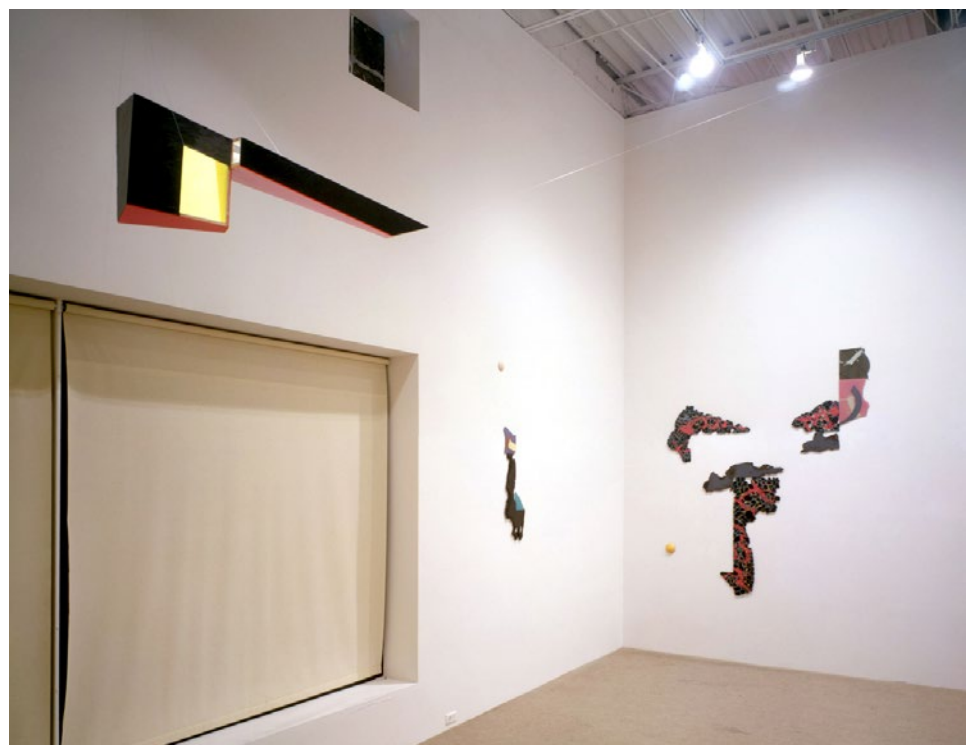
Installation view, Steve Keister, BlumHelman Warehouse, 1986



Steve Keister, Minatour, 1988



Poster for N.Y.TOWZ, 1980, Texas Gallery, Houston, TX



Installation view of N.Y.TOWZ, including Steve Keister (left) and Dike Blair (right)

protective product cushioning to create abstract, architectural, relief installations. As with the earlier sculpture, interiors, negative space, were as essential as the positive form. The packaging is literally a physical manifestation of a box's interior, sans product. Soon after the abstract works, he saw the possibility to assemble his castings to form faces and bodies. He writes:

I always start with the face, setting up a psychological nodule to anchor the gaze. The body extends the image just enough to complete an entity, an embodiment of the mystery of the unknowable.

Steve periodically returns to Mesoamerican flavored pieces, like the ones in **BATZ**, which are among my favorites. Josh and Steve collaborated in the past with a two-person exhibition, **Necropolitan Avenue** (2017) and a couple years ago, Josh invited Steve to do a show at Freddy. I think Josh's invite came in response to Steve's early bat pieces (such as **Demonic Bat** from 2004, (see page 51) as Freddy (after Freddy Kruger of **Nightmare on Elm Street**) is in a church where he lives and works. The adjacent cemetery gives the gallery an appropriately Halloweenish vibe. To my eyes, the combination of the spooky gallery and Covid isolation inspired and energized Steve's studio. While retaining Mesoamerican flavors, the new bats have a contemporary, almost cartoonish appearance that invoke Mayan ornamental art, but isn't fettered to it. He also makes some graphic moves with the sculpture (see **Standing Bat I and II**, see pages 29 and 17) which, along with colliding 2D and 3D sculptural notions, are as indebted to color field painting as to Mayan textiles. It's worth noting that for the **BATZ**



**show, Steve made his first USO since the eighties, Flying Bat, 2022 (see page 33). And another piece, Hanging Bat, 2022 (see page 39), engages the ceiling and is a combination of wall painting and ceramic object in a particularly novel and ingenious way, and to me is reminiscent of his earlier installation work.**

**The BATZ works evoke deep time—the Mayan bat-God Zotz is a subject—and Sat. morning cartoons. What I felt when standing in Freddy was a kind of zany inspiration and gentle humor that reminded me of the spirit of Steve’s 80’s work. Artists work in cycles and, given time, often revisit their early work but with more self-knowledge and skill. I think that’s the case with BATZ, which is a testament to the decades of Steve’s physical/spatial/temporal sculptural explorations.**



Standing Bat II, 2022, glazed ceramic, acrylic, wood, cement, 66 x 48 x 12 inches









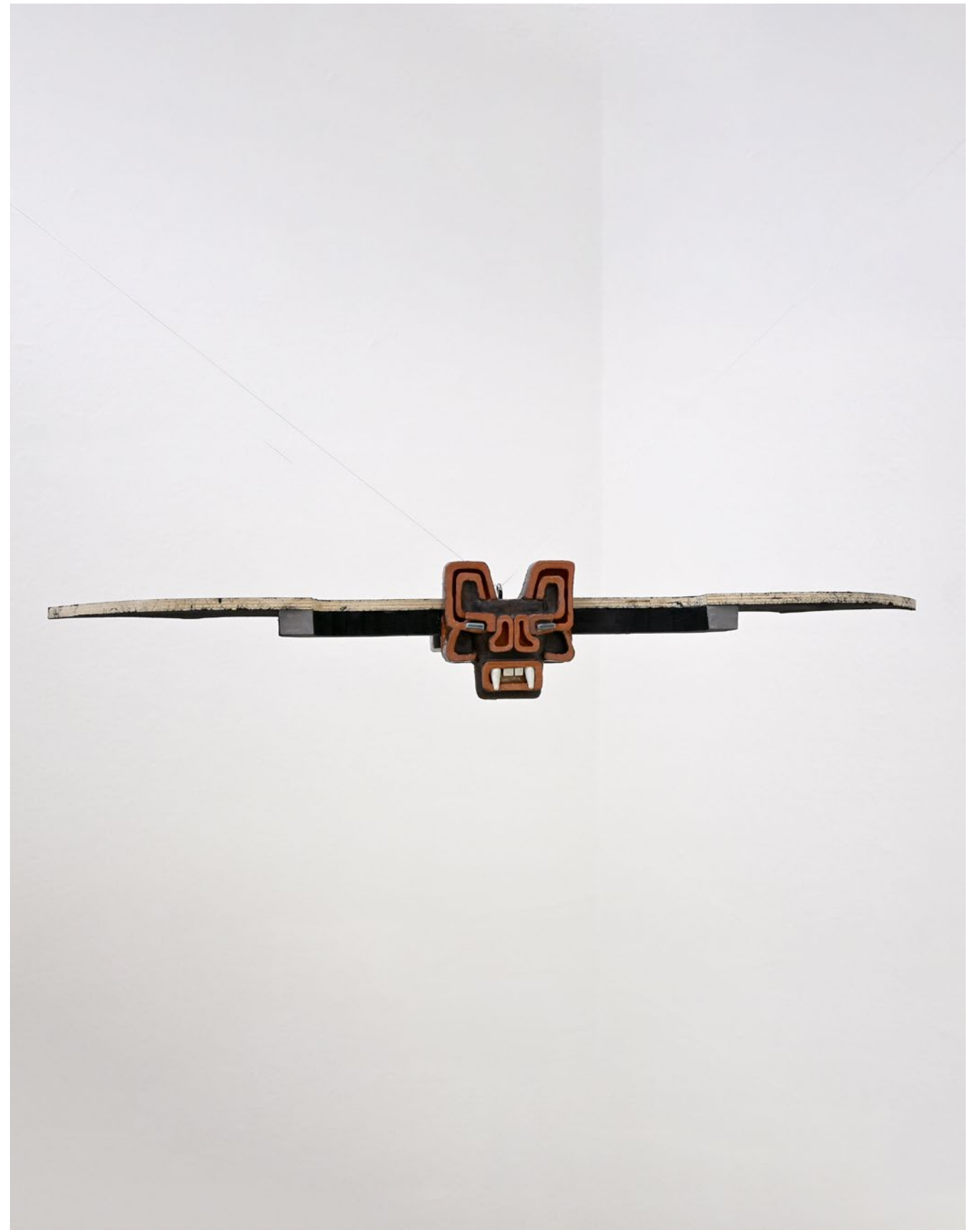
















Hanging Bat, 2022, glazed ceramic, acrylic, wall, 16½ x 12 x 4 inches











**Crouching Bat, 2015, glazed ceramic, 7¼ × 9 × 4¼ inches**







**Demonic Bat, 2004, glazed ceramic, acrylic, wood, 24 x 32 x 8 inches**





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*Freddy*