



Christian Eckart has found a good groove in Houston

Artist Christian Eckart's 'Cloud Room Field' brings light to Hobby Airport terminal

By Molly Glentzer | December 31, 2015



Photo: James Nielsen, Staff

IMAGE

Christian Eckart's "Cloud Room Field" spans 60 feet above the central security checkpoint at the airport's main entrance.

Christian Eckart was pouring potent margaritas into highball glasses.

"It's a little strong, but you're not obliged to finish it. I don't know what it is with alcohol and art," he said, chuckling. "In New York, I was a martini connoisseur. This is a new tequila I fell in love with. Casamigos. It has George Clooney's signature on the label. For the price, the best tequila I'm willing to buy."

He was being hospitable in his Museum District home, but Eckart also felt like he needed a stiff drink that day in mid-October. His first Houston public art commission, the \$600,000 "Cloud Room Field" for Hobby Airport, was behind schedule.

One of the largest local public commissions of the year (and one of seven major new works for the airport's recent expansion), the piece took about eight months to design and fabricate. Every piece of it but the screws was custom-made by craftsmen Eckart hired in Austin and Toronto.

"For me, this is the thrill. I basically create an impossible object in my mind, then I have to figure out how to engineer and build it," he said. The project fills 445 files in 23 folders on his computer.

Measuring 10 feet by 60 feet, the luminous "Cloud Room Field" contains 600 panes of custom-made dichroic glass in nine pastel colors that cast reflections in opposing colors, sparkling constantly. They're suspended at 45-degree angles, in six directions, inside a three-dimensional armature of anodized aluminum and stainless steel. This grid has about 15,000 parts.

But engineering isn't really the point: For years, Eckart, 56, has aimed to evoke the sublime - a notion popularized by 18th-century Romantics who thought art should be an awesomely soulful counterpoint to science and reason. Eckart also draws from the concepts of Renaissance architects who designed vast, ornate cathedrals to give visitors an ecstatic experience.

He utilizes an entirely different mode of transport, however: contemporary abstraction, often rendered in cold, hard materials.

From 'Horn of Plenty' to Houston

Growing up, he was always "the kid who could draw" but also an athlete and a hard worker. His father, a home builder, expected him to pay for his own bikes, cars and schooling and gave him his first summer job at the age of 9.

He ended up majoring in art because he couldn't get into film school. He moved to New York in 1984 and earned his master's degree at Hunter College in 1986.

That was a seminal moment for his generation.

Almost overnight, Eckart was hailed as an international star in a movement some coined "M.F.A. Abstraction." They were the first group trained academically "in a very specific way," approaching art and the making of it highly conceptually, said gallery owner Robert McClain, Eckart's Houston dealer. Prices for their work skyrocketed, even as global stock markets tanked in 1987.

Eckart broke into the really big time alongside Jeff Koons, Robert Gober and other then up-and-comers in "Horn of Plenty," a landmark 1989 exhibition at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. European collectors loved his work, and he began to think in even grander terms.

He shifted from concocting his own gold-leaf paintings on plywood - labor-intensive studio work - to what he calls his "capital-intensive" practice.

"It was a moment where you could make these pretty big decisions," he said.

He came up with a concept for a series of 144 layered screen prints on aluminum exploring moments of ecstasy in contemporary life. He finished nine pieces - including a pair of triptychs now in his studio - before the swollen art market collapsed in 1990.

Eckart's career spiraled, along with his first marriage.

"I was in a really dark place for a few years," he said.

Eventually, he found what seemed like a perfect life, dividing his time between Brooklyn and Europe, where galleries continued to show his work. He spent part of a year in Berlin and kept a studio in Amsterdam for about four years.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001, he returned to Brooklyn for good, he thought. He fell in love with Gillian Davies, a fellow Canadian and the stockbroker sister of a client. She moved from Vancouver to New York to be with him, but the city still was in shock, and the winter of 2001 was miserably cold.

They made wish lists of better places to live. They wanted to be near water, and she wanted a horse and dogs.

San Diego topped Davies' list, but Eckart had a solo show at McClain Gallery that January, and they stayed in Houston for six months. She liked the people - and wearing shorts in winter. They left New York on the last day of 2002 and married in 2003.

"It all just fell into place," Davies said. "Sometimes, it feels like you're swimming upstream and things are difficult. This was like, it just flowed."

She quickly found a good job in Houston as an energy company executive, and he taught classes at the Glassell School of Art and Rice University while they converted a dilapidated property into a sleek, contemporary home.

The loftlike space reads instantly as the sophisticated habitat of well-traveled people with a soft spot for rescued animals. Their blue heeler, Cody; Catahoula leopard dog, Annie, and a cat named Squirrel greet visitors at the door.

In the living room, a massive mirrored Buddha glows like a Zen disco ball. It's one of their favorite things, although they also own serious art by Mark Flood, Michael Bevilacqua, Kelli Vance, Adam Fuss, Axel Hütte and Koons. Eckart also collects monochromatic Chinese ceramics that fill a glass case inset into one wall.

Life in Houston has been good. He and Davies often entertain friends, who include former Mayor Bill White and his wife, Andrea White. Eckart also plays tennis often at Houston City Club and dotes on the extreme machines on his side of the garage - a new Ducati bike ("the Ferrari of Italian motorcycles"); a hard-tail chopper, a bike with no rear suspension; and an electric BMW car.

"The physics of riding a motorcycle are so beautiful. It can be a transcendent experience," Eckart said.

A thoughtful, complex process

Eckart can bend your brain explaining how art theories, art history, painting and sculpture collide in his work.

"I've always looked for materials that have these interactive or engaging properties, so as the viewer moves or the light changes, the paint might change color in a really subtle way," he said.

Examples from different periods of his 30-year career often fill his home studio-showroom space, which is bigger than some Houston galleries.

The 20-foot wide "Numina," an inkjet print of a circular object on metallized paper, recently filled the back wall. Eckart said the image was inspired by the fence on one of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 500-year-old "Unicorn Tapestries." If you don't know that, you might interpret it as a rendering of the Roman Colosseum or, less poetically, an automotive air filter.

The title means "thought object," Eckart said. "You don't have a sense of scale so you don't know if we're looking at a microscopic view of a nanostructure or something 10 times bigger than the earth."

Something entirely different - "The Absurd Vehicle" - filled a corner of the room.

Commissioned for a garden by a prominent Houston collector whose wife nixed it, the piece features a large, hornlike structure atop a starlike axle with 16 muscle-y wheels. The interior of the horn is powder-coated in ombre purple, but Eckart left the exterior unfinished, suggesting the "vehicle" was meant to be embedded in a deep wall.

"It's a painting that needed to be a sculpture that wanted to be a hot rod that wanted to be kind of a space vehicle that wanted to be a time machine that wanted to be an oracle, you know?" Eckart said, grinning. "I am really interested in the notion of the utility of the painting as a mechanism of transcendence."

He's also always wanted to make paintings with the "presence of motorcycles," he said.

He likens his process to designing a concept car and putting it through an assembly line that will be used only once. This means he doesn't actually build his objects himself, a practice referred to as "taking the hand out."

The objects he designs are crazy-expensive: Producing a solo show of new works can cost Eckart hundreds of thousands of dollars. He operates like a cottage industry; he's employed the same Toronto fabricator and digital-rendering assistant for decades.

Most of the works in the studio were either unsold or being held in storage for their owners, he said. "They're either too big or have rules that make them kind of unacquirable," he said.

He pointed to the triptychs from early in his career that he will not allow to be separated or resold, should they find a buyer.

"There's just certain things I'd rather keep if I can't find a good shepherd for them," Eckart said. "They're snapshots into a window of time somewhere on this pathway."

His work is in the permanent collections of numerous institutions around the world, including New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and Vienna's Museum Moderner Kunst; but some of his former assistants, including the Danish-Icelandic sensation Olafur Eliasson, have eclipsed him on the international art market.

Eckart is taking "The Absurd Vehicle" and other recent pieces and two brand new ones to Los Angeles in late January, where he'll have a solo show at the new Wilding Cran gallery. He also has been busy with private commissions, including a major piece for a Boston bank building made with dichroic glass.

It's a poorly kept secret that Eckart lost out last year to longtime Houston sculptor Ed Wilson on a big local project for the George R. Brown Convention Center, but he sounded upbeat even about that.

"I wish him the best," Eckart said.

More than a pretty thing

Attached to a wall above Hobby Airport's central security checkpoint, "Cloud Room Field" will be "just a pretty thing" for most people, Eckart said.

"But every time they take a step it's going to change color. Basically, it's an ever-changing field painting. It will never be the same object two times."

Collector Brad Bucher, who began supporting Eckart's work even before the artist moved to Houston, loves the new piece, which was finished in mid-December.

"It's going to entertain and enthrall people at Hobby for decades," Bucher said. "I think the city got a great buy. It's not going to go out of style."

Artist Aaron Parazette thinks Eckart is under-appreciated here. Along with McClain, he hopes "Cloud Room Field" opens some eyes.

"He's flown under the radar for most people," Parazette said. "He's sort of an elusive and mysterious figure. But he's far and away the most decorated artist living in Houston, a star in our midst. He has a perspective that very few other people have."

Parazette, who teaches painting at the University of Houston, finds it significant that Eckart believed enough in the city's potential as an art center to make his home here.

"I think we can call him a Houston artist now," he said.



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