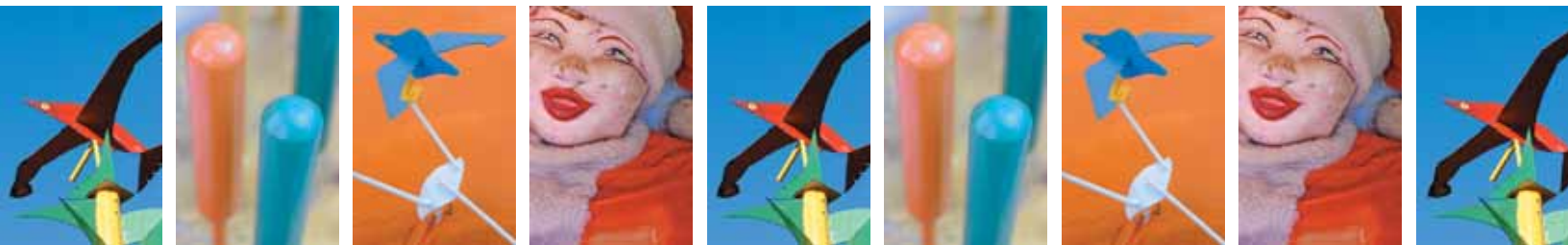


OUTSIDE



HOUSTON

preserving outsider art at the orange show and beer can house [written and photographed by david andrews](#)

I'm waiting for the sun to shine on El Destino Club—a shuttered nightclub outside Houston—when up walks a man whose chiseled face recalls my wife's father. What are you doing, he says. Soy un hombre fotografico. Why photograph this place? The happy colors and flaking paint. He ponders that. I ask him why it closed. La economia. Satisfied, he heads on up the road. ● And when the sun does shine, it is powerfully crystalline, illuminating all the facets of the place where anything goes. It's the nation's largest city without a zoning code, so you get a nightclub next to a scrap yard, a church next to a check-cashing establishment, a six-story building next to a one-story. Above-ground archeology if you will—with all the layers intermingled. ● “If juxtaposition and discontinuity may be said to characterize evolving cities such as Houston, in no area are they so dramatic and intensified than in this one,” notes *Houston: An Architectural Guide*. Some parts date to the very beginnings of the city, others point to what's yet to come. ● Telephone Road, where I've got my camera poised, was once home of the wildcatters and the honky tonks, lined with metal enamel billboards for Grand Prize Beer. Now, next to what's left, the signs say “su palabra es su credito” (your word is your credit) or “compre aqui, pague aqui” (compare here, buy here), in a piñata palette that dazzles the eye. Nuzzled in between are the likes of Gigi's Party Rentals, a weathered survivor of the '50s, and Bodhi's Zen Garden and Veggie, its day already done.

LEFT AND ABOVE: *Orange Show moments. Creator Jeff McKissack had no written plans. Cutting metal, he saw a scrap in the shape of a wing, and decided to go with it.*



JUST A FEW MILES EAST OF DOWNTOWN'S LOOMING SKYSCRAPERS—WEDGED BETWEEN RUN-DOWN ASBESTOS-SIDED HOUSES AND A FREIGHT COMPANY, FREEWAY ABUZZ A BLOCK AWAY—RESIDES THE KEY TO LIFE.

MARKETING DIRECTOR STEPHEN BRIDGES TELLS ME, HALF IN JEST, THAT ALL OF HOUSTON is only a backdrop for the Orange Show. He has a point. Mexicali colors. Check. Anything goes. Check. Quirky context. Check. Just a few miles east of downtown's looming skyscrapers—wedged between run-down asbestos-sided houses and a freight company, freeway abuzz a block away—resides the key to life. Indeed, just a quick visit, writes Joseph Lomax in *Folk Art in Texas*, “will more than convince anyone that within the pithy orange rind lie the secrets of health, longevity, and happiness.”

But before the convincing sets in, you have to take a breath, because you're flat-out agog. The product of postal worker Jeff McKissack—its architect, mason, welder, carpenter, engineer, tilesetter, and general mastermind—the Orange Show gives going postal a whole new twist. “Once inside you think you're seeing the impossible, carefully, even lovingly engineered to become felicitously possible,” says art critic Ann Holmes. “It probably doesn't really threaten the laws of Newton, it just seems to.”

Ventilators whizzing, wind vanes gyrating, flags cracking—the Gulf breeze animates the place even before you set foot inside. From out front it's a pint-size Alamo, surrounded by a white wall, with a pair of stone lions to guard the entrance. Through a turnstile, you enter into a labyrinth of pretzel-twist staircases, up, down, and around a seemingly unending series of improbable attractions. An oasis festooned with plastic orange tree limbs. Small fountains with frogs spouting water. A wishing well. A diorama on all the good chemicals you get from eating an orange. A diorama with diminutive dinosaurs. Two steam engines—one posing as a tractor that powers a boat round and round a pocket-size stadium. All intersected by a maze of passageways. And I'm just getting started. Luckily I've made it to an observation deck where I can take a break in one of the tutti-frutti-painted metal tractor seats. Rows of tutti-frutti-painted metal tractor seats. One wasn't enough. One wasn't enough either when it came to wagon-wheel balconies, in eye-popping jelly-bean colors.



BELOW LEFT: “There are places that hold our interest because they seem to compress time and space into a picture of the city in miniature,” writes Bruce Webb in *Ephemeral City*. The Orange Show is such a place. **BELOW RIGHT:** Cans knitted into fencing at the Beer Can House.

The circle is the main motif in McKissack’s brand of art, a strain particularly virulent in the Lone Star State. The circle represents perfection, “the form most satisfying to innate desire for order and predictability,” writes Edward Abernethy in *Folk Art in Texas*. Wheels and tires adorn yards throughout the state—demarcating flower beds, substituting for gates and fencing, standing sentinel along driveways. “Only the wheel can be rotated through 360 degrees and maintain the same form,” Abernethy writes. “It can also be moved through all its planes and always be symmetrical.” The tractor seat is another favorite, along with whirligigs, walking drills, go-devils, cultivators, and wagons of all sizes—resurrected discards, junk to most us, that form a romantic bond with the rural past, where something as simple as a bleached skull can conjure up the longhorn mystique. Some scholars say that this sort of improv—combining do-it-yourself with recycling—is proof that inventive America still exists.

McKissack was all nostalgic over steam, which vies with the orange for airplay at the site. In a city that was freewayed almost overnight, he looked back longingly to the years of his youth, watching the last of the great paddleboats along the banks of the Chattahoochee.

ACROSS THE STREET AT THE ORANGE SHOW CENTER FOR VISIONARY ART, STEPHEN SITS happily behind his computer creating a self-propelled tour of Houston—by car, naturally—so I can take his thesis out for a spin. The center, a house of wisdom whose archives draw the learned worldwide, was established to protect the show—which recently joined the National Register of Historic Places—and similar sites. And it is literally a house, one of several just like it on the street. The show is now prime performance space, with alt bands and theater, Carmen Miranda look-alike contests, swimming in the pool with Esther Williams movies, and kids taking in puppet shows from the candy-colored seats. Such fare may be a foretaste of my tour, says the mischievous look on Stephen’s face.







"AM I THE ONLY ONE WHOSE MOTHER USED TO TAKE THOSE CANNED PEARS OR PEACHES and set them on a lettuce leaf with grated Velveeta on top as a garnish, or cottage cheese?" It's a question to ponder, posed online by a pleased patron of the Dinner Bell, Jeff McKissack's lunchtime haunt. Every day, after retirement, he braved a tangle of freeway ramps and cross streets—on a bike no less—to get to its temptations. Hulking slabs of meatloaf. Marshmallow salad. Chicken and dumplings in brown gravy. Beef stew and sides of okra. And for dessert, chocolate icebox pie with whipped cream on top. All under glass, cafeteria-style, deliciously lit with green florescent. Plus '50s throwback decor with boomerang tables, southern hospitality, and portions so huge a truck driver wouldn't come away hungry.

But there's more—an icing of tone on top. I'm thinking of the cakes and pies of pop artist Wayne Thiebaud, paint slathered thick like luscious frosting, metaphors for abundance and America's ceaseless appetite.



ONCE INSIDE YOU THINK YOU'RE SEEING THE IMPOSSIBLE, CAREFULLY, EVEN LOVINGLY ENGINEERED TO BECOME FELICITOUSLY POSSIBLE. IT PROBABLY DOESN'T REALLY THREATEN THE LAWS OF NEWTON, IT JUST SEEMS TO. —CRITIC ANN HOLMES

And, in Thiebaud's words, "a stereotypical this-can-be-found-anywhere-in-the-country-but-only-in-this-country quality." Except this is real, and it tastes like mom.

Jeff McKissack ate his last meal at the Dinner Bell, on the afternoon of January 20, 1980. On his way back to the Orange Show, he got off his bike, went in a bank, and collapsed from a stroke. He left the show to his nephew, who soon learned it was worthless.

McKissack thought the show would make him rich—"the biggest thing to hit Houston since the Astrodome"—with 300,000 visitors a year. Here he is at the opening, May 5, 1979, with wide grin, orange pants, and panama hat. Only 150 showed up, then visitation slowed to a trickle. He withdrew into his house across the street, and was dead in seven months, eight days before his 78th birthday. The show had been the focus of his every moment for over two decades.

MCKISSACK HAD A HUCK FINN CHILDHOOD—IN A TOWN ON THE ALABAMA-GEORGIA border—running barefoot along the riverbanks. He got a business degree from Mercer, went to Columbia grad school, and worked on Wall Street in the 1920s. He got to shake hands with legendary inventor

Thomas Edison, a lifelong inspiration. During the Depression, he trucked oranges from Florida to Atlanta, discovering his mission to serve the orange growers of America; he came to believe that every part of his life was proof of that mission. He never married.

During the war he was a welder with the Navy, taking a Houston postal job at the height of the oil boom, in 1954. As he made downtown deliveries, he started to forage for materials—chipped bricks or pieces of scrap metal from razed buildings. His yard quickly filled up, then his house, with only a trail through it. He bought two lots across the way, where he labored alone on his orange homage, full time after retiring in 1968. Every morning, he pushed his wheelbarrow across the street and went to work.

What he built is elusive. It's like a kid's game. I keep expecting to find the treasure at the end of each twist-

ing passage. But there is no treasure, no focal point, just a never-ending succession of gewgaws—windmills aping planetary movement, a woodsman restrained by his female companion ("spare that orange tree"), a metal scarecrow with a homily on life's fears. Around the bend will surely be a reason for this joy ride. But the joke's on me, a clown seems to say. The orange connection proves occasionally tenuous, and I laugh out loud at signs like "love oranges and live," "love me, orange, please love me," and "clown found happiness by drinking cold fresh orange juice every day." And when the orange isn't front and center, it's anything goes. An owl perched on a pedestal bears the inscription, "The less he said, the more he heard. Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?"

When asked why he created the place, McKissack always shrugged and gave a vague or seemingly whimsical answer. But here stands the Orange Show, a better monument than any tombstone.

STEPHEN HAS ME OUT ON THE FREEWAY, HEADING TOWARD DOWNTOWN IN PURSUIT OF THE larger context for McKissack's creation. Houston's anything-goes image, highly visible along this road, harkens back to the city's invention by a pair of New York sharpies who—in the late 1830s—sold the idea of a great Texas emporium on the swampy site. The mercantile ethic has been coin of the realm ever since. Add in a maverick attitude and a hunker for growth, and you get the picture. The 20th century saw Houston gallop toward its destiny as the petrochemical capital of the world, a position it still holds. Today, its landscape of refineries mingles with pockets of historic charm and masterworks by architects from Philip Johnson to Cesar Pelli.

Downtown glimmers like Emerald City, washed clean as great pinnacles of cloud race off to reveal a sky of regal blue. Weather stands in for nature in Houston, drama delivered daily from the Gulf. Its bayous, once a source of romantic endearment, were concreted over to cope with floods. The city

LEFT: A diorama at the Orange Show explains that the body is a chemical converter. ABOVE LEFT: Bottles glow at the Beer Can House. ABOVE RIGHT: Under glass at the Dinner Bell Cafeteria, Jeff McKissack's lunchtime haunt, a profoundly delicious slice of Americana.



AS OLD HOUSTON WENT DOWN, THE **ORANGE SHOW** WENT UP. MCKISSACK WAS IN THE CHIPS, NETTING **ROOF TILES FROM THE OLD CAPITOL THEATER, A RAILING FROM A FURNITURE COMPANY FIRE ESCAPE, AND AN OBELISK FROM THE TEXAS STATE HOTEL.**



embraced growth in a big way after World War II. As old Houston went down, the Orange Show went up. McKissack was in the chips, netting roof tiles from the Old Capitol Theater, a railing from a furniture company fire escape, and an obelisk from the Texas State Hotel.

The skyline's transformation was exhilarating. One after the next—in glass or porcelain enamel, marble or anodized aluminum—the skyscrapers rose like sober sentries over a new urban order. “Ground-level plazas finished with elegant paving, planting, and fountains seemed to represent a tasteful, enlightened alternative to the crowding of drug stores, beauty parlors, coffee shops, and shoe repair stands up to the sidewalk,” writes William Stern in *Ephemeral City*. “Such services were tucked discreetly into the basement if their presences were deemed necessary.” Parking lots, paved over the rubble, waited their turn to host a high-rise marvel, a turn that never came. “Collectively, these buildings, isolated in their plazas, tended to erode rather than relieve the fabric of downtown Houston, which, under the impact of retail flight and the economics of speculation, slowly came unraveled,” writes Stern. Today, the interstitial spaces, multiplying as development burst willy-nilly into the burbs, suggest both placelessness and unlimited, elastic possibility, a no-man’s-land of vacant lots between the railyards and the warehouses, the strip malls and the subdivisions. Here lies a city perennially on the edge of town, hid-



den in fissures unseen from the freeway. Since the 1970s, notes the Houston architectural guide, painters, sculptors, and writers have begun to explore these cracks and grooves as “an archeology, a compilation of urban experiences heretofore unexcavated and unanalyzed.”

This next generation of artist sometimes follows directly in McKissack's footsteps, with creations that are personal and highly idiosyncratic. Like

McKissack, they work in the vein of the outsider artist, who eschews the commercial gallery and often the very idea of work for sale. The difference is, this artist is aware—and embraces—the role. Also unlike McKissack, this artist is frequently not self-taught, but highly trained.

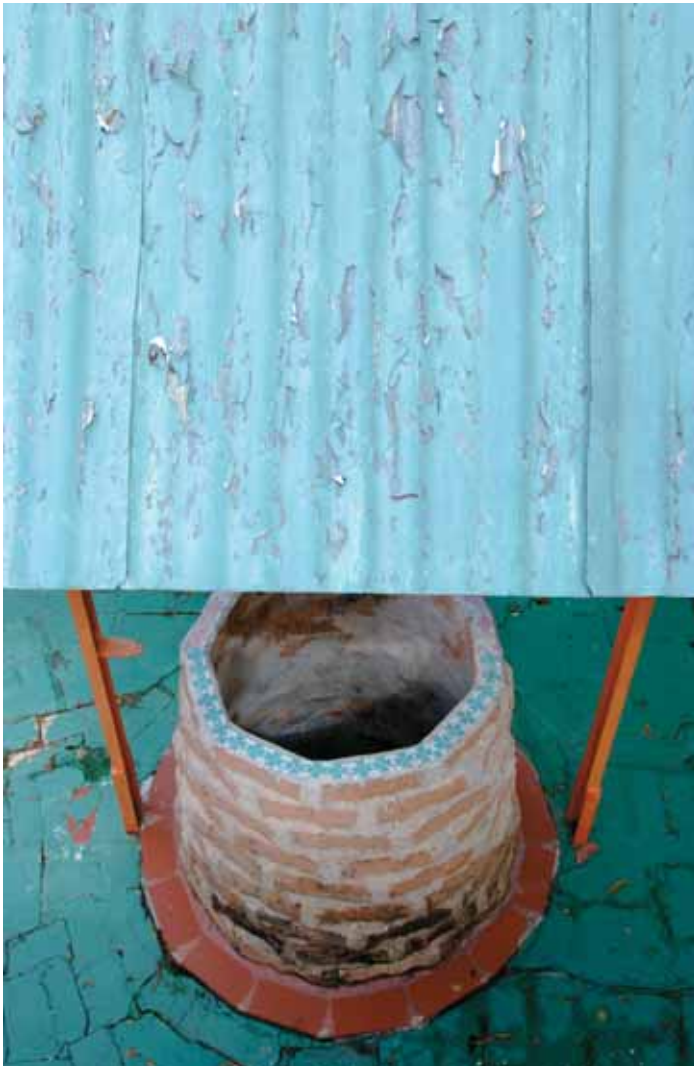
Dolan Smith, who boasts a master's degree in fine arts, has made the cover of *Houston Magazine* with his Museum of the Weird. As affable as Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, he gives me a tour of his collection, the museum

housed in a charming little bungalow. I step inside and greet a menagerie that runs the gamut of quirk—from horns to doll heads—along with his own pieces. An ominous sensation hovers over it all, leavened with a layer of humor and Smith's boyish charm as docent. He shows me a cabinet with instructions on how to make an American clown, including

TOP: McKissack could and would offer provenance for all the items at the Orange Show—like this umbrella—whether scavenged from wrecked buildings or acquired at antique and junk shops. **ABOVE:** Mannequins find a new life at the show.



WHEN ASKED WHY HE CREATED THE PLACE, MCKISSACK ALWAYS SHRUGGED AND GAVE A VAGUE OR SEEMINGLY WHIMSICAL ANSWER. BUT HERE STANDS THE ORANGE SHOW, A BETTER MONUMENT THAN ANY TOMBSTONE.



ABOVE: *Wishing well at the Orange Show. Self-taught artists like McKissack, not concerned with pleasing critics, feel free to combine unusual materials. RIGHT:* *Looking down from a wagon-wheel balcony at the show. "Welders as a class seem to be creative," writes Francis Edward Abernethy in *Folk Art in Texas*. A knowledge of the craft gives the welder power of expression.*

"10 to 12 years of aimless wandering, bad booze, cigarettes, drugs, unsanitary conditions, and abuse from strangers." Most of Smith's own pieces relate to egregious childhood experiences, his afflictions inventoried in a gazebo called "the Scar Room." Canines also have a place in his art. Smith performs dog weddings and, when the litter arrives, baptisms, too. His work is part performance, part his collection—like the Orange Show, a collaged experience—and part traditional media such as painting and sculpture, with a twist. His dogs accompany us into the alley for a look at his rust-encrusted pickup, a work of art on wheels. He's transformed the bed into an armored orifice—with padded seats around the rim and a bulbous membrane where the rear window used to be.

Art cars are big in this city. The annual Art Car Parade, produced by the Orange Show, draws attendees worldwide, and has also spun off its own museum. Dan Akroyd was this year's master of ceremonies.

Mark Bradford, aka Scrap Daddy, is always a headliner. He is clearly in the McKissack camp, working outside traditional venues and expectations. I park just across from his studio, in a sleepy historic neighborhood called the Heights, next to a broad concrete channel. A TV sensation, Bradford has hosted shows from *Scrap Yard Scavenger* to *Guinness Book of Records*, *Prime Time*. He tells me about his creations. A payphone station launched down a ski slope at 75 miles an hour. A guillotine that cut a Camaro in half. A crossbow the size of an 18-wheeler. A medieval-style catapult that flung a refrigerator 314 feet. And the Spoonazoid, with its armor scale of kitchen spoons acquired hours before shipping for meltdown, as American Airlines got rid of its silverware post-911. His favorite finds are full-mades like forklifts that can be readily born again. Art car artists have a natural home in Houston, he says, an industrial city with tons of stuff to hunt. Besides, he likes recycling.

A ROOSTER EYES ME THROUGH THE CHICKEN WIRE AS SOME BURLY GUYS HAUL sacks of Mighty Good Goat Pellets. Maybe Stephen has seen fit to include Petticoat Junction on my trip-tik. Actually it's the Wabash Antique and Feed Store (mere blocks from the Beer Can House, the Orange Show's other property) where you can find all you need to feed your chick, cow, horse, bunny, or peacock. And if you don't have one, you can get one here, along with a lop-eared rabbit, pygmy goat, or miniature pot-bellied pig.

Canines and their accoutrements are a big draw; Wabash places about 200 homeless pets a year. "I'm looking for thick-cushioned doggie beds that are nice and not offensive when I put my house on the market," writes a potential patron online. "I ran across this place and can't wait to stop by this weekend." He can make his dog's day by bringing home a tasty pig knuckle or cow femur.

Antiques nuzzle up next to the bags of feed, mainly country-kitchen and farm items like crocks, churns, cow skulls, linens, and lanterns. Outside is a haven for handmade yard art, from boot-shaped planters to a turquoise-and-red-metal rooster with his tongue hanging out. All lorded over by a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi.





THE LIFE OF JOHN MILKOVISCH CAME TO A HEAD IN 1968, WHEN HE RETIRED FROM HIS JOB AS AN upholsterer with the Southern Pacific Railroad. He was tired of taking care of his three-bedroom bungalow west of Houston, what with the painting and the mowing. So he amassed an estimated 50,000 empty cans of Texas Pride, Buckhorn, and Falstaff—whatever was on special—and commenced to re-side his house, garnished with garland curtains made from the tops. It took him 17 years, but look at the result.

First came a patio with a fence; 40 holes a slat, embedded with marbles. “It was real pretty with the sun sparkling through there in the morning,” his wife Mary told interviewer Joseph Lomax in *Folk Art in Texas*. Then he paved the driveway, and the front yard, too. While drinking the beer. He flattened the cans, stored them in the garage, in the attic, hung around trees. He dangled plastic from the six packs off the eaves.

The pop-tops tinkle in the breeze as I point and click in the late day sun. What’s it like in a hurricane, Mary is asked. “Well, wild!” It’s date night and couples stream by for a hoot. In between shots I point out the resemblance to an Andy





THE POP-TOPS TINKLE IN THE BREEZE AS I POINT AND CLICK IN THE LATE DAY SUN. WHAT'S IT LIKE IN A HURRICANE, MARY IS ASKED. "WELL, WILD!" IT'S DATE NIGHT AND COUPLES STREAM BY FOR A HOOT.

Warhol. Except instead of multiple Jackies, it's doppelgangered Budweiser. The entire abode is covered in cans. You can't find the door bell. Out back a wall of colored beer bottles sparkles in the light.

Milkovisch cut the cans with upholstery tools like linoleum knives, doubled over as "bricks" to rivet into sheets. The precision is impressive. "You know, in 17 years it don't take much to accumulate all these cans," he told Lomax—what with wife, grown kids, and their spouses all imbibing out on the porch. "He was always the type that didn't want to throw anything away," Mary said. After she passed in 2001, the Orange Show acquired the place. Restoration took seven years and \$250,000 in donations. Volunteers generated their own empties to patch the siding.

WHEN I ROLL BACK INTO THE ORANGE SHOW, STEPHEN IS BEHIND HIS DESK WITH A SEE-what-I-mean look on his face. "With the freeways, the palm trees, and the attitude, Houston's a lot like L.A.," he says. "Without the fun parts." Well, I beg to differ, Stephen. No one makes fun like Houston.

Two final notes from the Ephemeral City: Stephen Bridges has gone on to life after the Orange Show, and Dolan Smith has sold his house to another artist.

contact points Orange Show Center for Visionary Art **web** www.orangeshow.org/
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LEFT: Tops dangle in the breeze on the front porch of the Beer Can House. LEFT BELOW: Fence detail with tops sparkling behind. RIGHT BELOW: A Warhol moment. Bridges says that preservation is "just now coming into consciousness" in Houston, a particular challenge with places like the Orange Show and Beer Can House. "How do you preserve what wasn't meant to last?" he says. The city, through its cultural arts council, helps keep the show going with money from its hotel-motel tax.

