

lines

CROSS



Next time you open a Heineken, think twice about missing out the cap—there's someone who'd love to get his hands on it. Cliff Graham, a Los Angeles artist-designer, has been a lifelong collector of things wood, engraved, and often hand-drawn, from bottle caps and pen caps to collectible cards and glass tops. Earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in the fine arts at California State University, Long Beach, and also teaching sculpture there, Graham has the formal background

for creating his work. But childhood visits in the California redwood forests, his father's workshop, stints at Disneyland, and weekends spent at L.A.'s famous flea markets have been equally influential.

For more than 20 years now, he has turned multitudes of odds and ends into jaw-dropping surface treatments for tables, chairs, and even entire walls. This past spring, he collaborated with White Wash on a bathroom at the Ritz, The Decorist Show House in New York.

talking trash

In the hands of Clare Graham, everyday castoffs go from litter to glitter

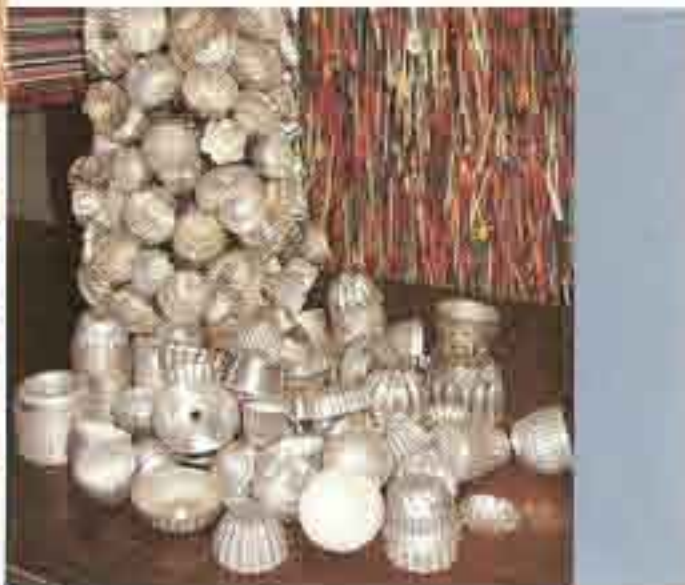
Clearly, you're a collector by nature. How did that start?

As one of five children, my formative years were consumed by toy protection and self-delusion. My father and brother were very mechanical. I wasn't, so I collected and assembled bits and pieces of nature that weren't necessarily usable—leaves, stones, crystals from the iron mines. I had a rottop desk that allowed me to categorize everything in nooks and crannies.

When did you transition into man-made items?

During my time at Disneyland, which began in 1968 with me dressed up as Goofy and evolved into managing all the visual support for parades, stage shows, and movie premieres. Having to design and construct sets and signage took me to the flea-market world. That's where I encountered things like the "swizzle-stick collectors' society." I once saw rusted can tops staple-gunned all over a table and thought, *I can do that. And I have.* ➤

Clockwise from top: Heineken with his 73-year-old tower of 2,000 Scribble-Max. A dining table of 25,000 vintage spoons. An engraved wooden aluminum patio table. Crystal top, engraved in his studio in Los Angeles.



How did these can tops get to Kips Bay?
I met Matthew White in the '80's at the Rose Bowl Swap Meet in Pasadena, over a crusty red tile tray we both coveted. He got the tray—which I found again, years later, at an estate sale—and our shared aesthetic grew into a good friendship. I've since done pieces for him personally and for White-Webb clients. When they got the Kips Bay bed-



Clockwise from top: Tin-top walls in White-Webb's bedroom at the 2005 Kips Bay Designer Show House in New York. A cabinet studded with can tops. Table by Matthew White designed in a wooden frame. Matt White's yardsticks, in 2,000 found at L.A.'s flea markets and garage sales. Side table made from Swedish food tins glued and nailed together. Matt, sculpted for the top of Matt's steel legs.



room, they commissioned my metallic "bakerie" for two whole walls, plus a radiator cover.

What happened next?

They gave me the dimensions, and I set to work building seven plywood substrate panels. Then I laid out the lids on my worktable and began to "shingle" them one by one. Steel lids range in size from 1 to 5 inches in diameter, and they look like copper, brass, or silver, shiny or matte, depending on how they're treated for food safety.

There's also right-side-up and upside-down. It's like a painter's palette. Ultimately, it took four weeks and 13,000 lids, each hammered to the substrate with nickel-plated escutcheon pins, which have faceted heads that sparkle subtly.

Was that your largest piece to date?

No, I sold two 8-foot-tall urns to Copia, the Napa Valley wine center. Someone from the center had seen them in an Oakland Museum of California exhibit called "Hello Again: A New Wave of Recycled Art and Design." Each urn has a steel pencil-rod framework strung with 46,000 caps. One is all used caps, which have a warm patina, and the other is unused, with a crisper gleam. The curator of the show actually alerted me to state recycling agencies I hadn't known of.

What are your other sources for materials?

Basically anyone I tell what I'm doing provides me with weekly savings from their trash heap—friends, restaurants. A family-style Italian restaurant down the street from my house in Los Feliz is my biggest supplier of 1-gallon lids.



From top: A 15-gallon can that will hold trash paper. The artist among the artists: down-to-earth, growing organic produce in a come-from-the-local-foods stand. A man and his dog, Jimmie's pup, the American Lander by White. Top left: The Art.



Where do you store everything?

My studio is a 1933 Safeway supermarket turned roller rink, with 7,000 square feet and 25-foot bow-truss ceilings, so thankfully I have lots of room. Small items—room keys, Scrabble tiles—are stored in 35-gallon trash cans. Mattress springs get stacked. Steel lids are in file boxes. Soda cans have their tops and bottoms sliced off and are then cut open with scissors to lie flat in file boxes, too.

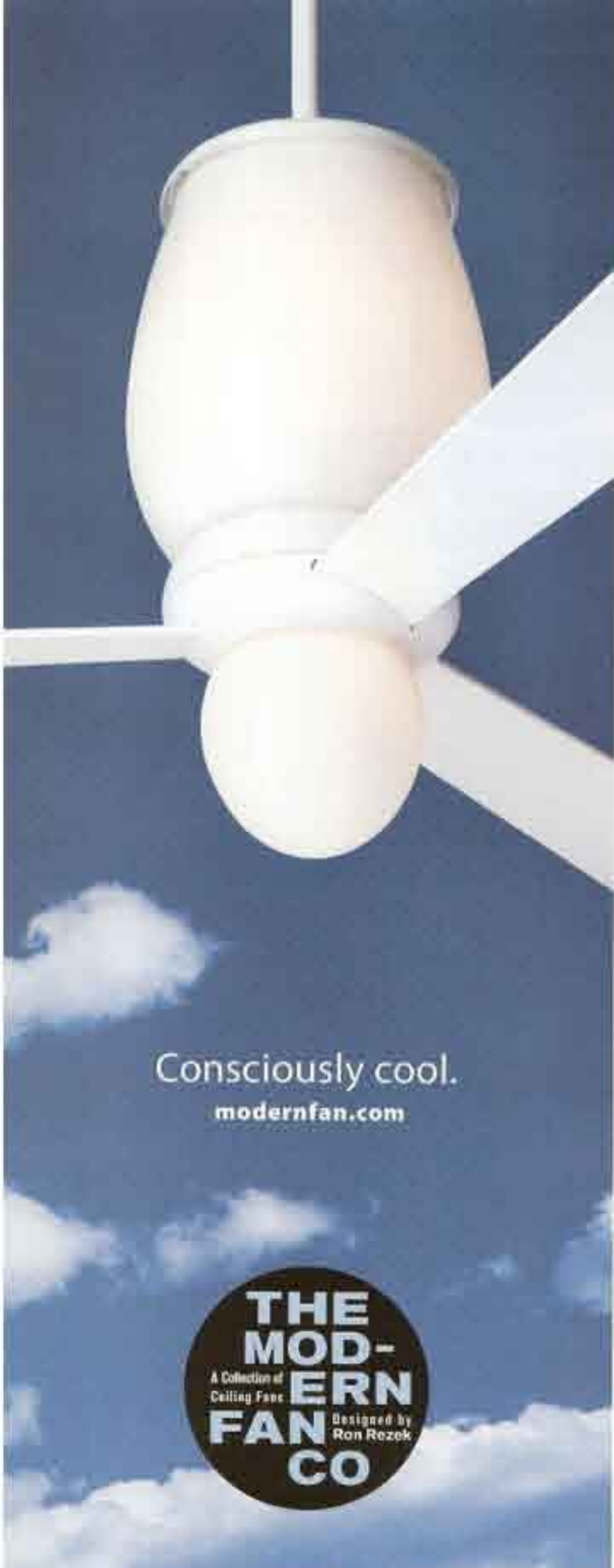


What items have you begun collecting most recently?

Aluminum Jell-O molds. I'm currently spending countless hours combining and recombining them until they're comfortable.

Is your work outsider art? Furniture design?

I'm too aware of art trends to be an outsider artist, too undisciplined and scattered to be a furniture designer, and too aggressive to be a folk artist. I'm just happy to organize chaos and awaken others to the beauty in disregarded objects. —Annie Block



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