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The B(art)er Brigade; An Artist-in-Residence Swaps His Glass Creations for a Concrete Countertop and Glowing Glazed Walls; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (1444 words)

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Glass sculptor Tim Tate had a clear vision for his condo in the stylishly renovated Mather building near the MCI Center downtown: "a cool, New Yorky-looking artist's loft."

But even the deeply discounted \$136,000 he paid for one of 12 units in the luxury project set aside as affordable living/work space for artists left him close to broke.

"I didn't have any money left because I spent it on a huge down payment," says Tate, 42, founder and co-director of the Washington Glass School, which specializes in architectural lighting and glass. "But I had a lot of friends who could do a lot of cool stuff, and I had a lot of glass and people wanted it. It seemed like the perfect match."

Thus was born "The Barter Enhancement Project," also known as Apartment 202: a one-bedroom, one-bath flat with a galley kitchen, 13-foot ceilings, tall windows and white walls. Lots of white walls constituting "a barren, empty box."

In December, the day after he closed on the unit, he began phoning artist friends whose work he admired to propose swapping "my glass for their art." The list included an interior design consultant, a neon lighting fabricator and a couple specializing in decorative painting. Others who heard about the barter gambit soon wanted in on the exchange. It took just five weeks and about \$12,000 to turn Tate's apartment into the 900-square-foot retreat he'd envisioned: one bedroom wall finished to mimic exposed brick, another that glows like Venetian plaster, a raised space for a home office and a concrete-topped kitchen peninsula. Striking colors, decorative glazes and accent pieces punctuate the space, including an inventive self-contained, wood-paneled "fireplace" built to look like the real thing, with canned Sterno fueling flames licking at concrete "logs."

Tate, who had never owned a home before, snared a unit in the Mather Studios Lofts Condominiums, a circa 1917 building that once housed the University of the District of Columbia's arts program, by winning a lottery designed to attract impecunious artists-in-residence.

The 40 full-price Mather condos -- which sold from \$269,000 to \$925,000 -- were, like Tate's unit, laid out with a large, living space but walls to define bedrooms and bathrooms.

He decided to keep the basic floor plan because other features were so strong: nearly eight-foot-high windows, soaring ceilings and exposed ductwork. But he needed furniture, lighting, warmth and drama. "It definitely needed drama," Tate recalls. Hence the plea for help.

The overall interior design is the work of Chad Alan, whose eponymous firm is in Adams Morgan. But Alan admits he first had to "overcome the bitterness and jealousy" of losing out on a Mather condo for himself before giving Tate a hand. (As one of 50 qualifying artists, Alan drew a hopelessly high lottery number, 42; Tate picked 15 but got lucky after five other winners dropped out.)

Alan designed a low platform along the living room wall nearest the kitchen to create a distinct office area where Tate can deal with the endless paperwork he brings home from school. It contains a desk and chair, computer, bookcases and galvanized tin storage cubes.

It is large enough for a dining table should Tate decide to retire the desk and computer, which is unlikely. "Even

though this is a live/work studio and even though I am a glass artist, I wanted to feel like I get to go to work," he says.

In the galley kitchen, Alan added a comma-shaped peninsula with a poured concrete top, strong enough to be used for seating as well as eating. Tate painted the cabinets a rich saffron and refaced them with amber glass panels etched with countless monkeys, an homage to Pepe, the pet simian he bought at age 9 from the back of a monster magazine. "It haunted me for many years," he explains.

To save money, they chose laminate flooring (\$1.30 per square foot at Ikea) instead of hardwood, and they hit a dozen furniture stores before finding a handsome leather easy chair and matching ottoman for \$629 at Value City in Falls Church.

In addition, Alan -- who also creates intricate modern tapestries that he shows in galleries -- designed two vivid pillows as gifts for Tate. One is green velvet with a front of patterned ribbons; the other, red felt with an elaborate machine-embroidered portrait of a French prostitute.

Alan laughs at their "ridiculously frugal budget" -- about \$3,300 for materials, including glass for Tate's art trades, plus \$9,000 for furniture.

For his services, he'll receive a long-coveted Tate piece, a large white glass flaming heart that sells for about \$4,000, similar to a piece in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery here.

The first responders to Tate's call for help were Sean Hennessey, who works in the Shakespeare Theater's prop shop, and his girlfriend, decorative painter Rania Hassan. They agreed to embellish the long living room wall in return for enough of Tate's iridescent glass tiles to redo the kitchen and bathroom in their District home.

Within the first few days of covering that expanse of white in an ochre-colored parchment finish -- Alan stopped them from adding darker glazes -- everyone agreed that all of Tate's walls needed the Hennessey-Hassan touch.

One bedroom wall was covered with sheets of vacu-formed plastic bricks -- a snap for Hennessey, who has replicated castles for several of the Bard's theatrical royals at the Shakespeare. He laid 12-foot sections of the faux bricks across his workshop floor before applying layers of color to mimic clay.

Even up close, the impostors, now fastened to the wall behind Tate's bed, look remarkably real. Tate, however, always gives away the joke. "There is no point having faux anything unless you tell people about it. As soon as they say, 'I love it,' I say, 'Go touch the bricks' because these set designers are making such wonderful things."

The duo coated the remaining bedroom walls in a mossy Venetian plaster. The small bathroom became a study in copper, purple and green metallic wall paint meant to evoke silk.

For their work, Tate added to their compensation a spectacular \$4,000 glass canopic jar he modeled after ancient Egyptian versions that held the innards of mummies, "because at one point Sean and Rania were practically living here."

Enter longtime friend and neon artist Marty King, who left her mark in an otherwise neglected spot. Mounted over the door outside the bathroom is a pair of twisted pink and red abstract neon tubes. One had been given to Tate by their mutual pal, Clay Huffman, who died several years ago. King added a second to celebrate the trio's intertwined friendship.

"It's on the bathroom light circuit so when it's on outside, you know there is someone inside," she says.

In return, Tate gave King a bright blue glass platter ringed by feline faces. "Marty's a cat rescuer. When you trap and neuter a feral cat you clip the left ear. That is what is on this plate," he explains. "I have no idea what it's worth. It's not in my regular line. It was just for Marty."

The art trades grew to include others who "wanted to be part of this." Ceramist Margaret Boozer, who also has a piece in the Renwick collection, gave him a glazed black clay and glass piece that hangs on a bathroom wall.

From structural engineer Michael Sirvet came a sculpture of bolted-together aluminum squares. Alan decreed it "too impressive" for the bathroom, moving it to the entrance hall ceiling. It fits perfectly above the stainless steel front door, throwing intricate geometric shadows off three halogen bulbs.

Neither artist has yet chosen a reciprocal gift, but the imminent exchange pleases Tate enormously. "It means I have a piece of their work forever and they have mine."

His own creations are much in evidence throughout his new home. A five-pendant chandelier hangs in the living room; a clear, molded glass backsplash of aquatic flora does its best to distract from the enormous bathroom mirror he detests. And having determined that leaving a kitty litter box in plain sight amid all this elegance simply would not do, he sawed a cat's silhouette out of the bottom of a foyer closet door, giving olfactory relief to guests and privacy to his two pets.

A degree of fine-tuning remains.

"We are going to put the fireplace on big industrial wheels and roll it wherever I want in the apartment. I can see it when I take a bath, or have it in the bedroom," says Tate. "All these illusions, if I didn't tell people, I am not sure they would know."

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