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Walter Gordinier's Large-Scale Sculptures Imbue Their Sites with "An Invitation to Stay"

Posted on April 13, 2018 by The Art Commission



"Glass Falls Amphitheater" Photo credit: Max Gordinier

Cast glass wasn't contemporary sculptor [Walter Gordinier's](#) first medium of choice. After an education in ceramic sculpture, he says, "I spent the first dozen or so years showing clay constructions on the museum circuit." Then, after founding the application of commercial-grade fishing wire (woven and braided seven strand stainless steel), he became one of a handful of artists in the U.S. commissioned to design and install early aerial atrium sculptures. (His defining principle behind suspending heavy objects in space is to assure they will remain permanently static in space.)

Only later, after a commission to create a 12-foot counter out of 2-inch thick sculptural glass did the material command his attention. "Until that time I never really cared for glass at all," Gordinier says. "But when we opened the kiln and I looked at that piece, I thought, 'this is going to become the story of my life.'"

Today, with a repertoire of materials that includes stainless steel, corten steel, granite, concrete, cast glass, and his own invention of laminated structurally dynamic artist glass, Gordinier's capacity to pair his creations with their environs is nearly limitless. Drawn to designs that are "pure in form, distilled to their most essential gesture," his sleek, streamlined works are designed to inspire imagination and allure to the urban plazas, healing gardens, and other sites he is commissioned to design and enhance with his site-specific sculptures.

"The Juneau Project"



Lobby "Trilogy Towers," "Story Bars," "Glacial Collide" Photo credit: Max Gordinier

Most recently, Gordinier completed a chapter of his career as a large-scale sculptor in Juneau, AK after a multi-year, multifaceted project for the State Library Archives Museum (SLAM). He was first commissioned to create 25 elegantly exclusive castings integrated into the handrails of the building's two-story lobby. He worked closely with the architects and contractors, even creating custom aluminum brackets to fit the base of each *Story Bar*

Gordinier was then asked to create the 12-foot cast-glass *Trilogy Towers* adorning the glazing wall of the lobby's second floor and, later, a formidable cast glass disc, *Glacial Collide*, a glass circle 16 feet in diameter, precisely designed to be an insert, fitting into a steel wall. The steel wall is an intentional design feature meant to expand the concept of *Glacial Collide*, stretching 25 feet across the lobby's entrance wall.

The ever-expanding reach of Gordinier's contributions to the SLAM project is at least in part testament to his approach to collaboration. Keen to tackle new challenges and seasoned in working with an array of professionals and tradesmen, Gordinier is a consummate innovator and eager partner. "I try to draw as much as I can from the players," Gordinier says of the architects, contractors, engineers, landscape architects, and the invested project stakeholders in any given project. "I want there to be an open flexible dialogue, everyone's ideas streaming forward about how we accomplish our creative goals."



"Glacial Collide" Photo credit: Max Gordinier



"Pivot Plaza" Photo credit: Max Gordinier

That sense of camaraderie may explain why Gordinier was soon brought on to create SLAM's outdoor *Pivot Plaza* intended to welcome visitors and direct them toward the building's entrance. Taking his inspiration from place, position, and direction, *Compass Needles* is a 75-foot lineal land sculpture meant to put visitors in a place on the plaza. This vision led him to design repetitive concentric circles that started in the center of the plaza and worked themselves right up the steps and into the lobby floor. Titled *True North*, the five vertical features of granite, corten steel, and Gordinier's own structurally dynamic sculptural glass cradle the edge of the plaza and provide a subtle background to the garden's features. Two glass and steel towers titled *Gateway*, each more than 12 feet tall, mark the entrance to the site.

"By this time," Gordinier laughs, "we were just a bunch of people standing around sharing a lot of great ideas when suddenly they realized, 'Walter should be designing the landscape architecture, marrying it back to his plaza.'" His soft landscape scheme followed and again accentuated the plaza design. True to his collaborative spirit, the sculptor, who has longstanding expertise in landscape architecture with an emphasis on Japanese gardens, engaged and partnered in a collaborative spirit with a local landscape architect "that everyone knew."

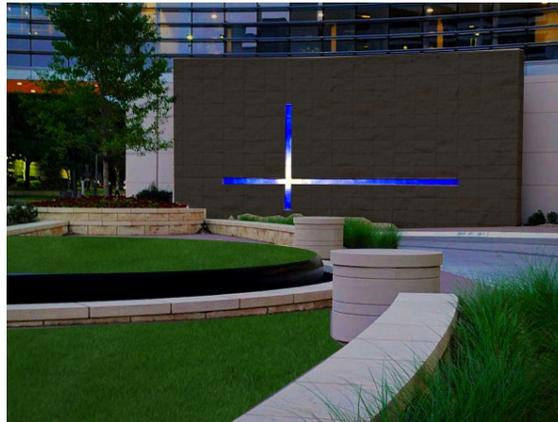
Bold and colorful, formidable and sturdy, Gordinier's steel and glass SLAM sculptures boast a palette that is vibrant, almost tropical. ("I really see cast glass as a way of painting with frozen sheets of color," he explains.) It's a far cry from the aesthetic inspired by pine trees and log cabins that others may have brought forth. Instead, its playful vitality is a nod to the center's artistic mission and complements the building's warm copper facade. At the same time, their rugged materials and thoughtful placement accommodate the site's unique practical needs, including extreme temperatures and substantial snow removal. "In the end, the whole thing married itself into the architecture just beautifully," Gordinier says of the plaza.

Lovies Garden and Cross Over



"Entry Gateway" "Cross Over" "Lovies Garden" Photo credit: Max Gordinier

On the opposite side of the country, is Gordinier's design of a 4,000 square-foot healing arts garden adjacent to the interfaith chapel at Baylor Sammons Hospital in Dallas, TX. With an empowered dialog that included the Baylor chaplain and standing CEO, the artist succeeded in designing the Horner Family Chapel and described how the meaningful content of a cross could be implemented for an interfaith chapel. "I stood there and explained, 'Here is what we are going to do: taking the normal context of a cross, turn it on its side, and expand it in a linear direction, embed it in the wall and turn on the lighting.'" The result is a 40-foot sculpture, *Cross Over*, built of Texas limestone and an illuminated cast-glass insert, that serves as a privacy wall and delineates the site as a place for respite both inside and out.



"Cross Over" Photo credit: Max Gordinier

Charged with creating "a retreat for self-reflection" in the midst of a bustling healthcare center and urban community, Gordinier's characteristically minimalistic features include the sculpture *Glass Falls*, a monolithic sculptural water feature consisting of cast glass and black granite that terminates the east end of the Healing Garden. He designed it to be experienced from within and outside the garden. Where SLAM's aesthetic is stimulating and surprising, Gordinier's contributions to *Lovie's Garden* is contemplative, comforting.

"With all my projects, my approach is to pair my sculpture with the architecture and the very fabric of the landscape," Gordinier says of his site-specific commissions. In the end, he says, the goal is always to create spaces that entice, compel, inspire, and welcome their visitors as "a kind of open arms, an invitation to stay."

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