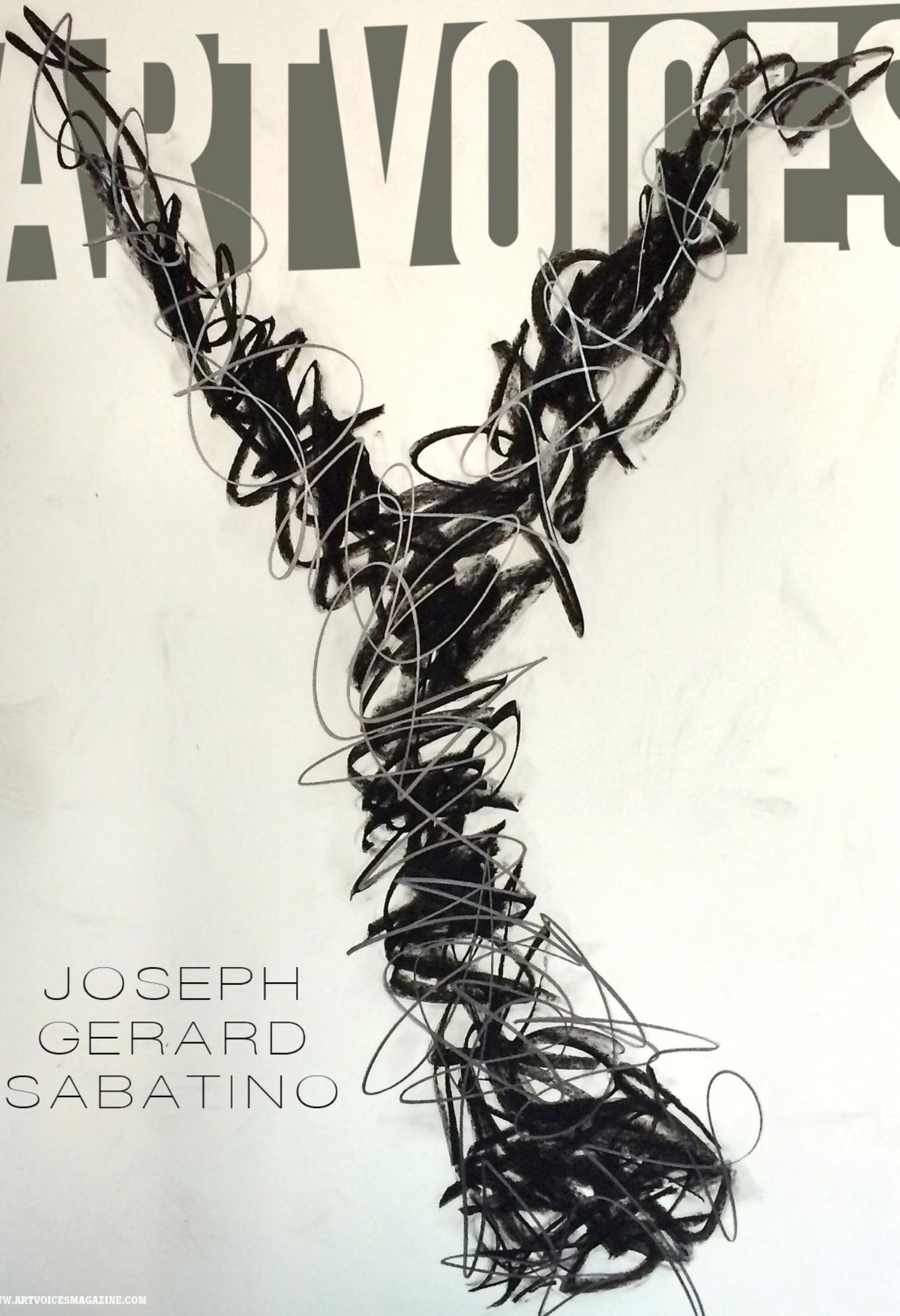


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ART VOICES

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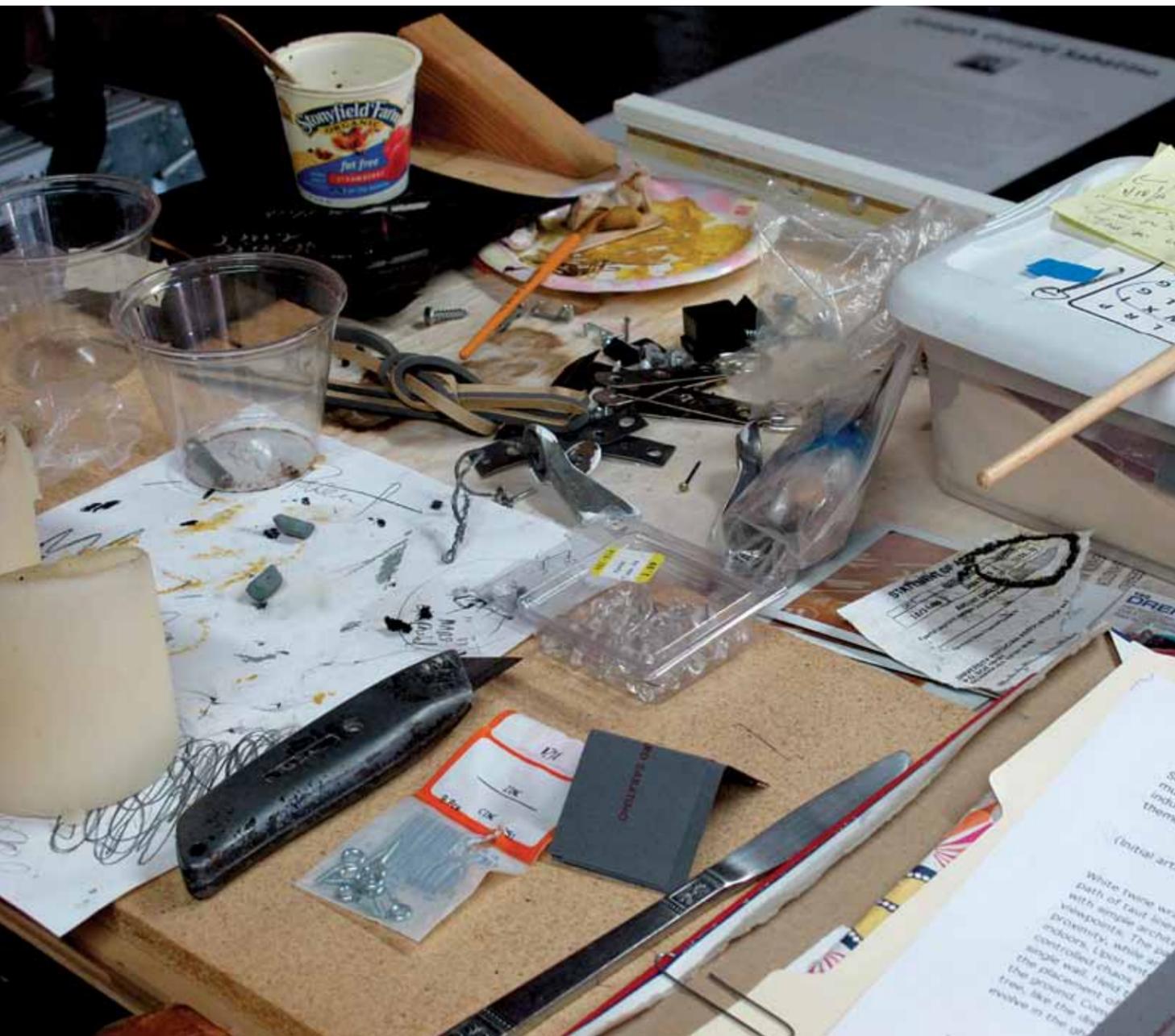




JOSEPH GERARDO SABATINO

BY SHANA BETH MASON

It's tempting to think of Joseph G. Sabatino as having a bit of creative lust for materials that are—pointedly—unattractive. Substances that ordinarily evoke sensations of dread, unease, dysfunction, and even horror may be found in his tightly-wound objects and drawings. Pig intestine may encase the chains of what appears to be a child's swing or homemade cookie dough may be twisted and speared onto butcher's hooks. It isn't a far stretch to imagine that Sabatino is effectively motivated by a psychological abattoir. (Oh, but wouldn't Bataille be proud?)



Sabatino may not be the first artist to deal in unpleasanties in his work (Serrano, Barney, and McCarthy mastered these killing fields long ago), but he may well be the first to incorporate so many disparate and diverse visual dialects into the process. He is a staunchly blue-collar utilitarian, employing welder's pencils, asphalt, oxidized sheet metals, and other forms of found industrial ephemera to construct both two- and three-dimensional scenarios. It is little wonder that such tactile connections to the worlds of historically conflicted, labor-intensive occupations have worked in Sabatino's favor, particularly within university art

museum and gallery settings. His works and installations have been staged at Kean, Seton Hall, William Paterson, and Rutgers Universities (all in New Jersey) as well as Northern Kentucky University. Sabatino has also participated in speaking engagements, including the 2007 SVA's "Artist's Talk on Art" panel and has been an artist educator at Rutgers since 2009. This kind of exposure is oriented to a more academic than commercial sector, but Sabatino is hardly troubled. He cites his exchange program with Montclair State University and the Lorenzo de' Medici program in Florence in 1999 as a having a "profoundly transformative effect" on his practice, with

photography and drawing giving way to more sculptural and kinetic sensibilities—harder to sell but easier to witness for a finite period. He recalls, "When I experienced the full presence of the piece, the physicality of it...everybody would say the same thing in our photo class, and that's what my argument was, 'I can't capture what people are feeling.' It was all about pure experience, the physicality of objects and mundane, simple things." Rather than petrifying or memorializing his installations, he insists upon pure experientiality.

Sabatino's work exists in multiple semblances of kinetic art, installation, and sculpture,

with references to early modes of Conceptualism and Pop. Having made constructive steps toward a definitive, fully-fledged practice, though, has not meant the end of the learning process. The work itself does not immediately suggest complex stages of pre-development, but Sabatino is tireless in his planning and rendering of his varying installations and designs. He is aware that his audience is not attuned to the inherent or imagined market values of the works and may not even have a highly sophisticated aesthetic vocabulary. "I've had that exposure to top people in the industry," he explains, "But in terms of that kind of audience, I have not walked through the door yet." His aesthetic would, at first glance, seem naïve or even self-taught; this wouldn't be a stretch to imagine. The exploratory nature of his objects is simple but not lifeless or mute. He wraps nostalgia up in materiality.

Sabatino has buttressed his practice in object-based investigations through international travel, artist residency programs (including a period on full scholarship to the acclaimed Vermont Studio Center), and a BFA from Montclair State. Within this consistent sequence of academic curricula, he has entrenched himself in creative pursuits using laborer's elements. A stint at the Jentel Foundation Artist Residency in Banner, Wyoming put Sabatino in a local welder's empty airplane hangar. It was a perfect studio space for him, as Sabatino is comfortable in industrial surroundings. His studio in Jersey City is no exception. Steel, construction, and welding professionals are the sort who congregate there during normal business hours. He says, "After 5 pm, the spaces around my studio are completely deserted. There's nothing." The appreciation of a non-art work environment has given Sabatino an increased ability to survive without illusions. His routines include teaching, artist and student mentoring, design work, and small construction projects. His skills seem to have made for a pragmatic artist as well as an engaged and aware citizen. Sabatino is highly conscientious about both critical theory and practice when applied to art-making, but he firmly rejects ideals of entitlement or celebrity for his own purposes as an artist. If nothing else, he is down-to-earth and straightforward. Not too many artists could claim such an invaluable asset.

Throughout the course of our discussion, art and the discipline of art history became entangled in an range of other topics including life in Tuscany, how to reverse an espresso



hangover, and why Scotch should be sanctioned as the only true drink for an artist. The artist's personality shone through. Sabatino is friendly and light and has a healthy sense of humor. No matter where our conversation led, the practice of art was always within the larger context. Without question, Sabatino is a people person, and no interview should be

without a splash of fun. So I had to ask: What is the one thing you would save during the zombie apocalypse? Just like his work, the hypothetical answer is entirely experience-based. "Oh, you can't do that. You can't even go there. At the last second, the physical response...What are you gonna do?" Odds are, he would act on impulse. **FA**