

IN HIS STUDIO IN SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS, DAVID TONNESEN USES BRUTE FORCE AND GENTLE PERSUASION TO BEND STEEL INTO THE NATURE-INSPIRED LIGHT FIXTURES AND SCULPTURES THAT HAVE BECOME HIS SIGNATURE.

MAN OF STEEL

TEXT BY MATT ROBINSON | PORTRAIT BY WEBB CHAPPELL

Steel. A combination of natural elements and human processes. It can support thousands of pounds or simply hold together two pieces of paper. It all depends on how it is used, on who shapes it, on whose vision it is bent to represent. | For nearly twenty years, sculptor David Tonnesen of Somerville, Massachusetts, has used the man-made material to evoke the



natural wonders from which it is born. Taking a dark, heavy material, he blends artistic vision and practical application to bring light and openness to public and private spaces with his signature light fixtures and sculptures.

Tonnesen's first artistic love was photography, but while earning his BFA in that medium at the University of Delaware he tried his hand at other artistic pursuits. "I was concentrating too much on one thing," he says, "so I took a class in jewelry making."

Thus was born his love affair with metal. "I learned how to anodize titanium," he recalls, explaining the process of chemically treating metals so they reflect light at different wavelengths, releasing a myriad of colors. "I eventually sold more than 100,000 anodized bracelets, which was enough to keep me at a nice poverty level."

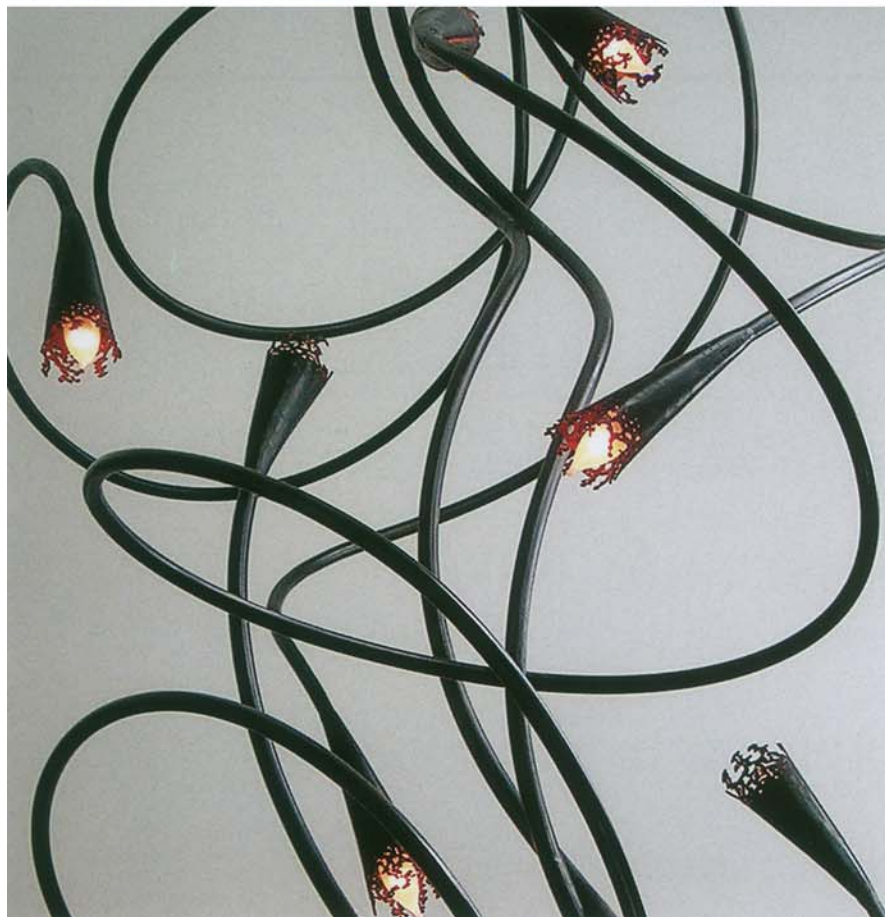
Hoping to take his art and his bank account to new heights, Tonnesen decided to change the dimensions of his work as well. So when he moved to the Brickbottom Artist Studios in Somerville, he took on new challenges even before he really knew what he was doing. When word got out that he worked in metal, people began to approach him with project proposals. "I had no space, tools or know-how," he admits, "but I figured I'd say yes to the job and then figure out how to do it."

His improvisational ethic served him well even after he learned how to use the many machines that fill his garage-like studio. "I use the machines the way they say not to," he says as he shows off his series of lathes, welders and plasma torches, which can cut through a half inch of steel with unadulterated heat. "They are meant to give smooth lines, but I like to bend them," he says.

Tonnesen enjoys working with the latest technology, such as the LED illumination he uses for many of his lighting pieces, but he is also a bit of an old-fashioned guy who takes great pleasure in the ways of the hammer and the anvil. "Nothing beats elbow grease," he says. "You basically persuade the

TOP: *Roosters* (2004), stainless steel and glass, 4' x 1' x 2'

BOTTOM: *Saker dining chandelier* (2006), pierced and blackened steel, 4' x 4' x 4'



hell out of it!"

Though the pieces of metal can weigh up to 250 pounds each and the hammering has left him with battered arms and wrists, Tonnesen is far from muscle-bound. Instead, like the material he uses, he's muscular but lithe, solid but flexible. The smile comes as easily to his slender face as the curves come to the steel in his hands.

His living space is just a few steps across a steel-trellised courtyard from his workshop. There, painted floors and steel-sheathed ceilings intermingle with delicate miniature models and substantial full-scale renderings of Tonnesen's signature lighting and sculptural work. "Sometimes it's easier to make something than to find it," he says, pointing

TOP: Legal Sea Foods' Cod Fish (2003), stainless steel, 6' x 45' x 24'
BOTTOM: Halber chandelier (2000), blackened and perforated steel, 3' x 3' x 16'



Touch table and lamp (2003), blackened steel and mahogany, 2' x 2' x 5'

out the handmade bathroom fixtures that combine brushed steel with rocks found on the beach, and his custom kitchen that is a rare example of non-curvilinear design. "It is punishment for me," he says of the angular island, "but it is practical."

The objects in his home — a diverse array of pieces including a taxidermied fish and a model of a forty-five-foot sculpture he created for Legal Sea Foods — reveal Tonnesen's desire to combine the natural and the man-made. "The process of playing with metal, making forms and seeing what I like made me realize how I liked extracting the natural spaces," he says.

Many of Tonnesen's pieces evoke nature: the backsplash on a stainless steel vanity calls to mind the flames that forge steel, a blackened-steel chandelier resembles a cluster of vines. Perhaps the crowning achievement of his nature-inspired work is the giant steel fish that sits atop Legal Sea Foods' headquarters on Boston's south piers. "I had done a waterfall for one of their restaurants and Roger (Berkowitz, the company's CEO) asked me for 'something really major,'" he says.

"The scale of my work has gone from my fingers to my entire body," he continues, recalling his early days of delicate jewelry work. "Doing this project, I felt like an ant!"

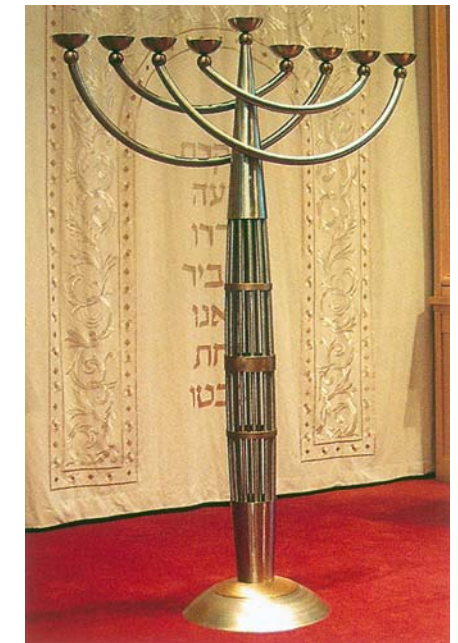
That he still marvels at the process of working with steel allows him to keep his work fresh and to make each piece new and exciting. "I am always hard pressed to do just one thing," he says, offering a portfolio that shows work ranging from menu holders to sconces to a new flame-shaped piece he has labeled a coat rack so the shippers won't blanch at the prospect of mailing art, in prices ranging from \$3,000 for a dining room chandelier to more than \$100,000 for a large-scale sculpture.

And as diverse as his work is, Tonnesen also suggests that each piece offers an array of approaches. "Every angle gives a different take," he says. "It is not the same from every view."

His work fits in spaces as varied as the roof of Best Cellars in Brookline's Coolidge Corner to the walls and ceilings of popular night spots and restaurants in Boston to giant candelabras on the rooftops of synagogues such as Brookline's Ohabei Shalom and



Top: Wing Pendant (1997), oxidized and stainless steel, Touch table and lamp 2' x 2' x 3'
Bottom: Kendall Kinetic (2006), stainless steel, 5' x 4' x 13'



Young Israel menorah (2002), bronze and stainless steel, 1' x 4' x 7'

the Graham Gund-designed Young Israel and Chabad Lubavitch of the North Shore in Swampscott. "I love doing them because they are steeped in so much tradition and meaning," Tonnesen says of the curving crowns he has created for these congregations, "and because they are unique to each community."

Though the raw materials may be raw indeed, Tonnesen takes great pride in his ability to bend and shape them not only to his will but also — and more important — to that of his clients. "My work can go in a traditional Colonial or a modern deck house. It fits well in a variety of spaces," he says.

As with his anodized jewelry, which allowed him to play with depth on a two-dimensional surface, Tonnesen uses his larger pieces of steel to bring greater dimension to what is often a flat landscape.

"Now that I am working in three dimensions," he says, "I can say a lot more." **NEH**

David Tonnesen's pieces for the home can range from \$3,000 to \$13,000, depending on size. He can be reached at (617) 666-9883; to see more of his work, visit www.davidtonnesen.com.