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COVER STORY



Kendall Buster's "Flow" was installed recently in the new Health and Biomedical Sciences Building at UH. Eric Hester

ART

# University of Houston puts art in its place — on campus

College grounds serve as indoor-outdoor museum for works by acclaimed artists

By Molly Glentzer

**HC** Kendall Buster's "Flow" floats above the entrance to the University of Houston's new Health and Biomedical Sciences Building like a 3-D topographic rendering of some mysterious, icy netherworld.

From atop the stairs in the bright, open space, it reminds curator Mike Guidry of the Starship Enterprise. "It's very different from various angles and at night versus the day," he said. "It's amazing how complex this piece is."

Installed in February, "Flow" is made of white shade cloth stretched over 18 layers of amorphous-shaped powder-coated steel frames, all held in place by 100 aircraft cables precisely spaced in a 2-foot grid. Buster, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, is well-known for her flying wonders. They've been exhibited at museums around the world and also hang in such high-profile locations as the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., and the San Francisco International Airport.

"Flow" is one of a half-dozen major works installed at UH in the past five years, all commissions by international art stars. They include the first U.S. public art commission for Venezuelan master Carlos Cruz-Diez, a trio of monumental sculptures by Australian sculptor Lawrence Argent, a suspended installation by New York's Jacob Hashimoto and a gleaming 15-foot kinetic totem by New Orleans legend Lin Emery. Local luminaries are represented, too, with a mischievously mis-informative plaza by the Art Guys and an etched glass window wall by Bert Samples.

Now, Guidry, an artist who earned his master's degree at UH and moved here after Hurricane Katrina, is shepherding about a dozen more projects and proposals.

**Plan your visit**

Download a walking tour map of the UH public art collection at [www.uh.edu/uh-collection/PublicArtGuide.pdf](http://www.uh.edu/uh-collection/PublicArtGuide.pdf). Visit the collection's Facebook page for more information.

Next month, acclaimed sculptor Brian Tolle will start construction on what sounds like a Houston landmark in the making. Tolle will replace an unsightly scupper on 3-year-old Cemo Hall with a 14-foot "oyster shell" of hand-forged aluminum that will direct rainwater over a 10-foot-tall mound of smaller but still larger-than-lifefize sculpted shells, each powder-coated with pearlescent paint, so no two are alike.

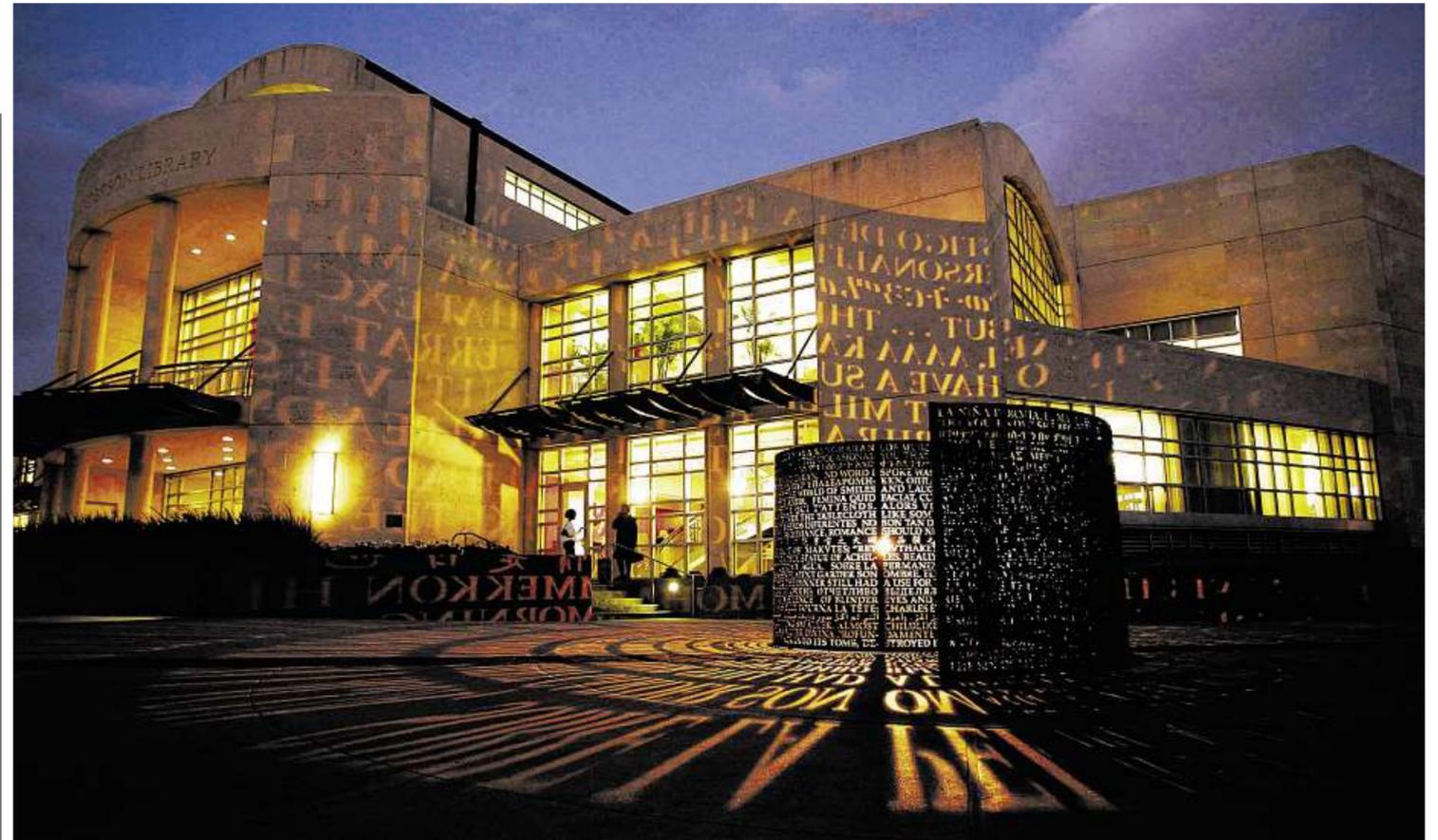
UH may have only achieved Tier One research status a few years ago, but the school has been ahead of the curve for decades with its public art program.

During its first building boom, in 1966, UH became the first Texas institution — and one of the first in the nation — to establish a policy that dedicated 1 percent of the cost of construction projects for the purchase of art. Brawny outdoor works began appearing on campus in 1970.

About 14 monumental steel structures from that era are scattered across the lawns behind the Blaffer Art Museum.

"They make up a nice whole," Guidry said. "We have developed, in some ways, a time capsule of public art from that period. It's by no means perfect, but it's a taste. It puts it in a nice context."

Public art is an increasingly important element of the higher-education atmosphere. Texas Tech, whose collection was recognized in 2006 by Public Art Review magazine as one of the nation's "Big 10," initiated its program in 2001. The University of Texas launched its ambitious Land-



University of Houston

Jim Sanborn's "A Comma A," a favorite of university president Renu Khator, lights up the facade of the University of Houston's M.D. Anderson Library at night. It soon will undergo conservation.

marks program in 2008, and Rice University has aggressively acquired works since 2010.

Jack Becker, Public Art Review publisher, didn't know why UH wasn't included in the magazine's survey, which hasn't been repeated. "It wasn't the kind of comprehensive survey we'd do now," Becker said.

The candidates were nominated by professionals within the Americans for the Arts' public art network. Becker said they considered how artists were engaged, the experimental

nature of the work, how it was used for teaching and its accessibility to the public. They weren't looking for collections "sequestered in hallways and classrooms," he said.

Universities can take more risks with their public art than municipalities can, Becker said. "It's not just about decorating the campus."

He attributes the increased interest in public art programs partly to competitiveness. A lot of schools have realized they can have excellent academics and research, but when

prospective students tour campus, public art provides a memorable impression — a focal point for photos, Becker explained.

UH appears to have a sleeping giant in that regard. It has amassed more than 450 works, one of the nation's largest public art collections. Largely unsung, it has always been quality-conscious thanks to a 15-member selection committee that includes some of the university's own highly respected visual-art faculty and staff as well as museum curators

from outside the school.

About 300 works are located on the central campus, mostly inside buildings. Art also follows new construction and expansion projects at the Clear Lake, Downtown (where Hashimoto's installation hangs), Sugar Land (where the Emery stands) and Victoria locations.

Because UH took advantage of the recent economic slump, when construction prices were lower, 20 new or expanded facilities have come to

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fruition since 2006, when a 10-year master plan was announced. About half, at a cost of \$342.4 million, were completed last year. Another \$278.1 million worth are under construction or in the design phase.

The recent Blaffer renovation — while a huge improvement — was the smallest by far of all the projects. That \$2 million upgrade was a fraction of the money devoted to new buildings for science, engineering and business study.

But all the construction on the central campus alone — including new residence halls, a student center and garages — translates to more than \$6.2 million for public art. That's been enough for the committee to reserve funds for all-important conservation and extend the collection to older areas of the school.

### Eclectic collection

You can't walk across the 550-acre central campus without coming into contact with art, be it outdoor sculpture or indoor works in all manner of media, including paintings, murals, prints, drawings, photography, collage and sculpture.

"It's eclectic, and I'd like it to stay that way," Guidry said. "The campus is eclectic. There's no single vision or aesthetic. When you're building a public art collection, it's not about a curator's vision. You want things people can respond to and relate to over time."

Students recently hurrying to their last classes of the semester seemed oblivious to the riches, as if art was just part of

the furniture.

"Art is the expression of oneself. Our art collection reflects the diversity and vibrancy of our collective energy," said UH president Renu Khator. "I feel that our art is inviting, engaging and stimulating to everyone, but particularly to students and visitors who don't see it every day, but are moved by it nonetheless."

Khator, who has a small but cherished collection of Indian art at home, likes much of the campus art. But the two works that always make her pause reference scholarly pursuits: Jim Sanborn's "A Comma A" and Gerhard Marcks' statue "Albertus Magnus."

Sanborn's comma-shaped bronze sculpture, installed in 2003 near the M.D. Anderson Library, features cut-out text, in several languages, from library holdings. Marcks' bronze, cast in 1950 and acquired in 1970, commemorates the 13th-century German philosopher Albert the Great, revered as "the universal man of knowledge."

The university welcomes visitors to tour its collection, offering a downloadable map at [www.uh.edu/uh-collection/PublicArtGuide.pdf](http://www.uh.edu/uh-collection/PublicArtGuide.pdf).

Guidry and I hit some of the highlights, beginning in the arts complex.

Frank Stella's wildly colorful painted collage "Euphonia," which stretches across the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the Moores Opera House and down the mezzanine walls, remains one of the collection's treasures. Installed in 1997, it is still the largest work the program has produced.

At the campus' Lyndall



Brett Coomer photos / Houston Chronicle

**Carlos Cruz-Diez's first U.S. public art commission, "Double Psychromie (for the University of Houston)" is near the UH Welcome Center.**

Wortham Theatre, we admired the delicacy of Alyson Shotz's "A Moment in Time," a suspended installation with 2,000 clear glass beads on monofilament. It was the first installation Guidry guided when he was hired seven years ago, and he still loves its sense of ephemerality. It also represents the importance of timing in the selection process.

"We got to work with her at the best point in her career, when we could afford it. The next year, her prices skyrocketed," Guidry said.

Al Sousa's "Windows on the World" puzzle collage and an untitled painting by Gael Stack were recently hung in the theater's main lobby, part of an initiative to showcase the university's esteemed art faculty.

Jim Love's "Landscape With Blue Trees," with a



**UH has a legendary art faculty and counts many internationally known artists among its alumni. Many are represented in the school's public art program. The Art Guys, both alums, created "The State of Four Lies" for a Cougar Village lawn.**

large hard-hat-wearing polka-dot chicken strutting under a pair of trees with pipes for branches, enlivens an otherwise barren engineering courtyard.

"It's kind of goofy, like his work could be," Guidry said.

He stopped to peel off a

notice that had been stuck to one of Love's trees, a hazard of placing art in areas where they can be touched and climbed upon. "I do this all the time," he said.

We also chuckled and marveled at Argent's "Your Move," a trio of jaunty, giant gourds in

granite and bronze that look ready to bounce across the Calhoun Lofts courtyard in spite of weighing 40,000 to 60,000 pounds. Hand carved in China by artisans working from Argent's 1-foot model, they posed a bear of an installation challenge.

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“They’re both elegant and goofy — and a little ‘Alice in Wonderland,’” Guidry said.

Playfulness also delights with “The Statue of Four Lies,” a plaza featuring bronze statues of Art Guys Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, their hands outstretched. Parodying Harvard University’s famous “Statue of Three Lies,” the piece is awash with misinformation and also has a codex and a time capsule.

“They didn’t like the idea of just creating something and walking away. They wanted continuous interaction. People do come and dress them up,” Guidry said.

#### Art opportunities

Guidry said the selection committee tries to be as hands-off as possible, although Liam Gillick’s proposal for a directional-sign sculpture near a parking lot may be relocated so it doesn’t confuse visitors. Like the Art Guys’ commission, it’s jokey, offering “directions” to fictitious departments.

“We generally just give artists the information we can about where the art opportunities are, then try not to direct them too much,” Guidry said. “What they come up with is usually amazing.”

Tolle chose to remake the scupper at Cemo Hall partly because Guidry suggested it was ugly.

“Never tell an artist what not to do,” Tolle said. A professor at Parsons the New School for Design in New York, he’s at a point in his career when he can choose projects, and he expects to be given free reign. Tolle knew the building’s patron, businessman and UH alum

Mike Cemo, wanted a water feature. “I didn’t object to the idea, but with drought and environmental concerns in the area, using water gratuitously wouldn’t be the strongest decision,” the artist said.

Tolle’s projects involve deep research into a place’s history and culture, and here he found a Karankawa Indian creation myth that provided an inspired solution. The Karankawas, who were native to the Gulf Coast but disappeared by 1850, believed the sun and moon, who were married, argued and tipped over their baby’s crib, a giant oyster shell in the sky. The baby who tumbled to Earth became the first Karankawa.

“The myth is so beautiful, and it’s about storms, so it makes perfect sense as a scupper,” Tolle explained. “It fits the location, the history of the area, and makes use of an existing feature that wasn’t compelling to people.”

The piece, not yet named, will be visible from inside Cemo Hall but also beautiful when it’s not raining, he added.

Tolle, who’s also creating projects in New York (at the Manhattan Bridge) and Calgary, Alberta, said he likes working for educational institutions because it’s a way of reaching out to younger people. He also liked Houston’s strong cultural heritage. “That’s where my work begins,” he said.

Guidry and the other administrators were another plus. “Since Mike is an artist himself, he’s passionate about the integrity of the art,” Tolle said. “It all came together in a way compelling for me.”

Commissions by Jim

Isermann and Nathan Carter are among new works being developed for 2014, and the Victoria campus has several important proposals in progress.

“There’s a lot of public art out there, and sculpture collections, but a lot of it looks alike,” Guidry said. “MIT and the University of California-San Diego’s Stuart Collection do it really well, but we’re not trying to emulate anybody. We’re doing our own thing.”

Now that the economy has improved, Guidry expects the building to slow. The committee has reserved funds for a series of temporary installations to keep the program going. That opens up a lot of possibilities, Guidry said.

“Not every great artist does public art,” he added. “So there’s some freedom there; and you don’t have to set aside conservation funds.”

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston curator Alison de Lima Greene, who first served on the systemwide selection committee in the 1980s, has long admired the collection, as well as the university’s unrelated visual-art education program.

“Looking over the history, some installations are more successful than others. You have to be careful about things going in and out of fashion,” Greene said. “But works like Charles Ginnever’s (1978’s Cor-Ten steel ‘Troika’) are really to be valued again now.”

She considers herself a cheerleader and adviser. “My role is not to tell them what to do. Often, the discussions are more organic consensus building.

“There’s a very happy symbiosis in the Hous-



Brett Coomer / Houston Chronicle

**Jim Love’s whimsical “Landscape With Blue Trees” livens up an engineering department courtyard.**

ton art community,” she added. And UH, long a visual-arts hub, has never been an island. Greene notes that artists first recognized by Kim Davenport at Rice Gallery — Hashimoto among them — have found their way into the UH public art program.

The MFAH curator also appreciates that UH doesn’t slight its faculty or alumni (The Art Guys and Randy Twaddle are among the latter group). They’ve found “a fairly smart balance between responding to the university’s heritage as well as ushering in new talent,” she said.

Greene believes public art is essential to the college experience. “It’s as integral as anything else the university can offer,” she said. “You don’t have to just offer art appreciation courses; you can create it more subtly.”

[molly.glentzer@chron.com](mailto:molly.glentzer@chron.com)