

TODD'S World

TODD MURPHY'S ART CHALLENGES YOU TO LOOK DEEPLY AT ITS SYMBOLIC IMAGERY AND HAUNTING BEAUTY. SO DOES HIS HOME.



By Lisa Mowry
Photography by Brian Gassel



WITH HIS PENCHANT FOR OVERSIZED CANVASES, IT'S FITTING THAT TODD MURPHY'S ROOFTOP VIEW IS A GRAND PANORAMA OF ATLANTA. THE ARTIST, FACING, ADMITS HE IS A CITY BOY AT HEART. "ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS ARE EITHER GIFTS FROM FRIENDS OR OF FRIENDS," SAYS TODD, REFERRING TO THE PORTRAITS OF ELTON JOHN AND MICHAEL STIPE IN HIS LIVING ROOM, ABOVE. THE CHAIRS AND BOOKCASE ARE RECYCLED CAST-OFFS.

Art and real life don't always intersect, but in Todd Murphy's world the two are almost indistinguishable. Forget about homes that don't

reflect the owner's personality or artists who posture through their paintings. With Todd's place, what you see is pure him, as personal as his enigmatic works of art.

One reason may be proximity. The oversized paintings that have made Todd a well-known name in Atlanta's art community are created just a few feet from his living area. It's all housed in an 11,000-square-foot warehouse downtown, a Home Depot-sized structure the height of a four-story office building.

"Before paying my way as an artist, I did handiwork," he says, as explanation for the work he's done himself on the warehouse for the past three years, installing floors and doors, plumbing and electricity. "A lot of people think it's hip to live in a studio, but it's difficult," he adds. "It's hard work."

His living area is relatively small compared to the cavernous, cluttered space allotted for art. Aged doors lead from the studio into a two-story bedroom. Upstairs is his study and a bathroom, the latter framed only with window panes. "I can do that because it's such a private place," he explains of the out-in-the-open loo. "The only window is in there, so the glass walls allow the light to come into the study."

He found the window panes by the side of a road. In fact, conversations about his furnishings go something like this: Where did you get this chair? "I found it along the side of the road." What about this bookcase? "Roadside, as well." The sink? "Absolutely roadside."

In other words, Todd is a man with an eye for found objects. "You'd be surprised at what people throw out," he says. "You ride around Morningside or Virginia-Highland on a Saturday after people have cleaned, and there's good stuff."

His Gothic-looking bed is made from an old London theater marquee he saw at the Wrecking Bar; the sides are old doors. "I see things and see what they can be," he notes.

These things he sees, and what he does with them have mystified art critics and loft visitors alike. Part Heathcliff,

FOUND OBJECTS SUCH AS THIS GILDED DRESSMAKERS' FORM AND A WELL-WORN SCULPTURAL SOFA ARE AS MUCH TODD'S ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AS HIS PAINTINGS, SUCH AS "PRIMA VERA," TOP RIGHT. FOCAL POINTS IN THE TWO-STORY BEDROOM, RIGHT AND FACING, INCLUDE A THEATER MARQUEE-TURNED-BED, A FRAMED PRINT OF MADONNA AND FAMILY PHOTOS.



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THE CURIOUS OBJECTS IN TODD'S WORK AREAS, RIGHT, OFTEN RE-APPEAR IN HIS PAINTINGS. DISCARDED WINDOW PANES FRAME HIS SEE-THROUGH BATHROOM, FACING, WHICH IS ADJACENT TO THE LIVING AREA. DRIED FLOWERS ARE A REGULAR MOTIF IN HIS HOME AND ART.

part Vincent Price, Todd creates romantic-eerie imagery that includes butterflies and swans, headless figures with ambiguous genders, chandeliers, mysterious words and old chairs. "Haven't you ever seen an old chair with a great personality?" he asks rhetorically. "The things around us take on personality."

The background for all this imagery is darkness—on canvas and at home. Todd's studio has no natural light, allowing him to paint at two a.m. or two p.m. with the same lighting conditions. "The way I work—with plexiglass—it's very reflective. It's difficult to do if the lighting isn't right," he says. Living area lights are on a dimmer, with dim being the operative word.

One thing you won't find *chez* Murphy is a kitchen, not even a hot plate and mini-fridge. "I can't stand cleaning up all that kitchen stuff after I cook," he says. "Plus, it's a nice excuse to get out."

Get out he does, these days often to his gallery shows on the West Coast and Manhattan. Todd was born in Chicago in 1962, but considers Atlanta his home, having spent his childhood in Sandy Springs and college at the University of Georgia. An article in *Atlanta Homes & Lifestyles'* predecessor, *SOUTHERN HOMES* ("The Work of Todd Murphy", Sept./Oct. 1989) was one major break, and his shows at the Lowe Gallery and group exhibits throughout the South have brought him a dedicated following. Critical success has always been there, but a recent platoon of celebrities buying Todd's work—Elton John and Sugar Ray Leonard, for instance—has raised his status to a local Jackson Pollock.

Someday he may transport it all to the country ("But it would have to be a big place. I like things on a large scale," he says), although he vows always to maintain a city place, "for bookstores, restaurants— that kind of thing I need."

His assistant, Anna Walker, says that Todd's place tells the story of "history," both the traditional meaning of the word and a play on "his story." "It's very much Todd—his story—but it's history as well; in old things," she says. "They're not finished and they're not perfect but there's knowledge in them."

Todd's home may be unconventional, but no one would deny it is compelling. "No matter where you are in life you can live with dignity," he says. "You can make where you are elegant. It can be *home*, even if you don't have the right this or that. It can be beautiful." □



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