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2019BY [STEPHEN
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This 'Totem' Artist's Living Room Isn't Like Your Living Room



Walter Markham Jr., an artist and employee of the city's Department of Parks, has lived in a cheerful five-floor walk-up just south of Prospect Park since 2006. One afternoon a few years ago, a carbon monoxide alarm went off in his apartment, so he called the FDNY. Soon afterwards, they rapped on his door, which he opened for them.

"They started to walk in, but they looked into my studio and backed out into the hallway," Markham recalled. "The one with the meter just kind of stuck his arm into the room and was like, 'Yep looks great thanks,' and left."

Markham is familiar with this type of response from people popping in for their first time. Since being priced out of an art studio six years ago, his apartment has morphed into a de facto workshop and warehouse for his series of giant mixed-media sculptures, up to 10 feet tall, that he refers to as totems. His apartment has effectively been eaten alive by his work. It's violent and it's scary, but it's also intoxicating and suitable for small children.



There are 24 of the towers in the series, titled “Guardians of the Finite Province of Meaning,” but in the confines of his living room it feels like 24 dozen; they create their own psychic micro-climate.

The arboreal tableau, four floors above Ocean Avenue, brings to mind the 1957 novel *The Baron in the Trees*, by Italo Calvino, where the protagonist flees his home to live in the forest. In Markham’s case, however, the forest is coming from inside the house.

Elaborating on the series, Markham said the sculptures are about the creative process, and about how visual work is described.



“The materials I use – graphite, paper, chalk – are precursors to using language to describe the sculptures. The totems are about how we apply language to visual forms,” Markham explained, bouncing fluently between references to the psychoanalytic theorist D.W. Winnicott and the Peanuts comic strip, specifically Linus’s blanket.

In addition to those materials, the sculptures incorporate masks, crayons, and cannibalized bits of Markham’s paintings, which reflect abstract expressionist and minimalist influences.

Once the initial art-induced shock wears off, the conversation turns inevitably toward the fate of the works. Markham, who holds an MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, understandably hopes the work can be

seen by a larger audience, and in larger spaces that are not his apartment. He has previously exhibited work in group shows at the Palazzo Mora in Venice, Italy, and at BricArtsMedia in Brooklyn.



While the prospect of seeing the series broken up and relocated may engender feelings of grief, panic, or rage among some visitors, this is the desired outcome. “Guardians” is not a site-specific installation, it just plays one on TV. While there is no reason the series couldn’t be shown en bloc, each tower is intended to be a distinct sculpture.

Like many artists, however, Markham is more enthusiastic about making the work than marketing it. He is not given to schmoozing with art-world grandees.

“I struggle with it. I’m just not the kind of guy who loves going to openings and chatting up dealers.”

These sentiments track with Markham’s somewhat spartan lifestyle, which sees him leave his apartment at 5:15 a.m. five days a week for Fort Tryon Park, where he works. His family has been supportive of Markham’s career and offered to subsidize another art studio, but he turned down the assistance.



There is, hovering over his apartment, the faint suggestion of a monastery. In lieu of a couch, Markham’s living room sports a reclining,

bench-like car seat, a three-legged stool, and a wobbly computer stand hidden among the sculptures.

After years of cohabitation with his totems, Markham is content to operate on his apartment's peripheries. His bedroom is tucked into the back of the apartment, like a tonsil, and he prepares his meals in a kitchen that doubles as a library.

These ascetic circumstances aside, Markham is not a shut-in. He has launched another project, the Crayon Self-Portraits Library, which invites artists to create self-portraits using only wax crayons. Over 40 artists have submitted portraits, many of which can be viewed [here](#).

In short, Walter Markham is doing what New York City artists have been doing to get by for generations: hustling, adapting, traumatizing local firefighters – all in the name of creating work that shocks, inspires, and delights those who see it.

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One Comment



Anthony. Spero

Jan 25, 2019 @ 16:51

I've seen some of this guys work and it's pretty cool .it's worth the look

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