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Gathering places: Bath House birds flock to couple's latest public sculpture

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Artists Frances Bagley and Tom Orr were inspired by bird perches to create their White Rock Lake Water Theatre.

Award-winning Dallas artists Frances Bagley and Tom Orr have sculpture on view in public spaces from North Carolina to Osaka, Japan - and a lot in between in Texas. But it's not always easy to win the public over to the sophisticated, contemporary large-scale works they produce on their own and as a team.

That hasn't been a problem at the White Rock Lake Water Theater. The lakeside installation is popular with both birds and people, along with the occasional turtle.

Ms. Bagley and Mr. Orr have made numerous works together during their 14 years of marriage, but the collection of piers poking from the water behind Bath House Cultural Center is their first collaborative, permanent public installation. After two years of planning and construction, it was dedicated in November.

Both artists say they have different approaches to public work and what Ms. Bagley calls "art for art's sake." "When you're using public money, and you're putting it in a place that's public-owned, I feel that you have to take a different point of view than you do when you're working in your studio," says Ms. Bagley. "I think about who's going to use it - the viewer, the patron, the participant - more than I think about myself. When I work in the studio, I don't think about that."

"You have to think in a different direction," says Mr. Orr. "You're taking all kinds of things into consideration ... how it'll be perceived, how it'll be used." When they applied for the competition to create a work of art for the Bath House grounds, "Nobody thought we would suggest the water. Everybody thought it would be the parking lot," Ms. Bagley says.

Before submitting an idea, "We were looking around for a site that looked interesting," Ms. Bagley recalls. Then she noticed a row of slender black poles out in the water, placed there years ago to mark the safety zone for swimming.

"And I said, 'Look at how birds perch on those poles. It makes its own sculpture,'" Ms. Bagley recalls. "And he said, 'What if we put in a hundred poles?' And I said, 'Then it could be a theater, and they could perform, we could make a big arc.' So it went back and forth. It was definitely a collaborative idea."

To make sure it would be accepted by both the city and the city's birds, the artists consulted with an ornithologist, who said that "once they're used to it, they'll be all over it," Ms. Bagley says.

Workers were all over it during construction. Underwater divers had to bolt the 80-odd piers to a concrete slab under the water, and a solar power system was set up for the poles, which are lighted from within.

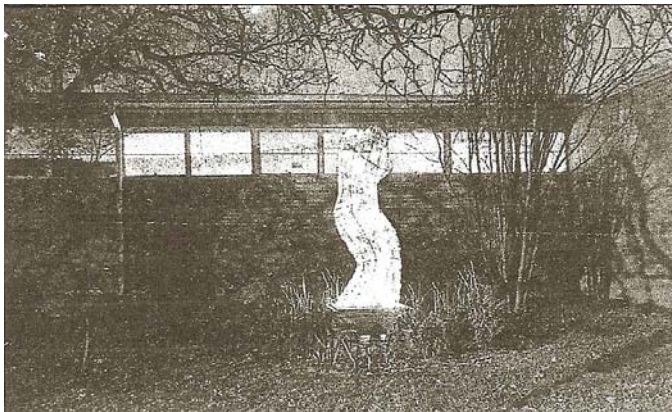
"We thought it would be a very simple idea, and it turned out to be a very complicated idea," Ms. Bagley says.



Reeds in Willow

Ms. Bagley made this seated figure in woven reed in 2000. Neiman Marcus bought it for its store at The Shops at Willow Bend in Plano.

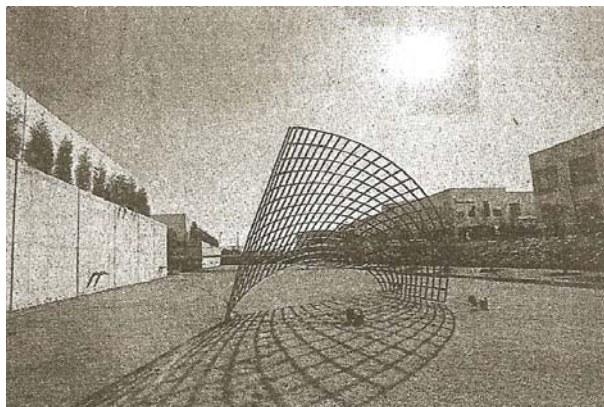
"You can't help but question it," she says of having her work in a department store. "I didn't know it would be in the shoe department. If I had known, I might have balked even more. But I reconciled it... It's a combination of their sensitivity and how they dealt with us. We knew they took it seriously."



Playing for position

Ms. Bagley did this 1998 sand-blasted glass and fiber-optic light sculpture for an office building at Hood and Routh streets in Oak Lawn.

"A lot of times when you're painting a painting or something, you're not thinking about where it's going to be." In this case, the client "wanted it up on a pedestal, and I didn't. ... I wanted it to stand on the ground. I didn't want it to be a formal 'statue.' That's something you have to struggle with."



Shadow play

Mr. Orr created this 2001 painted steel sculpture for the International Business Park in Carrollton.

"The shadow is just as important as the piece, as important as the metal," says Mr. Orr. "It's

different every day, every month - cloudy, sunny.

It's nice when people pick that up, too, instead of someone saying to me, 'Hey, did you see those

shadows it makes?'"