

ZEST PLUS STAR

MIXED MEDIA

New mosaics are enlivening East End

Works in progress will add eye-popping visuals to neighborhood projects

By Molly Glezter

In much the same way Midtown has become a province of street paintings, Houston's southeast side shimmers with mosaics. Several works in progress suggest how different the effects can be.

Next to the Orange Show on Munger, Matt Gifford's grotto project will be the amphitheater and the magnum opus of the still-developing Smither Park, a planned wonderland of mosaics. Huntsville eco-artist Dan Phillips built the half-orb-shaped structure.

Gifford, a Phillips protégé who grew up in Kansas and now makes furniture in Nashville, imaged the grotto's shape as the head of a giant fish, coming at the audience from the ground with its mouth wide open.

"It was my first instinct with it," he said recently, wiping sweat from his brow. He remembers seeing J. Seward Johnson's "The Awakening" on a class visit to Washington, D.C., and Maryland; that sculpture depicts a 70-foot giant who appears to be emerging from the ground.

"I like the impression that there's something deeper or something larger looming, so you have to re-evaluate what the space might normally mean. I'm not trying to make anything too scary. It's friendly, inspired by an

angler fish," he explained. "I've got a disco ball I need to mount to make a dangly antenna."

He's worked in the heat since last month laying on a skin of tile, metal, wood and assorted other recycled objects. The grotto-fish now has shiny scales of corrugated metal and dorsal fins of filigreed iron (perhaps porch railings) up where people can't reach and hurt themselves.

Fans on lazy Susans also protrude from the back, ready to spin in the wind. Gifford wants to add more moving elements — old farm discs would do the trick, if you happen to have any sitting around.

"I'm not a kinetic artist, but I've used stuff with bicycle-wheel mechanisms before and simple air foils; you've just got to get things balanced," he said. The amphitheater's inside back wall, a portal-looking mosaic of mirrors surrounded by bits of old picture frames and wood, also is coming together.

Gifford imagined this section as the creature's throat. (The pharynx is a big plastic flower.)

He estimates the whole project covers about 2,400 square feet.

"It's really big, so you need a lot of whatever it is you're doing," he said. He's still accepting materials donations.

Across the Gulf Freeway at 3103 Navigation, Jesse Sifuentes'



Molly Glezter / Houston Chronicle

Artist Matt Gifford is covering the amphitheater at Smither Park with a mosaic of found objects. When completed, the structure will resemble the mouth of a large angler fish.

small fleet of colorful ceramic mosaics in the shape of paper airplanes has a more stealth attitude. Gliding along the side of a warehouselike brick building owned by furniture maker James Dawson, they appear to be taking off from the abandoned railroad tracks adjacent to the property.

Sifuentes, a Galveston native who teaches ceramics at Texas Southern University, has lived in the East End since the early 1970s. "I've always eyed that wall and have loved it for years," he said. "It was screaming for something."

He built the planes by sections in his studio on 16 pieces of 3-by-5-foot Hardie board (about 240 square feet total), then attached

them to the building with mortar screws. They were grouted in place before getting a final coat of water sealant.

Since this mural was commissioned by the Houston Arts Alliance's big fall "Transported & Renewed" campaign for the Port of Houston's centennial, Sifuentes designed an image with a sense of movement. There wasn't a budget to cover the whole facade.

"Paper airplanes are something simple that have been around a long time," he said. "I used to make them in elementary school, but this time I didn't get in trouble."

Also considering the transportation of knowledge and family histories, he filled in each space

with a quilt-inspired tile pattern. It's all cleanly geometric. "If there's anything organic in there it's a pathogen," Sifuentes said. (He has, however, embedded a few objects to honor local industry: a line of small red, white and blue space shuttles nods to NASA, while a few protruding coffee cups reflect the neighborhood's Maxwell House factory.)

The abstract patterns are a departure from earthy, agrarian-themed mosaics that are Sifuentes' signature on other area buildings: a three-panel mural on the facade of Simon's Menswear, 6500 Harrisburg; "The East End — The Birthplace of Houston"

on the side of the Rex Supply Co. building, 3775 Harrisburg; "Nuestra Familia, Nuestra Comunidad" at Ripley House, 4410 Navigation (a collaboration with Adrian de la Cerda); and the watermelon mural at the Gulfgate Starbucks. He has also done mosaics at the Orange Show, painted the stylized magnolia tree mural that wraps around a corner inside the Houston Permitting Center, 1102 Washington, and designed windows for Metro Rail lines.

"I've been trained to deal with surfaces and space in a craftsmanship kind of way," he said. "If you point a picture on a wall it's going to last, what, maybe 30 years. But tile lasts forever, as long as the building isn't torn down."

molly.glezter@chron.com

Jazz book author and musicians have strong ties to Houston

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wrote for many of those shows, which he began doing after he left the Chronicle in 1999 after 10 years on the job.

Da Camera, which was launched in 1987, has enjoyed smart, diverse and forward-thinking programming by Sarah Rothenberg for the past 20 years. During that time, the organization has presented such legendary figures as Wayne Shorter and Roy Haynes. The program also has put a premium on young, rising talent.

"We tend to be always looking ahead to our next jazz series," Da Camera's Leo Boucher says. "But Rick's book has been a chance to look back and realize how comprehensive we've been in presenting the mainstream of jazz to Houston audiences."

Mitchell has been writing about music for more than 40 years. He also has taught high school and college,

Upcoming Da Camera performances

Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

Chick Corea

When: 8 p.m. Oct. 10

Cécile McLorin Salvant

When: 8 p.m. Nov. 8

Jason Moran

When: 8 p.m. Feb. 7

Kendrick Scott Oracle

When: 8 p.m. March 7

Branford Marsalis

When: 8 p.m. April 18

Tickets: 713-524-5050, dacamera.com

and spent more than 10 years programming music for the Houston International Festival. He traces his interest in jazz to his mother's old, three-LP collection of Duke Ellington's music. "It was full of hisses and pops, but it had these classic songs: 'East St. Louis Toodle-oo,' 'Black and Tan Fantasy,' 'Mood Indigo.' That was my portal into it."

He delved deeper into

the music after seeing saxophonist Charles Lloyd (who is featured in the book) perform in the late 1960s. He immediately bought Lloyd's "Forest Flower" album, which Mitchell calls "my desert island disc." Free-form jazz — a once-popular format in which disc jockeys could play any music they wanted — also enabled him to hear progressive jazz acts such as Rahsaan Roland Kirk alongside pop artists like songwriter Joni Mitchell.

As Mitchell began his long career writing about music, jazz began to suffer an identity crisis. Its musicians had long put a premium on innovation, which facilitated its evolution from ragtime to big band to bebop to fusion and the avant-garde. But by the 1980s — for the first time in its history — jazz did not have a dominant new direction.

"There wasn't a new identifiable sub-genre," Mitchell says, "but there were people saying

there was no innovation after 1965, which is total (expletive)."

A boring debate ensued between jazz traditionalists, who were protective of the music's past, and those committed to the vanguard. "It consumed so much critical energy, and it just ended in a truce," Mitchell says. He paraphrases a quote from legendary bassist and composer Dave Holland, who is profiled in the book: "Lots of people have opinions about what jazz should or should not do, but what happens is the music carries on. I don't see one overriding style, but I do see a lot of wonderful styles being made. ... I think we need to rejoice in all the different ways this music can be made."

The artists featured in "Jazz in the New Millennium" (available at rickmitchell.us) don't make a collective statement about what jazz is. Taken as a

whole, they instead ask, "What can't it be?" The answer isn't limitless, but it extends beyond the shores of the United States. In addition to traditional players, Da Camera has booked acts that incorporate sounds from Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Caribbean into an art form that sprang up in the United States from African-American culture.

Houston musicians also have a strong presence in the book and not simply because they performed at Da Camera shows.

Drummer Eric Harland and pianist Jason Moran bridge past and present. Both are Houston natives and graduates of the storied jazz program at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, which has become a feeder for first-call jazz players in New York. Both have not only performed here

with Lloyd, but have headlined their own shows.

Moran returns February to premiere "The Rauchenberg Project," a piece commissioned by Da Camera. Drummer Kendrick Scott, another HSPPVA alum, will play in March.

The book also features another graduate of the school, Robert Glasper. The pianist enjoyed crossover success with his album "Black Radio," which won a Grammy and was a strong seller, fusing jazz with R&B and hip-hop.

"He made the point that even the avant-garde isn't the avant-garde," Mitchell says. "The avant-garde is 50 years old. So what he's doing is more avant-garde than the avant-garde: taking these jazz impulses and putting them with R&B and hip-hop in a way that's not watered down."

andrew.dansby@chron.com
Twitter: @AndrewDansby

Hoffman: Tourney was a fun assignment

Hoffman from page G1

hall from me.

You know what I'm going to miss most about driving back and forth across Texas to watch baseball tournaments?

The chicken salad on croissant sandwiches at Buc-ee's.

Mighty Pearlland advanced to the Little League World Series (ages 11-12 and some 13s) in South Williamsport by whuppin' Louisiana, 7-3, in the U.S. Southwest Regional final.

Pearland also qualified for the 2010 World Series and made it all the way to the U.S. title game.

Japan won the title in 2010. And the boys from Tokyo are defending champs this time around, too.

The Little League team from Oklahoma had a brief though memorable tournament. Pearlland and San Antonio nipped them by a combined 51-0.

Thanks for playing, Oklahoma.

Sixteen teams (eight U.S. and eight international) will compete for the World Series, with the championship game Aug. 24 on ABC.

I covered the 2010 tour-

nament with Pearlland. Admission to all Little League Games is free, and hot dogs are only \$2. It was definitely one of the most fun assignments on my long career path to the middle.

McCartney up close

If you want to see Paul McCartney ... join the crowd. And it will be a large crowd.

He's scheduled to play Candlestick Park in San Francisco on Aug. 14 (capacity 70,207), United Spirit Arena in Lubbock on Oct. 2 (capacity 15,000), Smoothie King Center in New Orleans on Oct.

11 (capacity 17,800) and American Airlines Center in Dallas on Oct. 13 (capacity 18,500).

Bring binoculars.

Or ... If you dig a little (but not much more, actually), you can catch Macca in a rare, intimate concert venue, Oct. 1, at the new Tobin Center in San Antonio. The joint holds only 1,750 people.

The last time McCartney played a concert in a small setting like this, he was making the young birds scream back in England.

Tickets to the benefit concert are \$1,000 and

\$3,500 and they're available by calling 210-223-8624. Heck, the secondary market is asking those prices in basketball arenas and baseball stadiums.

To get an idea how small 1,750 seats is ... the cuddly Arena Theatre in the round on the Southwest Freeway holds 2,750 people.

H-E-B supermarkets owns the naming rights to the stage in Tobin Center. They need to get H-E-B president Scott McClelland to introduce McCartney ... and J.J. Watt to tackle him.

ken.hoffman@chron.com

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