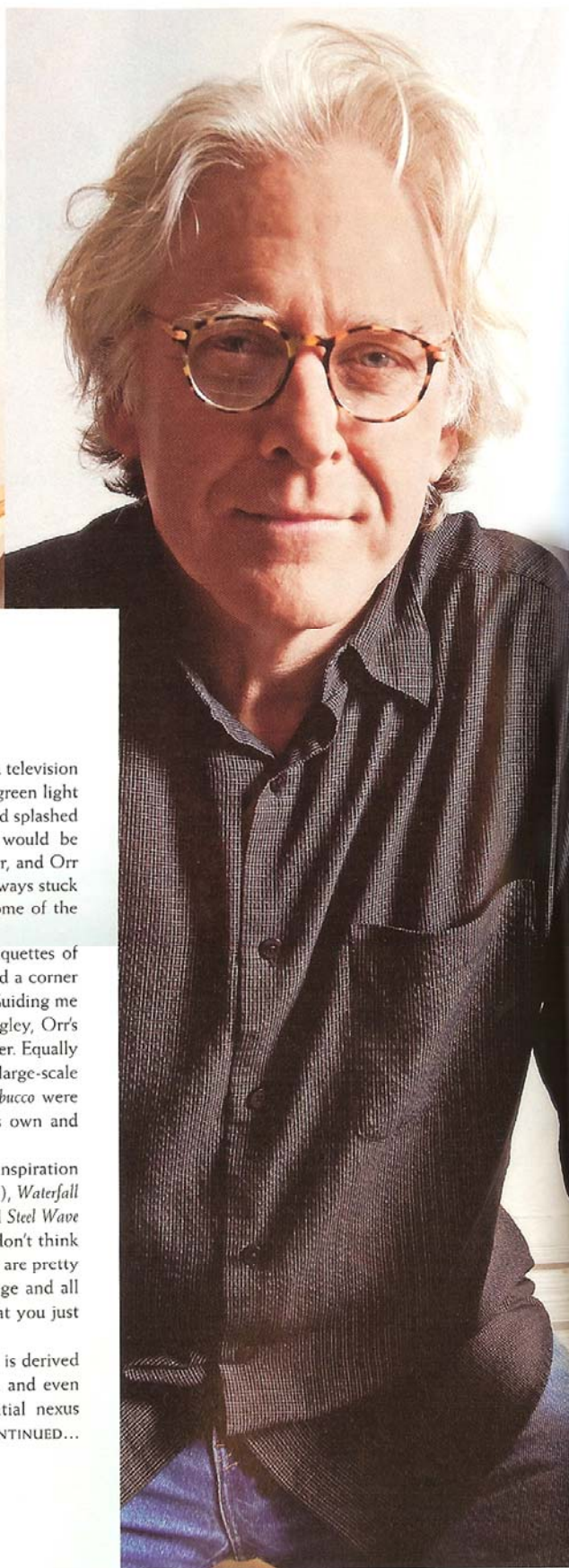


THE RADAR ART

BY STEVE CARTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARISSA BYERS



From left: Model for *Boat*, now in Nagano, Japan. Tom Orr is fascinated by the interplay of light, shadow and natural materials.



OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The art of Tom Orr reflects his lifelong affair with mirages, patterns and light

As a young boy growing up in Oak Cliff in the '50s, Tom Orr's next-door neighbor was a television repairman whose garage served as his after-hours workshop. Late at night, an ethereal green light emanated from the garage, filtered through Orr's Venetian-blinded bedroom window and splashed his ceiling with emerald and black-striped phantasms. The dance of the stripes would be unintentionally choreographed by the neighbor's raising or lowering of the garage door, and Orr learned that he himself could call the tune by adjusting his blinds. "That kind of stuff always stuck with me," the sculptor and printmaker marveled recently at his east Dallas studio. "Some of the things I'm working with now were things I saw when I was a boy."

His studio today, populated with current pieces both finished or developing, maquettes of past, present and future works, warehoused materials waiting to be called to action, and a corner devoted to germinating schemata, reflects Orr's restless imagination and explorations. Guiding me on a tour of the space, which he shares with his wife of 20 years, sculptor Frances Bagley, Orr's enthusiasm is infectious, and he talks about his artistic odyssey with the zeal of a teenager. Equally fluent with installations, freestanding or wall-hanging sculpture, leaning constructions, large-scale prints, theatrical design (his and Bagley's sets and costumes for the Dallas Opera's *Nabucco* were extraordinary), and the stubbornly unclassifiable, Tom Orr's work is immediately his own and indelibly memorable, whatever the medium.

Although he's not inclined to think of nature as a major influence on his work, its inspiration is hard to ignore: his *Floating Mountain* installation (wood and steel, 16-by-40-by-20 feet), *Waterfall* sculpture (steel, paint, wood, 122-by-184-by-84 inches), and the geometrically playful *Steel Wave* sculpture (painted steel; 12-by-30-by-9 feet) all underscore his vision as a creator. "I don't think about nature when I do a work, but I do respond to a lot of things in nature that I think are pretty darn fascinating," he says, "natural phenomena like reflections and shadow and mirage and all kinds of things. You can't beat nature, you can't top it, there are too many things that you just can't compete with."

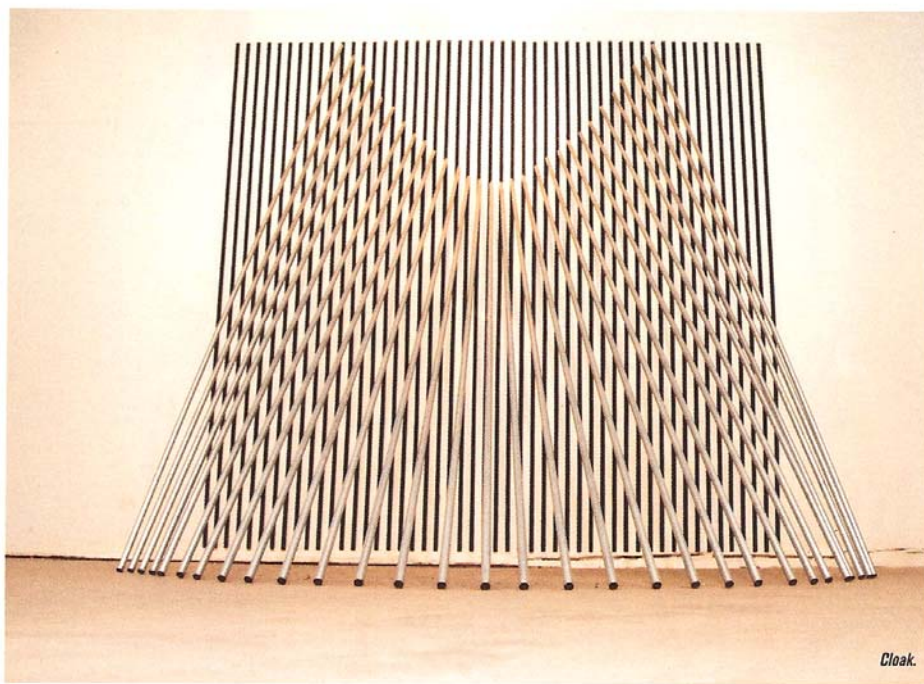
With a preference for natural, simple materials, much of Orr's delight in his work is derived from the collateral serendipity of the shadows his pieces produce. In a sense, light, and even viewers themselves, become Orr's collaborators, completing a subjective experiential nexus among art, artist, audience and elements.

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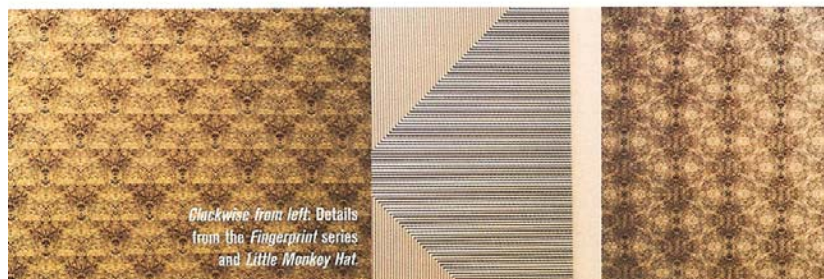
MODERNLUXURY

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...CONTINUED For example, Tom's mammoth *Wave* (1989, painted wood, 8-by-100-by-4 feet) was a temporary hilltop installation at Connemara Sculpture Park in Allen. Exploring his interest in the moiré effect, that shimmering illusion that results when two superimposed sets of lines seem to create a new set of lines, *Wave* was a breakthrough. "I built all these sections, basically like a fence and a fence leaning on each other, and I made it 100 feet long," he recalls. "I had no idea if it was going to work or not, but when we put it up and I walked down the hill to see it, it nearly knocked me over, it was like incredible... that was a great piece, and that one really got me going. Your eye puts the moiré pattern there," he continues. "It's what's going on in between these things that's really important, and what's going on between there isn't there. But you



Cloak.



Clockwise from left: Details from the Fingerprint series and Little Monkey Hat

perceive it, and to me that's a wonderful thing. You could get way off from *Wave* and just barely veer your head and the whole thing would move—it was just beautiful."

Born in Dallas in 1950, and raised here and in Lubbock, Orr always knew he'd be an artist. After a couple of years at El Centro College, where he began to focus on three-dimensional work, he migrated to the renowned Rhode Island School of Design. Upon graduation he headed back to Dallas, where working for his family's demolition/salvage company helped sustain him while he established his presence as an artist. "Building and destruction at the same time," he laughs on reflection. "It was a pretty good job for me, because I was always around materials, you know?" Orr also worked as a freelance carpenter and created display work for clients like Design Solutions, Neiman Marcus and Gucci. Some of Orr's earliest exhibits were with the fledgling 500X Gallery; he was one of the enterprise's founding members. Since then, he's been represented by Conduit, the late Turner & Runyon, and for the last two years, Marty Walker Gallery, as well as doing private commissions.

Lately, some of the impetus of Orr's work has been responding to immediacy, something of a return to the *modus operandi* of his earlier years. "When I get an idea, man, I'll just make the thing and go, 'Whoa, that's it!'" he enthuses, "and you get these goose bumps all over you, and

then it's 'now how can I really make this work?' What I've been doing lately is trying not to build things, not to construct pieces, but just get my idea out there as fast as I can and not really refine it, but get it to work, stand up, and kind of wire it together, and try to keep it as fresh as possible." Orr's studio houses evidence of the blitz approach: a large scale leaning piece, *Television*, is a low-relief sculpture constructed of clear greenhouse plastic, cellophane, blue glass, wire grid and a striped background; another leaning construction, *2709 62nd Street*, is an abstract evocation of the artist's boyhood residence in Lubbock. "I think I'm

trying to present these things and kind of blur them at the same time, just to see what they do," he theorizes. "Again, this is getting into the very immediate; I do it very quick, and then I look at these things for, like, six months. I've never shown them, but I consider them pieces now." Inspired by the impulse to capture some "painting-like quality against the wall," Orr concludes, "As you can see, some of these are very simple, but they're very complex at the same time."

While Orr's art may or may not speak of his biography explicitly, (although his thumbprint-derived prints certainly do implicate him), he nonetheless concedes to the self-revelation his art implies. "I guess if

my work is autobiographical it's because I'm always going back to those things, revisiting them, trying to draw from them," he explains. "The work I do is what I'm thinking about all the time—I set out with this certain thing that I'm trying to vision, and it's pretty much been the same for 30 years, you know? Maybe the construction methods and styles have changed, and the art may look a little different nowadays, but it's still that basic idea: and again that idea is just to get other people to connect with the things I'm seeing, and I'm always searching for ways to do that, to let you see it. Because it's pretty fascinating, this world—it really is, man." ■

To experience Orr's art, visit www.tomorr.net, or Marty Walker Gallery, 2135 Farrington St., 214.749.0066 or www.martywalkergallery.com.