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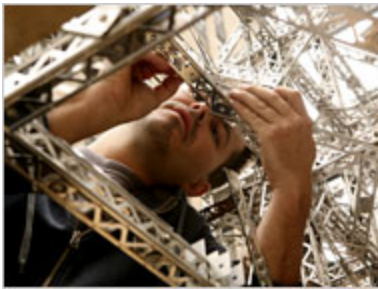
## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### **An Artist's Vision: Building With Toys, but on a Grand Scale**

By RANDY KENNEDY

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In the early 1970s, the artist Chris Burden pioneered a kind of sculpture that explored boundaries few people would care even to approach. The basic material was his body, and the work involved what he or others could do with it or to it.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

A worker assembling the tower, which will be officially unveiled on Wednesday.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

A protective cage around an Erector Set skyscraper at Rockefeller Plaza was removed Saturday.

The most infamous pieces, “Shoot” and “Trans-fixed,” were accurately titled. In one, a friend shot Mr. Burden in the left arm with a .22-caliber long rifle; in the other, he had his hands nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen bug.

Sitting at a sunny lunch table near Rockefeller Center recently, Mr. Burden, now 62 and seemingly no worse for the wear, reached into a briefcase and pulled out a piece of raw material for a new work that seemed almost as pliant as a human body. It was part of a thin Erector Set truss, actually a stainless steel replica of one from the original version, which was patented by an architecture-loving toymaker named A. C. Gilbert in 1912.

“Look how flimsy it is,” said Mr. Burden, flexing the piece easily between his hands. “It really is just a toy.”

But not far from him, partly shrouded on the trailer of a red Peterbilt truck, sat a sculpture made of hundreds of thousands of such pieces, painstakingly screwed together into a sturdy, almost crystalline creation. In essence, he had transformed a toy inspired by Manhattan buildings into a toy building approaching the size of some real buildings in Manhattan.

The work, called “What My Dad Gave Me” — a 65-foot Erector Set skyscraper, assembled over the last year by Mr. Burden and a team of assistants near Los Angeles — was hoisted into place early Saturday. It will officially open Wednesday as part of Rockefeller Center’s program of monumental outdoor exhibitions presented by the Public Art Fund and Tishman Speyer, which controls the center.

In work he has made over the last 25 years, Mr. Burden has been fascinated with feats of engineering as the means by which people try to defy their physical environment, ignoring obstacles like gravity and distance, weight and water. He has built several elaborate, scaled-down bridges using Erector Set and Meccano toy construction parts, including a 28-foot version of the steel-arch Hell Gate Bridge over the East River. (In an article last year, Peter Schjeldahl, an art critic for *The New Yorker*, described him admiringly as “a boyish gimcracker diverting us by diverting himself.”)

But Mr. Burden said his obsession with such models sprang from some serious thinking over many years about the nature of toys. “They’re the tools we use to inculcate children into how to be adults, how to live in the world,” he said. “But because they’re for children, there is this potential in them that’s never realized.”

He gestured back toward the toy skyscraper, which lay on its side on the truck bed in Rockefeller Plaza as two assistants, Joel Searles and Tim Rogenberg, used screwdrivers

to attach its spire. “I mean, children could have made that, theoretically, but they would never have enough time or parts,” he said.

As early as 1991, Mr. Burden had begun thinking about making a tower-size toy (one drawing from that year shows something he called “Small Skyscraper, Quasi Legal, LA County” that was never realized). So when Rochelle Steiner, the director of the Public Art Fund, approached him in 2006 in a general way about whether he was interested in making a project for Rockefeller Center — where his father, an engineer, had once worked — his answer was not general at all.

“He said, ‘Absolutely, and I know exactly what I want to do,’ ” she recalled.

Though he has developed a fairly keen intuitive sense about the amount of weight that Erector Set pieces can bear, Mr. Burden said he had not settled on a height for the toy tower until he visited Rockefeller Center and reminded himself of its scale. “And I said, ‘Holy cow, this can’t be a 25-footer,’ ” he said. “It has to be really big.”

He said he felt confident that he could have built to well over 100 feet, or more than 10 stories. But he decided to stop at 65 feet when engineers became involved and wind and stress tests were conducted to ensure that 16,000 pounds of nickel-finished stainless steel would not rain down on Fifth Avenue or a clutch of French tourists. (Asked whether a 100-plus-foot tower would have been safe, Mr. Burden said, smiling: “I think it would have been. But failure is very interesting, too.”)

The tower was built in sections at Mr. Burden’s studio in Topanga Canyon, and then pieces of it — including the largest one, the base, which had to be lifted out by helicopter — were taken to Los Angeles to be assembled. Ms. Steiner, who saw the piece upright during tests before its cross-country truck journey, said she loved it particularly because of the ways it pits the mind and the eye against each other.

“The fact that it is both a model and the height of a real building is bizarre,” she said. “It is simultaneously right and wrong from a traditional building perspective. And so it starts to play tricks on you.”

Mr. Burden, who describes the tower as a poetic interpretation of Rockefeller Center, said he also saw it as saying something about the ambitions of America, which he has always viewed in a slightly idealized way after growing up mostly in France and Italy. “I see it as optimistic and positive, though it feels corny to say those things,” he said.

The Erector Set and the skyscrapers that inspired it are emblems of the kind of confidence the country had at the turn of the 20th century, he said. “I think we could get it back,” he added. “I don’t think it’s impossible.”

In person, Mr. Burden — a barrel-chested man still built like the wrestler he was in high school — is personable and funny, making it slightly difficult to imagine him performing the confrontational and at times horrific pieces of his youth.

He said he saw his engineering pieces as part of the same tradition. “These are structures that are performing themselves in their forms,” he said. But by 1975 he had turned away from body-based performance, in part because of the kind of attention it was attracting.

“It became very misunderstood,” he said. “I wasn’t doing it to be some kind of stuntman.” (He said he bore no physical infirmities from those years; one of his worst injuries came only a few years ago when he wrestled a coyote to the ground after it latched onto his dog. The coyote then latched onto his left hand and almost tore off part of a finger.)

As Mr. Burden finished lunch and headed back to his tower, he said he was relieved that the piece made it across the country unscathed. “It required intense concentration to put together — it’s really easy to make a mistake, and when you do, you have to take apart what you’ve done and start over,” he said. “It might look like child’s play, but it’s anything but.”