

ARTIST FOCUS: ANDY COOLQUITT

Deep in the Heart of Texas, A Feast of Offbeat Art



ANDY COOLQUITT'S home near downtown Austin, Texas.

SOME TEXANS turn their homes into quirky works of art, like the railroad worker who covered his house in beer cans and the postman who turned his lot into The Orange Show, a mazelike homage to his favorite fruit.

Andy Coolquitt isn't a folk artist like them—he studied under sculptor Paul McCarthy—but the compound-style home he's building near downtown Austin owes something to that offbeat Texas tradition. He repurposed parts from a merry-go-round for a grand staircase. He dotted an exterior stucco wall with hundreds of beer-bottle tops. He crafted his kitchen's rainbow-hued chandelier by gluing together rows of plastic lighters he found on the streets nearby.

Mr. Coolquitt's house-building and individual artworks have lately made him a favorite of the contemporary art crowd, including New York collectors Susan and Michael Hort and Ottawa collector Joe Friday, who calls Mr. Coolquitt's art "rough and unfinished but also refined." His largest installations can sell for as much as \$75,000, but his smallest objects can still be bought for around \$5,000.

On Sept. 29, the public will be able to take a longer look when what's billed as the first museum survey of his art, "Attainable Excellence," opens at the Austin Museum of Art/Art-house, with a stop scheduled next

spring at Houston's Blaffer Museum, which organized the show.

Mr. Coolquitt, 48, grew up in Mesquite, just east of Dallas. He studied art at the University of California, Los Angeles but quickly realized he didn't want to study fine art in a rarefied studio setting. Instead, he wanted to explore ideas about making art that sprang from his interactions with everyday society. He left after a semester and took a job at Austin's Texas School for the Blind.

After a few years, he distilled his artistic philosophy into a question that would drive him back into art: Could an artwork be collaborative rather than reflecting a single artist's point of view? For Mr. Coolquitt, it meant buying and renovating a ramshackle farmhouse and inviting anyone willing to join in—often by using whatever materials he could scrounge from his neighborhood. Since he bought the original house for \$30,000 in 1994, hundreds of artists, friends and strangers have stayed for a few weeks, sometimes months. Most leave some creative mark on the five houses up now; he sleeps in a loft-style space above his workshop.

Also on view at the show: Coolquitt objects that can be used as lamps or chairs or benches, some of which he arranges into domestic tableaux.

—Kelly Crow

Andy Ecker/Andy Coolquitt and Lisa Cooley, New York