

The Technocentric Art of Robert Saucier

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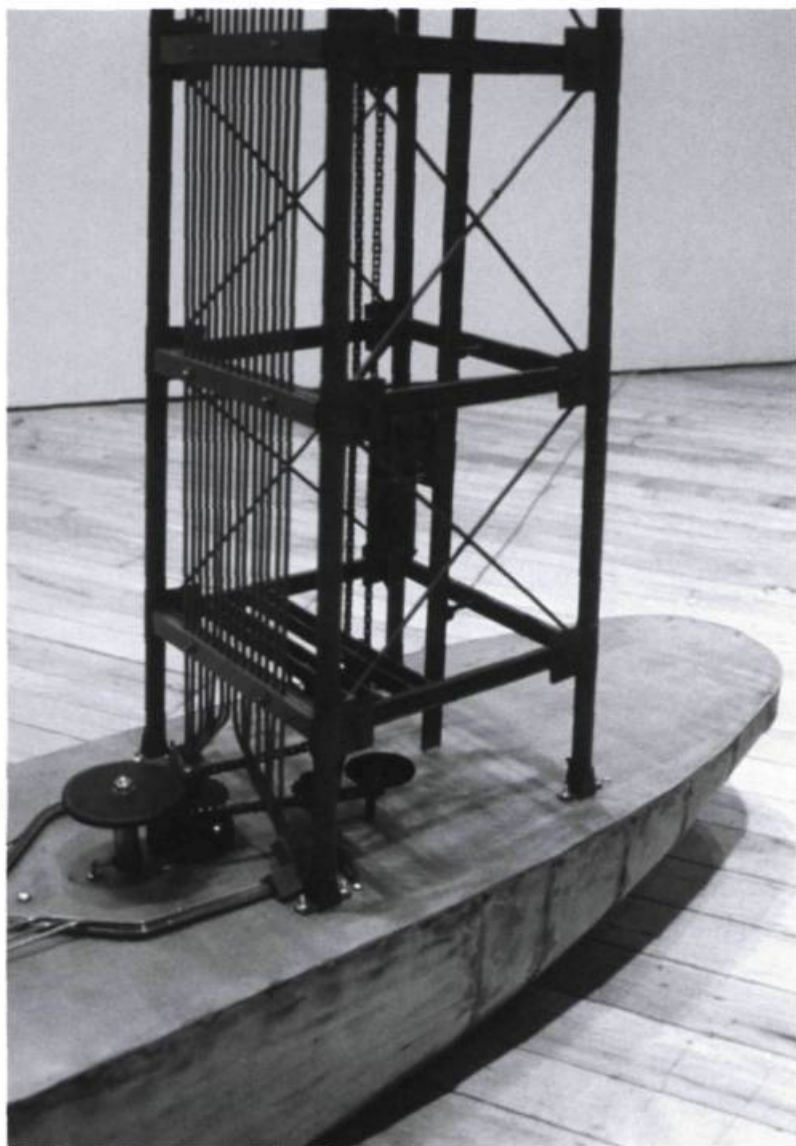
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The Technocentric Art of **Robert Saucier**

Athena Paradissis



Robert Saucier, *White Spirit*, 1991. Detail.

Actually I am that sort of girl, to look at. I'm good at games. I was a troop leader in the Spies. I do voluntary work three evenings a week for the Junior Anti-Sex League. Hours and hours I've spent pasting their rot all over London. I always carry one end of the banner in the processions. I always look cheerful and I never shirk anything. Always yell with the crowd, that's what I say.

It's the only way to be safe.

GEORGE ORWELL, 1984

Leo Kamen Gallery, Toronto
November 30 — December 21, 1991.
Orwell's 1984 envisions a world in which people are alienated from their minds, their desires, their individual selves. How one acts, how one thinks, is manipulated by the Thought Police who are, in turn, controlled by the Party. It is political fiction, divorced from reality and our

society. At least, this is what we are all led to believe. We live in a country where individuals are encouraged to grow and become anything they want to be. But in today's world, if individuals can't master technology, it will dominate them. «Technology Equals Super Power Status», so goes the anthem which justifies to the American tax-payer the government spending billions of dollars on the most modern weapons. Yet, we haven't a Thought Police and we haven't an Orwellian Party. Why then, do we live in a

society that is ostensibly dominated by technology? It affects the way we work and, yes, even think. Enter — Big Brother's updated replacement, The Technocrat.

Hailed at the turn of the century as a revolution which promised unprecedented progress, technology has evolved from its strict application in the factory to its growth in industry, warfare, medicine, and its invasion of the home. In today's world, technology is omnipresent; in the art of Robert Saucier, it is catalyst as well as theme.

Saucier's most recent exhibition, at the Leo Kamen Gallery,

Toronto, features three installations: *White Spirit*; *Fool's Parade*; *Untitled*. All three were executed in 1991.

I enter the gallery and hear a hypnotic tik ... tik ... tik, which is occasionally disturbed by a soft bang of metal hitting metal. The rhythmic tik ... tik ... tik, is the mechanized heart beat of the installations (all three are kinetic). It also sets the pace of the exhibition.

I begin to look at the installations. As I walk around, I become aware of a romantic, almost primitive sensibility which permeates the work. This romanticism is accentuated by the presence of a lighthouse and boats (at least one boat is incorporated into each installation).

There is a well-known story that my kindergarten teacher used to read to us about a little caboose that wanted to go up the steep hill; «I think I can / I think I can / I think I can» he would say until one day, he fulfilled his dream and made it up that sharp incline. The pictures that accompanied the story depicted a caboose with unmistakable human features. It had a face, it had a contoured body, it had feelings which it conveyed through tears, smiles and words. It was humanized and consequently transformed into something that children could identify and empathize with. One finds the adult version of the story in the Ultramar t.v. advertisements in which an ordinary Joe has entire conversations with his car named Princess. Substituting for wife and kids, Princess expresses excitement, she expresses anger and she expresses jealousy. The car has become a humanoid whom Joe adores. In fact, it has become standard protocol to attribute human characteristics to machines. This makes them less deadly, less dangerous, less intimidating, and more like us.

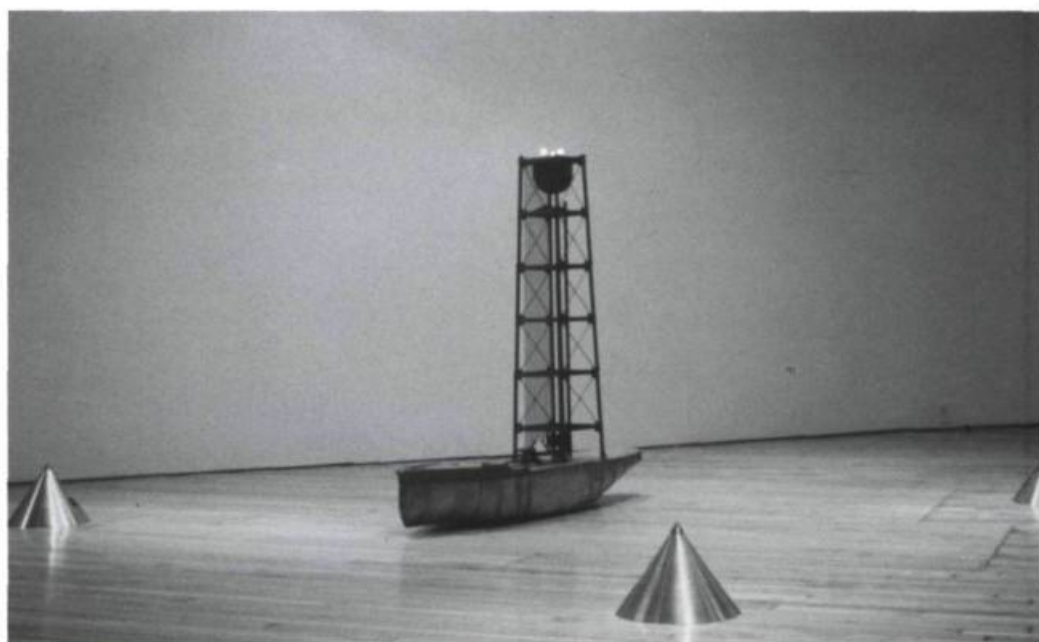
In *White Spirit*, an oil derrick is constructed on top of a battleship tanker, which is mechanically engineered to slowly circle — tik ... tik — around and around. Accompanying the tik ... tik is the synchronized sound of a drill-head which travels up and down the inside of the derrick. Three metal cones are arranged around the perimeter inside which the tanker circles — each of the cones depicting a close-up image of the top part of the derrick which resembles a turn-of-the-century lighthouse. This is not unintentional; at the top of the derrick, three flames burn — dual signifiers of the old lighthouses and the refineries which fuel modern industrial society.

The dichotomy of Saucier's symbols challenge and stimulate the viewer. The flame — symbol of hope, love and warmth, as well as symbol of pollution, destruction, ... a Dickensian industrial England. Water — symbol of rebirth, cleansing and life, as well as, symbol of the unknown, deluge, and the technology of hydro electricity which affects our environment. Boat — luxury liner or Battle Ship of death? Technology — leap into the future or into the abyss?

The tanker, in *White Spirit*, travels slowly around — looking, searching — for a way out. Yet — the

lighthouse images depicted on the cones, paradoxically, dictate an impasse, and the tanker continues about in aimless circles. In effect, *White Spirit* personifies the Catch 22 dilemma which defines contemporary society's relationship with technology. The tanker, embodiment of the human race, is trapped in a repetitive cycle: it cannot move forward, it cannot move backwards. Enforcing the message, the drill head moves up and down, up towards the top of the derrick, down to the very bottom of the tanker, disappearing into a hole which suggests a metaphoric drowning.

Saucier's art, however, is not an outright condemnation of technology. Recognizing that technology is, to a large extent, beneficial to our everyday lives, Saucier's art functions as an appeal against its all too frequent abuse. After all, war is cultural — not natural.



Robert Enright, in an article entitled, *The Lovely Treachery of Technology*, states that «Technology is less an enemy — intrinsically corrupting — than a tool used by people and organizations already corrupted.»¹ The observation that abuse of technology is the direct result of irresponsible technocrats is connected to Saucier's iconography.

The theme is not new to his art. In an earlier piece, entitled *Talons d'Achille*, 1989, Saucier explores how the hurried rush in the engineering of new machinery has resulted in a backlash of failed catastrophes — Chernobyl, the Challenger disaster, Three-Mile Island... After technology has taken its toll there will be, as the *Talking Heads* sing, (*Nothing but*) *Flowers*.

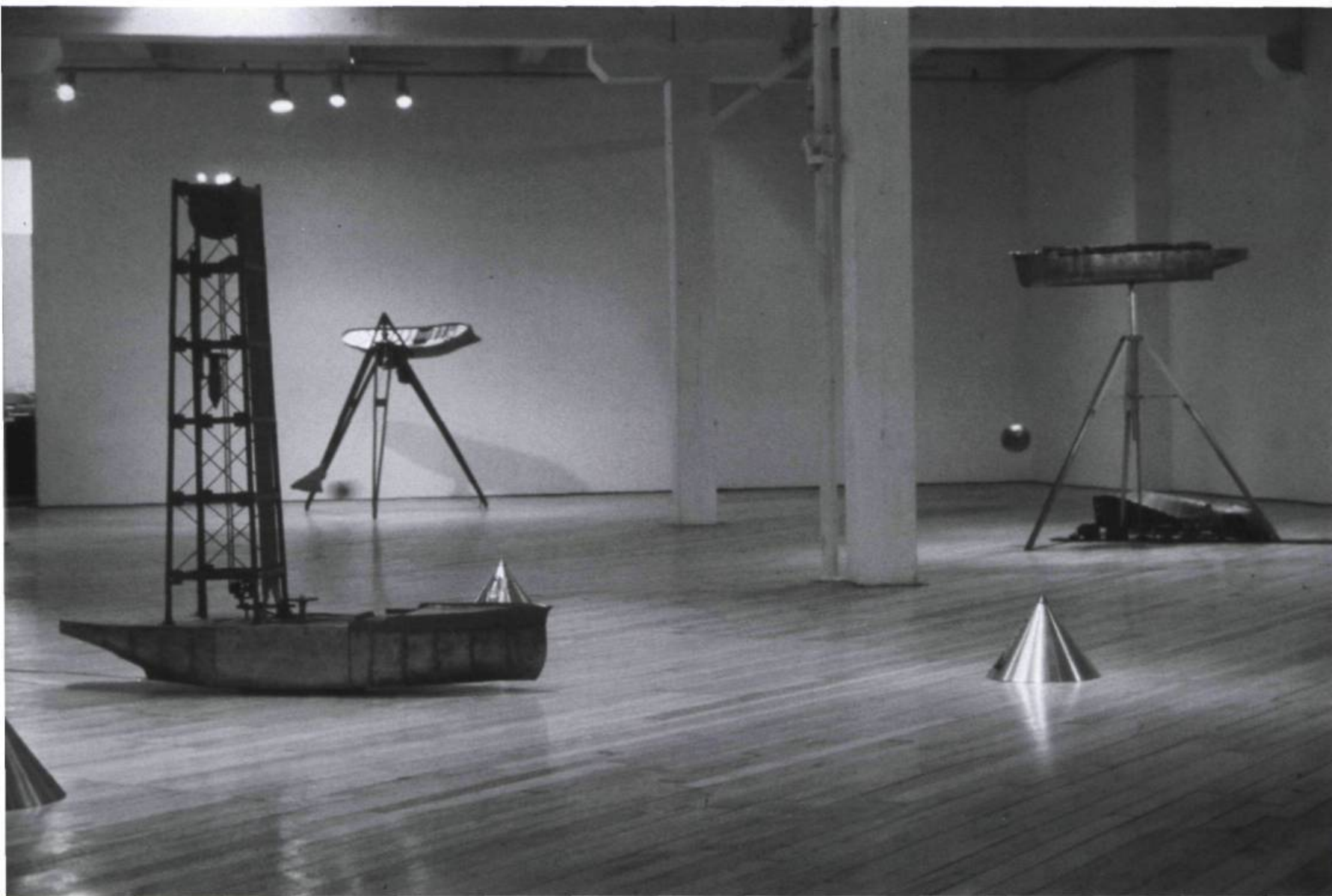
Often, the destruction has been intentional, such as Hiroshima. Tik ... tik ... tik — time is also a reminder of the need to carefully think about where we, as a race, want to go. We talk of nuclear disarmament and tighter control on environmental

polluters, but can we undo the damage done? Can we keep the good and oblivate the bad?

The uneasy balance created by the love / hate relationship shared by the individual and technology is extensively examined in Alvin Toffler's, *Future Shock*. «Change», Toffler writes, «is the process by which the future invades our lives, and it is important to look at it closely...» This, Toffler argues, should be done not from an historic perspective but from the «vantage point of the living, breathing individuals who experience it.»² In his book, *The Third Wave*, Toffler describes the process as giving «tech-

nology a womb, by inventing machines designed to give birth to new machines in infinite progression.» More significantly, this technological womb «brought machines together in interconnected systems under a single roof, to create the factory and ultimately the assembly line within the factory.»³ Echoing the fear of the 70's that technology would replace the individual in the work place, Toffler skyrockets into an imaginary future world, eliminating the concept of time and historic past. This is not

Robert Saucier, *White Spirit*, 1991. Detail.



Saucier's approach.

The exact tik ... tik of *White Spirit* is replaced by the random movement of *Fool's Parade*. «The random movement», explains Saucier, «neutralizes the hypnotic magnetism of *White Spirit* and *Untitled*. Programmed to a ten minute cycle, the viewer forgets the motion pattern and therefore cannot predict the next move.»

Unlike *White Spirit*, the "guts" of the machine are conspicuously displayed in an orderly line at the

Robert Saucier, *White Spirit*, 1991. Metal, wood, motors, electrical and mechanical devices, flame. The boat measures 134,6 x 35,5 x 134,6 cm; installation measures approx. 365 cm across.

bottom of the work. The message is clear: All this technology to accomplish a limited movement. Topping the work and this message is a boat which rests on a tripod. Its new, polished steel gleams invitingly, enticing the viewer forward. What a surprise to discover that it's cargo is charred wood! Useless waste, which hardly qualifies for the place of honour which, as the triumphant apex of the work, it is given. A play on priorities which complements the play on words in the title.

The support on which the boat rests, consists of a tripod to whose underside is attached, with a wire, a steel ball. The ball moves, at times back and forth, at times in circular movements, at times softly hitting one of the metal legs of the tripod. Connected to the piece of wire, it resembles an anchor which threatens to sink the boat on top. The image of doom is reinforced by a discarded boat, constructed of wood, which lies against the bottom of one of the tripod's legs. A passage of time interlocks past and future:

what this neglected, inoperative boat at the bottom is, the steel boat at the top will become.

Saucier's art reflects his view of technology. It is subjective. The tripod serves to remind us of this. Yet, as with all the other double twists of his symbols, Saucier's tripod also symbolizes the camera and the glossy pictures that appear in magazines. Photographed images of sleek looking cars, aerial shots of high-tech airplanes whose beauty negates their potential destructiveness, the space shuttle getting ready for take-off...

The tripod, the steel ball, the boat, appear again in *Untitled*. In this installation, the tripod supports an L-shaped steel bar. On the top end of the bar, there is a boat; on the bottom end there is a piece of wood chiseled into the shape of an arrow. At the centre of the work, the steel ball — connected to the tripod with a wire — circles around and around — this time without noise. Again, as with *Fool's Parade*, the guts of the mechanization are visible.

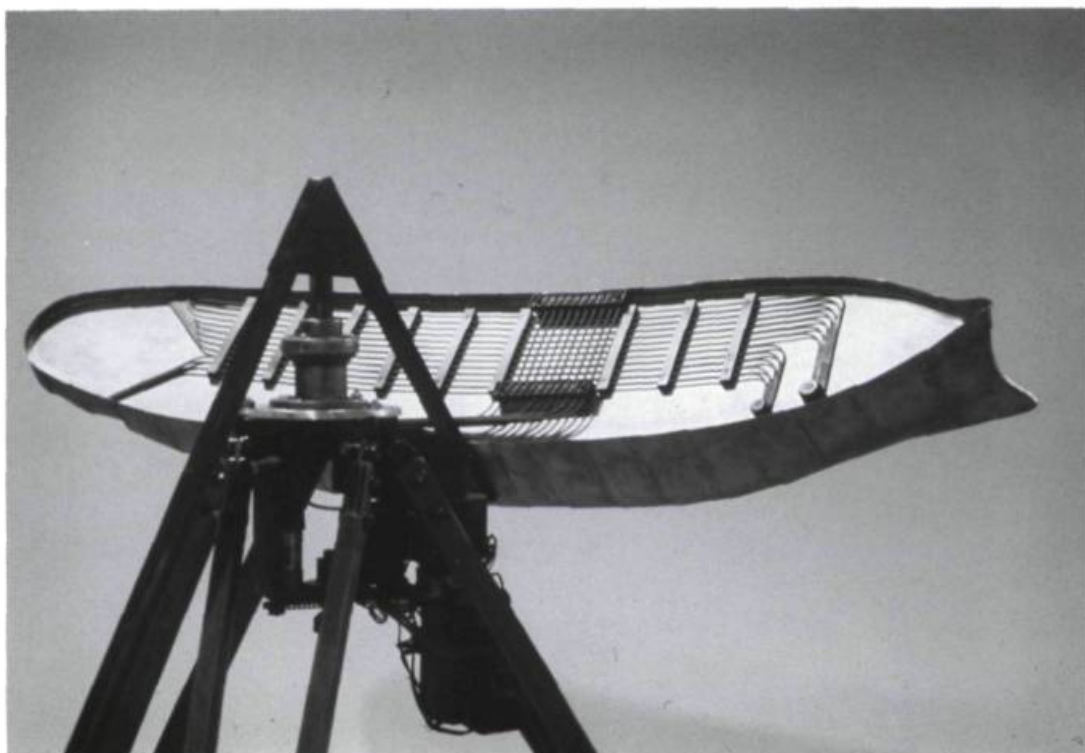
The arrow represents a historic passage of time. Created by prehistoric man as a tool to kill animals for food and clothing, the arrow developed into a weapon with which to fight the neighboring tribe. In turn, the arrow was used to kill another human being, evolving into the more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction with which we threaten ourselves... And that's the whole point, isn't it? We, those of us in charge of technology, have accomplished astronomical advances and yet we haven't progressed much beyond our predecessors. The prehistoric arrow on one side, the battleship of today on the other; the shiny steel boat with the burnt cargo on top, the discarded wreck at the bottom;

any different today? In the height of a recession which has witnessed the demise of such mega-institutions as Lavalin and the laying-off of 74,000 General Motors employees, governments and corporations continue to pour billions into technology. Who has the most and newest warfare? Who has the most efficient speed in production?... and the race is on!

Unlike the other two works in the show, *Untitled* makes no noise, thus contradicting the norm that a motor is heard but not seen. This is an intended silence that allows the viewer to absorb the mystery of the piece. The boat, tilted at a right angle, seems as if about to capsize — an illusion which the

Technology is God ... Individuals can be replaced. Does this make any sense? One hopes not. ♦

- 1 Enright, Robert, "The Lovely Treachery of Technology", *Border Crossings*, Fall, 1991, Volume 10, Number 4, p. 4.
- 2 Toffler, Alvin, *Future Shock*, Random House, New York, 1970, p. 164.
- 3 Toffler, Alvin, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, New York, 1986, p. 86.
- 4 Scott, F.R., *Poets Between The Wars*, poem entitled *Efficiency*, McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1969, p. 84.



Impasse — no progression, no regression.

In a poem written in 1935, F.R. Scott describes the relationship between technology and the individual:

Our huge steel mills
Operating at 25% of capacity
Are the last word in organization.

...

There is not one unnecessary worker
In these textile plants
That require a 75% tariff protection.
And when our closed shoe-factories re-open
They will produce more footwear than we can
possibly buy.⁴

Written during the height of the depression, Scott's poem expresses the helpless frustration encountered at the seeming domination of technology. Is it

moving steel ball helps to create. Around and around, the steel ball's circular motion has a hypnotic effect which recalls the deadly whirlpool which sucks in and then swallows. Hypnosis — implying an unconscious state of being which renders the individual susceptible to the blind obedience of external commands. This hypnotic effect is used as a metaphor in Saucier's art to demonstrate how society appears to be mesmerized by the out-of-control technocrat, and thus fails to respond.

Saucier, by incorporating random movement with timed movement, does not allow the viewer to sleep through his work; his boats don't sink. In *White Spirit*, the boat continues, echoing the determination of the little caboose that could.

Technology is not the enemy. Its abuse is. As complicated and intricate as the work of Robert Saucier may be, it remains simple. *War is peace ... Freedom is slavery ... Ignorance is strength*. Does it make any sense? Of course not. Power is war ...

Les oeuvres de Robert Saucier, en opposant divers symboles, stimulent et provoquent le spectateur. Sa plus récente exposition à la Galerie Leo Kamen de Toronto, donnait à voir trois installations réalisées en 1991 : *White Spirit*, *Fool's Parade* et *Untitled*.

White Spirit se compose d'un cuirassé, articulé mécaniquement pour pivoter lentement sur lui-même. Il est surmonté d'une tour de forage d'où s'échappent trois flammes. À l'intérieur de la tour, une tête foreuse se déplace de bas en haut. Trois cônes métalliques sont installés en périphérie. Chacun d'eux illustre en gros plan le sommet d'une tour de forage, une structure qui ressemble à un phare du début du siècle.

Symbole d'espoir, d'amour et de chaleur, le feu représente aussi la destruction et la pollution. L'eau, pour sa part, symbolise la renaissance, la purification et la vie, en même temps qu'elle est associée à l'inconnu, au déluge et à toute la technologie hydro-électrique qui affecte l'environnement.

S'agit-il d'un luxueux paquebot ou d'un menaçant destroyer? La technologie est-elle un saut vers le futur ou vers le chaos?... L'art de Saucier, toutefois, n'est pas une condamnation de la technologie. Il reconnaît qu'elle est, à bien des égards, profitable dans la vie quotidienne, mais il signale son utilisation excessive.

Fool's Parade et *Untitled* étalent leurs mécanismes internes, les mettent à nu. Dans *Fool's Parade*, le message est clair : toute cette sophistication de la technologie pour accomplir un mouvement si restreint. En reliant le passé et le présent, *Untitled* questionne ce que nous nommons le progrès. La technologie n'est pas l'ennemie, son abus l'est.

Robert Saucier, *Untitled*, 1991. Detail. Metal, tripod, motors, electrical and mechanical devices, slate. 152 x 160 x 160 cm; the boat measures 119 cm.