

Rooms that Work: Bricks and Stones

By Mariana Greene

The unmarked street to sculptor Harry Geffert's handmade house peters out at his so-called driveway, a rutted, rocky dirt track. As if the rampant poison ivy and clutching briars were not deterrent enough, Geffert has cultivated an impenetrable brake of plume cane around the 13-acre property's perimeter.

Geffert, who for decades cast a who's who of Texas artists' bronze sculptures as well as his own work at Green Mountain Studio and Garden in Johnson County, labels himself an amateur hermit ("Well, maybe I'm a professional hermit by now.") Although he enjoys the isolation, it's not visitors Geffert is trying to keep off his homestead but the steady, deliberate encroachment of urbanization and its unsettling cohorts—noise, polluted air, over-population and water shortages.

When Geffert bought his hill top near the town of Crowley, the place was in the country. He built his rambling, enchanting house by hand using salvaged materials and converted a barn into the now-legendary (among Texas sculptors and art patrons) foundry. He enjoyed the wild creatures he shared his acreage with. He could see the stars. He could hear no sounds of city life. Even his 30-minute drive to Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, where he taught for 27 years, offered 20 minutes of pleasurable country roads.

Today, nearby fields support an advancing army of overblown brink houses instead of cows and horses. Trucks bearing construction materials barrel along, terrorizing the once-peaceful lanes. The white dust they churn up thickens the air. His water supply is rationed by bureaucrats. Geffert pays more in taxes now than he paid for the land itself.

Disregard for the environment in his own neighborhood mirrors Geffert's longstanding concerns that traditionally have informed his art. As he nears 70, his work, represented by Moody Gallery in Houston and Pillsbury Peters Fine Art in Dallas, is distilled by a growing sense of urgency, of time running out

both for him and for the planet. Geffert no longer casts others' work, explaining he has the energy only to produce his own pieces.

The rangy Texan looks no further than his own acreage for his muse: the natural elements he casts and incorporates into his achingly delicate pieces. "I love the figure but I've started dealing with the very, very basic kinds of elements- the rocks, the trees, the wind. My art has always focused on man, though, whether he is visible [in my work] today, or not. In a sense, my work is still about the figure, even if it's not there.

"I'm trying to talk about the landscape as I knew it as a kid, the landscape of today and the landscape of tomorrow." In rural South Texas, Geffert recalls how the local population made do with the resources at hand rather than distant store. In his own way, the artist is practicing that philosophy again. He forages his own 13 acres for elements of his sculptures rather than ranging far afield. "If you narrow down where you're collecting," he explains, "you're actually expanding your seeing. You look harder and see more."

Worktables in his studio are spread with drying broomweed, roots and all, seeded hackberry branches, spent flower heads. Somehow, in Geffert's hands, what would be disregarded by most as dead weeds become lyrically beautiful and Geffert's metaphor for looking until you see.