

In the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were inspired by an exhibition of paper and painted collages by Kurt Schwitters at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. They immediately understood that the detritus of a culture could not only have cultural identity and significance, but that it had aesthetic value, which led to their groundbreaking works of the 1960s. At the same time, Edward Kienholz and Robert Indiana realized the importance of making American imagery humble, humorous, monumental, and iconic. Contemporaneously, Howard Kottler did the same with his ceramic plates, containing images of American cultural symbols and events. This was the 1960s. The country was fighting a war abroad and civil unrest at home, and certain artists realized that celebrating the heritage of America could be more a more valuable strategy in uplifting the national mindset than protesting against the government.

Into this context, J. Fred Woell introduced works in metal—brooches, pendants, statuettes, and spoons—at a time when metalsmiths were generally exploring the use of nonprecious materials and experimenting with techniques and, in many cases, ideas generated by their European counterparts. But the uniqueness of Woell's contribution to American art and the degree to which it transcended the work of his contemporary metalsmiths to reside comfortably alongside the artists mentioned above cannot be underestimated.

His 1966 brooch, *Come Alive. You're the Pepsi Generation*, is a seminal example of his absorption of Madison Avenue's attempt to hypnotize the American public into thinking that soft drinks can make you carefree, in spite of the turmoil both foreign and domestic. Now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the brooch has a wry criticism comparable to Andy Warhol's use of Coke bottles and Campbell's soup cans. Woell's wall plaque *Late Great Disposable Society* (1983) is nearly 20 years later a double-edged critique of American consumption and wastefulness. His statuettes of the 1970s, such as *Stop the War. I Want to Get Married* (1973), derive from collectible bronze icons of Americana collected by tourists, but he introduced a simultaneously humorous and deadly serious awareness of the toll that the Vietnam War was taking on domestic life in our country.

I grew up eating off of his spoons, which, like the statuettes, took their cue from the collectibles aimed at tourists who traveled the country, as mementos of the cities and landmarks they had visited. But Woell transformed these pieces into at the same time nostalgic and analytical icons of the American past, present, and future, both compositionally and structurally. His interweaving of different materials not traditionally considered ornamental—pennies, postage stamps, copper, beer cans, soda can tabs, bullet casings—and antique-looking photographs contributed to a far-reaching vocabulary and powerful voice. He raged in his own modest way against the perils of repeating the lessons of history either directly or obtusely, on a scale and in a genre normally reserved for beautiful objects.

Woell's humble manner and critical vision are irreplaceable, as is his seminal position and influence upon the history of art. Like many of his generation who have left us, he will be sorely missed, but he leaves us with a powerful legacy that cannot and will not be forgotten.