

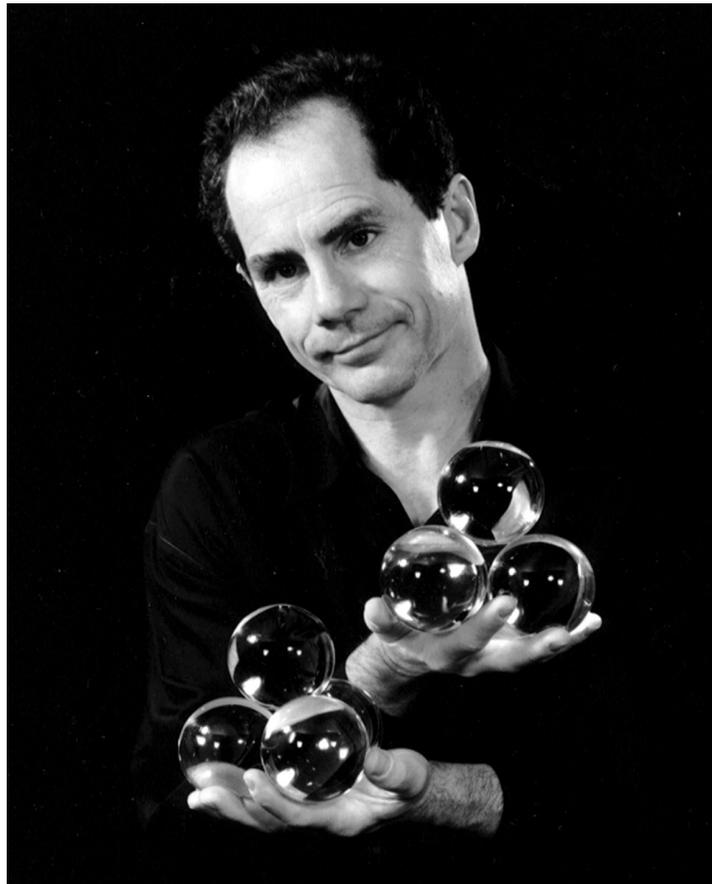
# MICHAEL MOSCHEN: IDEAS IN MOTION

BY EVA CIABATTONI

The only juggler ever to receive the MacArthur Foundation's prestigious Genius Award, Michael Moschen seamlessly blends principles of science and mathematics with the beauty of art to create performances that seem to upend the laws of physics. In this exclusive feature, Moschen discusses the inspiration and development of some of his most famous works and explains his creative process.

Once in a while, an artist comes along who redefines their medium. Take juggling. Practiced for millennia and depicted on Egyptian cave paintings dating to nearly 2000 B.C., juggling fell out of favor after the fall of the Roman Empire. It made a slow comeback and found its modern home when Philip Astley opened the first circus in England in 1768. Juggling has long sought to impress with quantity or danger—the lofting of sheer numbers of objects, or airborne knives, bowling balls, and even chain saws—eliciting “oohs” and “aahs” from audiences. Enter Michael Moschen, whose astonishing combination of juggling, art, and science won him a MacArthur Genius Award in 1990—the only one ever awarded to a juggler. “I’m not trying to dazzle the public with pyrotechnics,” Moschen said in a recent interview, “I want to make an aesthetically beautiful piece, one that preserves the magical and mysterious unknown.” (*The Record*, Bergen County, New Jersey)

observes them in action. Moschen has studied the mathematical and physical laws governing motion as well as the history of how they were deduced, but for him, the important part is what comes next. “Do you then use that law to create product?” Moschen asks. “Or do you apply it to process? I’m all about process. I’m not trying to get a result. I like to stay at the edge of something long enough—in a place that is not secure—so that the edge is moved.”



When exploring, he sets out always to accomplish the impossible. “Triangle,” one of Moschen’s most well-known works, involves bouncing five rubber balls at speeds of more than 50 mph inside a 10-foot plywood frame. What fired his imagination for “Triangle” was a visit to Karl-Heinz Ziethen’s juggling archive in Berlin, where he discovered that no one had ever juggled inside an enclosed space. What audiences see is Moschen inside the equilateral triangle managing a posse of balls careening off the sides at pre-

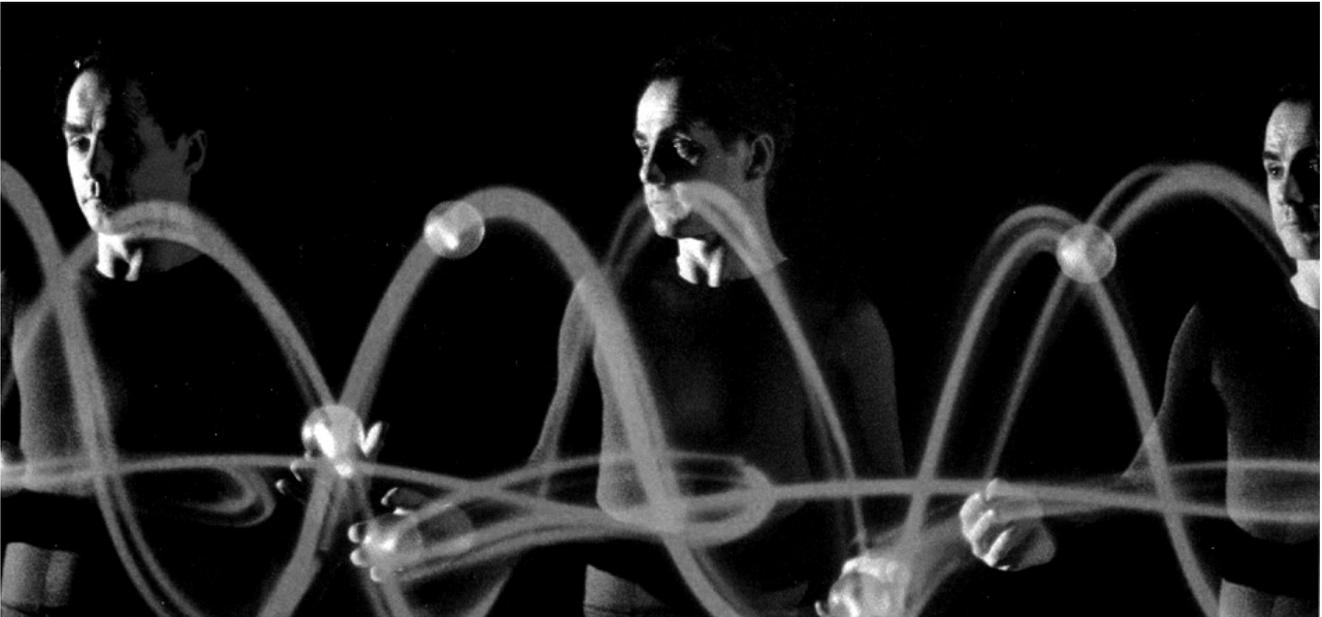
Fueled by his avid curiosity about the potential properties of objects in space and time, Moschen reads, studies sculpture in museums, and, deft at construction, he builds models and

cise angles; what they hear is a percussive rhythm like rain hitting a tin roof. What audiences don’t see is the four years of development the act took in his Cornwall, Connecticut, barn, in

which Moschen played around with wedges given him by his sculptor friend John Kahn, researched pyramids in the library, and finally slept curled inside the triangle to create a union with it.

Many of his pieces are based on the study and exploration of geometric shapes, their properties and how they move. Moschen studies a ball on the ground. He muses that gravity, which holds the ball on the ground, is also what will hold the ball in the palm of his hand. He considers the implications, the relationship of his hand to a sphere. He considers what it means to pick up a ball. It doesn't have a handle, so most people, when asked to pick up a ball, bend down and grip it. "As soon as you use the word 'grip,' you've limited the possibilities for how you can interact with the ball," Moschen says. "I don't hold a ball, I'm in the presence of a ball." He considers his hand, how it can be an

Moschen has always had a talent for endless repetition, even dating back to his boyhood days in Greenfield, Massachusetts. "I've always been very self-motivated. Unicycle riding, lariat spinning, knife throwing—I would skin my knees, bump, bruise my ankles, and fall on my head in order to get into the teeth of a thing. My parents were very indulgent," he says. His stonemason father was a key influence—he that taught Moschen to love using his hands and playing ball, whether billiards, baseball, or golf. One day his older brother Colin and best friend and neighbor Penn Jillette (of Penn & Teller fame) brought home a juggling book from the library. The three boys used tennis balls to try the tricks. They sent away for a set of "real" juggling balls convinced that "real" juggling balls would turn them into "real" jugglers. As young adults, Moschen and Jillette shared an apartment in New York City



**"I educate about what exists, then dream about the possibilities."**

**—Michael Moschen**

instrument of caress and love, as well as an instrument of violence, how it can be open or closed, palm up in supplication curled into a fist, or cocked like a gun.

"I don't set out with the idea of creating, but with the idea of studying something and letting it flower on its own," he says. Through this open-ended approach, Moschen is able to make crystal balls become as ephemeral as soap bubbles, seeming to float over his hands and perch lightly on the apex of his nose. He can transform a baton into a hummingbird and make circles dance while illuminating the relationship between a circle's circumference and diameter. It's illusion but without smoke and mirrors—it's illusion based on skill, grounded in science, and brought to life by Moschen's artistry.

A spider building a web across a window, the movement of a gyroscope, the guts of the giant telescope at Mount Palomar, the mole tunnels crisscrossing the snow in front of his home—everything fascinates Moschen. Part of the creative process is the inexplicable leaps and bounds of the imagination; but much of it is mundane, the plain hard work and commitment of showing up without fail every day. Artists of all disciplines agree that the muse is more likely to appear if she knows where to look.

and practiced a club-passing act for more than a year, 10 hours a day. To relieve the tedium, they would turn on the oven until the heat made the cockroaches leave their kitchen haven – and try to clobber the roaches with the fiberglass clubs they were passing back and forth.

Moschen's art has matured from those gritty days, growing beyond the physics and geometry that gave it its basic shape. Nowadays, Moschen is far more likely to stress the archetypal qualities of his work. Through the ages, humans have both feared and explored the unknown: the shape of the universe, the smallest building block of matter, the edge of the world, the mysteries of the human psyche. Moschen seeks to show that beyond what we know is more, always more. ■

*Please see page 25 for more information about Michael Moschen's Lively Arts performance on March 12, 2006.*

*Eva Ciabattoni is a freelance writer based in Los Altos.*

**Photos:**

Pages 16 and 17: *Michael Moschen.*