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## Engineering Beauty

Ralph Gardner Jr. on the Art of Roger Phillips

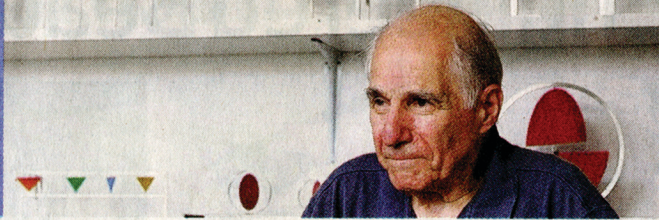
URBAN GARDNER A16

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### CITY NEWS

URBANGARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

## Engineered Beauty



The air-conditioning in my car died for the second time this weekend, and last night I had a dream that I pulled into some rest stop only to realize I'd forgotten the car's ignition keys at my starting point and had coasted all the way there. "People are doing that a lot these days," some environmentally conscious young woman told me in my dream when I expressed disbelief that I'd made it that far.

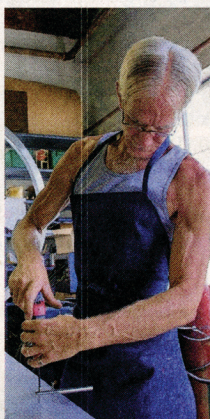
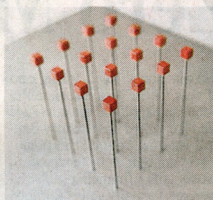
If that's not a plea from the subconscious that it's time to buy a new car, I don't know what is. But if I didn't need a new car, as well as a bunch of other stuff, I'd purchase a kinetic Roger Phillips sculpture, a show of whose work is on display through Aug. 27 at the James Graham & Sons Gallery at 32 E. 67th St.

Mr. Phillips's art brings to mind Alexander Calder's mobiles, but that's mostly because they have moving parts propelled by the wind. However, Mr. Phillips's sculptures are more colorful and geometric, and they are spectacularly engineered at his studio, down the street from his home overlooking the Hudson River, in Stuyvesant, N.Y.

I'd go so far as to say the difference between Messrs. Calder and Phillips is the difference between Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly: Mr. Astaire was an artist; Mr. Kelly was an athlete. While that might sound like I'm slighting Messrs. Kelly and Phillips (and I may be Mr. Kelly, who I didn't think was in Fred Astaire's league), Mr. Phillips's work, while less fragile than Alexander Calder's, appeals to my sense of order, without sacrificing beauty, in a way that Mr. Calder's doesn't.

"I've been working my whole life to get looser," Mr. Phillips said. "I keep getting more precise."

He takes brightly colored shapes, such as circles, squares and triangles, and suspends them from brushed stainless steel bases. Institutions where



Roger Phillips, top right, with one of his creations. To his left, studio assistant John Staats and two of the maquettes he makes before the actual sculpture. Above, tools of the trade.

they're on public display include the University of Pennsylvania, Bard College (Mr. Phillips's alma mater), SUNY Albany and the George Washington Carver Houses opposite Mt. Sinai Hospital at 100th Street and Madison Avenue.

Mr. Phillips works on commission, reserving the right to make an edition of four additional pieces. Before he creates the actual sculpture, in an old gas station he's converted into his studio, he makes a maquette, or scale model. I'd like one of those, too, for my coffee table. They're just as exquisitely crafted as the real thing, and if you commission a sculpture, which costs approxi-

mately \$18,000, the maquette is included.

The 79-year-old Mr. Phillips's first experience with metal work came when he worked at a blacksmith shop in the town of Cedarhurst on Long Island when he was 12. "My job was to hold the horse," he remembered. During the 1970s he was president of the Artists Blacksmith Association of North America.

He was an English, not art, major at Bard and went on to study English literature at Oxford. "Nobody has ever come up with a definite description of art," he observed. "Shakespeare came as close as anyone, in 'Hamlet,' when he said

the purpose of art is to hold the mirror up to nature."

When he returned from England and then the Army, and married his wife Lorelle in 1957, he went into the family insurance business, selling off the final remnants of the company, H&R Phillips Inc., only last year. But throughout his insurance career Mr. Phillips did sculpture on the side; or perhaps it's more accurate to say he did insurance on the side while he pursued his career as a sculptor.

The bays of the old garage where cars were repaired for 50 years are these days filled with precision machine equipment and tools where John

Staats, a master welder who has worked with Mr. Phillips since 1985, and his son Dylan execute Mr. Phillips's designs. "Stainless steel is very hard to weld, actually," Mr. Phillips explained. "It pulls and warps."

Almost more of a challenge is suspending the geometric shapes from the metal. You can't fully appreciate the engineered beauty of his work until you take it for a spin, literally, sending the circles or squares, which rotate on ball bearings, turning. "It's taken a long time to perfect that," he said.

The bold blues, reds, and blacks are automobile paint, applied by John Davis, a classic-car painter in Valatie, N.Y.,

a couple of towns over. Each piece takes approximately three months from start to finish and is so resistant to weather, Mr. Phillips said, that it will be a decade or more before it shows any signs of wear.

The simplicity and lack of pretension of both the artist and his work is reflected in the pieces' titles. They don't have names like "The Garden of Earthly Delights" or "Untitled #9." I asked Mr. Phillips what he called the sculpture with three diagonal yellow squares sitting in his shop. "That's 'three yellow squares diagonally,'" he said.

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