

# How Sculptor George Tobolowsky Got 'The Calling'

**Until he was in his 50s, he was just a businessman with a hobby.**

by [Jeff Bowden](#) Published 4.20.2011

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On a recent trip to the Tyler Museum of Art, to lecture at the opening of his latest show, Dallas sculptor George Tobolowsky drives south on Central Expressway and fiddles with the radio. He drives a lowered Chevrolet pickup. The bed is gouged and dented in 100 places. When he parks it in front of his sleek, white townhouse, one might expect a repairman inside. The interior of the truck resembles a vandalized storage shed. Strewn across the rear floorboard are work shoes, loose papers, a fluorescent safety vest, gloves, tie-down straps, a hard hat, and dust masks. The ride reflects a lifetime of hauling heavy things.

Barely out of Dallas, Tobolowsky looks for an exit ramp. "I need to get out and walk around," he says. "My back hurts." His left leg is propped against the armrest on the door. "Last week I kicked a piece of steel," he says. "Should've known better." If the art world were a rodeo, sculptors would be the bull riders of the bunch; pain is tied to the pleasure. To make his pieces, many of which weigh 1,000 pounds or more, Tobolowsky has battled sciatica, gashes, and burns. "I've got a friend who's a woodworker. He accidentally cut off the tips of his fingers. He tries to convince us that they're growing back."

Since his first solo show at the Gerald Peters Gallery in 2006 at the age of 56, Tobolowsky has moved steadily toward the front row of the Texas art world—this time as a maker of art.

He already had a patron's seat. Tobolowsky is currently serving on the board of SMU's Meadows Museum and has served on the boards of the Dallas Museum of Art and the Dallas Contemporary, and he is a co-founder of the Texas Sculpture Association and the Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery in Houston. Tobolowsky gravitates toward the boards' building committees. For six years, he was on the board for construction at Greenhill School.

"I love designing and working with architects," he says. "I'm interested in things being sized right and in making sure they work."



That interest doesn't necessarily explain his sculptures or why he was compelled to make them, to make the relatively late transition from patron to artist. Except that now, George Tobolowsky's life feels as though it is sized right.

Tobolowsky is the great-grandson of Russian émigrés. He wears a Stalinist mustache that requires his companions to study his eyes to determine his



mood. His children have begged him to shave it off, to see what's underneath. He has thus far resisted their petitions. The Army succeeded in removing it, but the streamlining lasted only for the duration of basic training. His wife, Julie, has never seen him without it.

Tobolowsky built a studio in Mountain Springs, about an hour north of Dallas, for his artist friends. Then he realized the place was for him.

Tobolowsky's father was president of a textile company. Tobolowsky assumed he would follow his dad into business. He went to Hillcrest High School and studied accounting and sculpture at SMU. He graduated from SMU Law School. He likes to say that he took a sculpture class at Meadows to meet girls. He got a few dates, but the relationship that stuck, the one that continues to animate his life and work, was with James Surls, arguably the most successful living Texas-born sculptor. Surls' work has been displayed at MOMA, the Smithsonian, and the Guggenheim. In 2009, the New York City Parks Public Art Program displayed five of Surls' pieces in the median on Park Avenue.

"When we met, he was teaching and working in bronze," Tobolowsky says of Surls. "He was a wild-looking guy. You didn't see anyone like him at the business school." Perhaps more than anyone else, Surls nurtured Tobolowsky's transformation from businessman to artist.

"I suppose destiny took George into the business world," Surls says. Tobolowsky started his career as an accountant at Arthur Young in Dallas. He later worked in the legal and tax departments at the Zale Corporation, which was started by his wife's family. Tobolowsky owned and operated various franchise businesses with partners, including tanning salons and Dunkin' Donuts shops. At one point, Tobolowsky ran 75 Blockbuster stores. And then, in 1995, he built a sculpture studio on his ranch in Mountain Springs, an hour north of Dallas. He told himself he was building it for his friends.

The Mountain Springs studio, constructed from reclaimed bridge beams and stone found on the property, served as a clubhouse for Tobolowsky's artist buddies until Thanksgiving 2004, when it occurred to Tobolowsky that perhaps the studio was for him. "I looked around and saw other people using my materials and my tools, and I thought, 'I should do this,'" he says. He'd built a few pieces here and there, but not enough to express a sensibility, a singular point of view. Until that Thanksgiving, there had never been any urgency.

"All artists hear the voice," Surls says. "Maybe it comes from a deity. Maybe it comes from inside. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the voice lands them on a seesaw of sorts, perfectly balanced. If they say yes to the voice, they get to cross into the realm of belief. In a religious sense, it's called 'getting the calling.'"

Starting that Thanksgiving, Tobolowsky and his welding assistant, Joe Miller, worked fast. Tobolowsky gathered found objects: discards from machine shops, salvage from oil fields, and worn-out parts from trucks and tractors. Sometimes the objects had markings on the surfaces: measurements, batch numbers, or dates. His favorite pieces had the words "bad" or "scrap" painted or etched on the sides, damnations of industrial uselessness.

He cleaned the pieces. He painted them or left the paint alone. He cut some in half or into irregular shapes. He started putting them together. He took photographs of partially built pieces, and then went home and sketched their conclusions directly onto the photographs. He built. He tore down. He rebuilt. When he finally had a collection, he called his art world connections.

Early on, Tobolowsky exhibited in Waco, Dallas, and Houston. By 2007, the late Ted Pillsbury, former director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, was a fan. In a lecture commemorating the Texas Sculpture Association's 25th anniversary, Pillsbury ended his slide show with images of Tobolowsky's work. "Tobolowsky is largely self-taught," Pillsbury said. "In the last five to 10 years [he has] created a formidable body of work, and his work is growing in its sophistication and its recognition."

Tobolowsky's work currently sells for \$3,000 to \$40,000. His first sale was to Dallas civic leaders and art collectors Sally and Tom Dunning, who promptly carted off Tobolowsky's piece *The Architect* to their home in Santa Fe. Craig Hall has purchased at least five of Tobolowsky's pieces, three of which are located in Hall Office Park in Frisco. Hall's sculpture collection was assembled with the help of curator Patricia Meadows, and it focuses on the works of living Texas artists. One of Tobolowsky's pieces, *Road to Success*, sits in the elevator landing outside Hall's private offices.

Jed Morse, curator at the Nasher Sculpture Center, believes that viewers can approach Tobolowsky's work on a number of levels. "There's just the sheer physicality of the sculptures," he says. "The weight. The mass. The steel. The simple act of walking around them." Then, Morse says, there's the history of the pieces, the found objects' life and utility. "It's another point of entry for appreciation." And thirdly, "Although the works are assemblages, they are



very intentional in shape, line, and form." Morse considers Tobolowsky an extension in the tradition of welded steel sculptors that includes Julio González, Picasso, and David Smith.

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Thirty minutes out of Tyler, Tobolowsky shifts and groans like a man flying coach to Singapore. "I'm going to pull off at this McDonald's," he says. "Walking's not too bad. Sitting's what hurts." When we get back on the highway, he hands over his BlackBerry. "Read this," he says. An email calls for artist qualifications for the Love Field renovation. The city of Dallas will spend \$2.6 million on newly commissioned artwork, 25 percent of which will be reserved for Dallas artists. (Tobolowsky was eventually named a finalist for the project. He's also a finalist for an art project for the Omni Dallas Convention Center Hotel.)

Tobolowsky currently produces 30 sculptural steel pieces a year. He often names his pieces using business terminology: *Reverse Triangular Merger*, *Hidden Dealbreaker*, and *My Traveling Entrepreneur*, a 4,000-pound sculpture that is now owned by the Art Museum of Southeast Texas. Tobolowsky's naming scheme is a nudge to observers to take a second look. "I got push-back, when I first started naming pieces," he said. "Mostly from my family. But my artist friends saw the appropriateness of the names. They seemed to work." The naming honors Tobolowsky's business roots and the nature of the found objects themselves.

"Wouldn't it be easier to paint?" is a question Tobolowsky sometimes gets from visitors. It doesn't bother him. "I like found objects," he says. "I like the shape and texture of pieces. I always try to figure out how an object was used. It helps me associate what goes with it." Tobolowsky says that museum patrons and collectors want to know the stories of the component parts. "It's better to know," he says. "Besides, you've got to know what kind of metal it is." Tobolowsky purchases his found objects at several Dallas-area scrap yards and fabrication plants. Gold Metal Recyclers is one of those scrap yards. It is located in southeast Dallas, separated from its neighbors by a tall, concrete wall. The security guards know Tobolowsky's Chevy. They know the mustache. They smile when he pulls through the gate.

Tobolowsky makes his sculpture with found objects, pieces of steel he rescues from scrap yards such as Gold Metal Recyclers.



The back lot at Gold Metal Recyclers is a scene of civil war-quality devastation: cranes stack worn-out buses near a pile of highway signs; grapplers load shredded aluminum into a compactor; another set of cranes stacks Coke machines. There is a pyramid of blue trusses from Texas Stadium. A hard hat seems ridiculous at Gold Metal Recyclers, an umbrella for a hurricane. In the dust and roar, it's a struggle to remember that something good is happening. Materials are being recycled, and art is being imagined.

Tyler is an important stop on Tobolowsky's pilgrimage. It is the site of James Surls' first public show. When museum curator Ken Tomio introduces Tobolowsky, the two men are semicircled by a crowd of perhaps 70 young couples and oil-money folks, one of whom purchased a sculpture earlier in the evening. "Usually when people take up art at an advanced age, they take up watercolors," Tomio says, smiling. All around him and Tobolowsky are 1,000-pound sculptures. "I guess the seed was planted young in George," he says.

All evening, men and women ignore typical gallery restraint and rub their fingers across Tobolowsky's pieces. When asked why, they say they wanted to feel the texture. Some talk

about the monochromatic quality of stainless steel, others, the anthropomorphic nature of the pieces. The museum staff has already had to warn visiting schoolteachers to keep their students off Tobolowsky's sculptures on display outside. The pieces look friendly enough to climb. On this night, the piece that seems to garner the most attention, Wall Street, is a study of pressure and heat, and a belief that something beautiful might arise from all the commotion. Made from stainless steel, Wall Street weighs 1,200 pounds, about the same as a teenage buffalo. Wall Street is outfitted with wheels and tanks. Tulips seem to shoot from the top. It begs a viewer to locate a switch and turn it on.

As the evening winds down, a middle-aged woman is overheard commenting to her companion that Tobolowsky seems to know when his sculptures are finished. The question the woman inadvertently raises—when is a work complete?—has tortured artists ever since they painted in caves. Is a work complete when the inspiration has been translated onto canvas or steel or, perhaps, into sound? Something in our physical world? Or does completion require a third party, an observer, to take it all in? Tobolowsky has a more precise definition. "It's done when it sells," he says.

The accountant in Tobolowsky might always believe in markets serving as co-creators and assaying engines. Perhaps they are. Regardless, his personal transformation is beginning to look like its own kind of completion—the completion of a life, a movement from "I should do this" to "I must do this." Surls says that if Tobolowsky didn't sell another piece for five years, it wouldn't matter.

"He wouldn't stop making art," Surls says. "He's in."