

Sculpture in its Own Light

Neon Art Shines in Atlanta

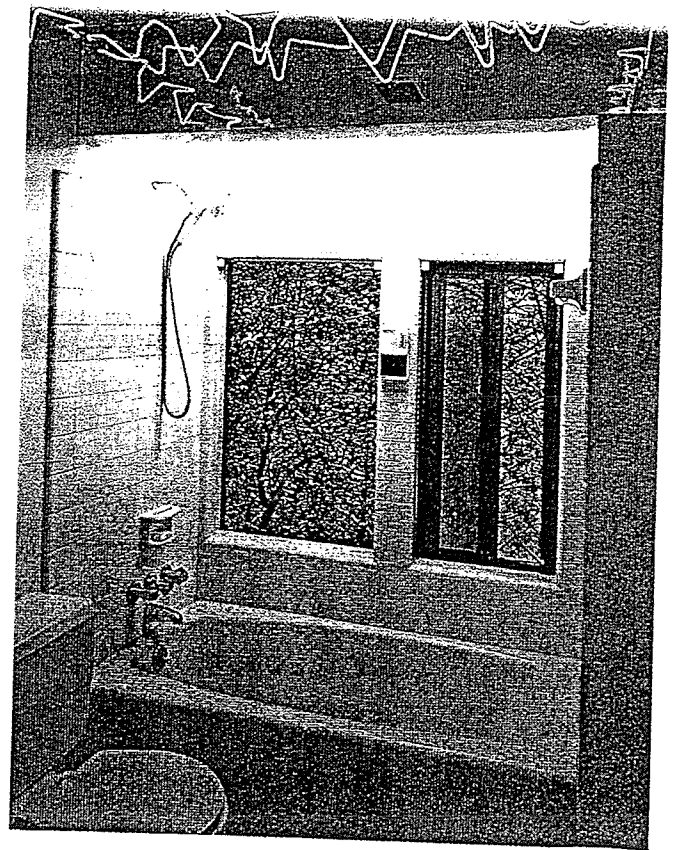
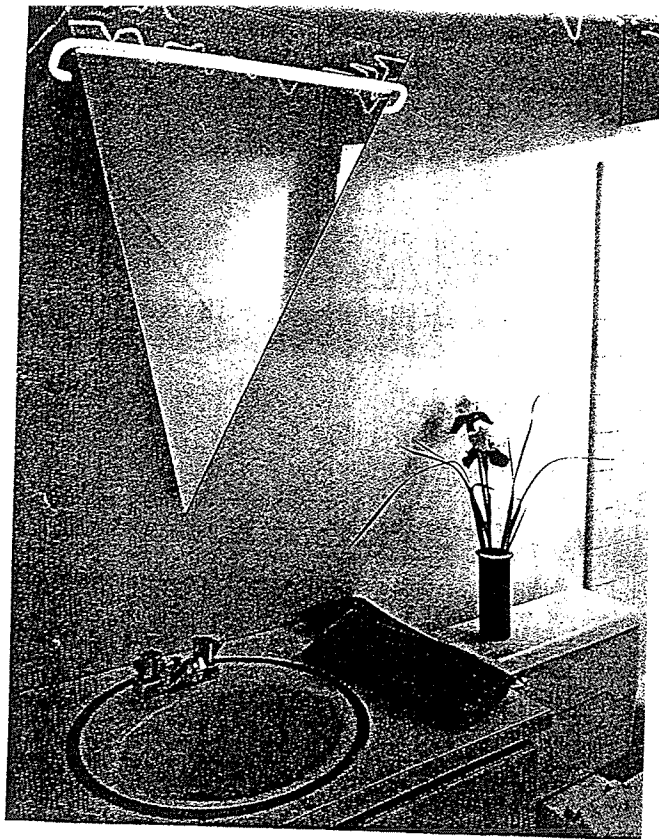
By Ellen Berman Fix

Photography by Kevin C. Rose

Neon. It dazzles. It delights. It's shimmering. It's chic. An adventurous assemblage of artists is breathing new life into what was once a purely commercial medium and creating fascinating neon sculptures and abstract decorative pieces. Synthesizing innovative graphic design with high-tech engineering, neon — although it comes from the Greek word *neos*, meaning 'new'—was discovered by accident almost a century ago. Frenchman Georges Claude, searching for a cheap way to produce oxygen for hospital use, found there were two gases leftover from the process—argon and neon. When bombarded with electricity, neon glowed an intense red; argon a cool blue. With the development of a patented electrode and special color-coated glass, the new neon lighting was born.

A Paris barbershop bought what was purportedly the world's first neon sign in 1912. The first neon sign in this country was erected by a Los Angeles car dealer in 1923; the word "PACKARD" stopped traffic with its bright orange letters. This spawned a love affair between neon and the advertising industry. In 1941 there were 5,000 'glass benders' employed by 2,000 neon plants nationwide. But when economic pressures forced the neon industry to concentrate on production

LEFT: Designed specifically for the space it occupies, this piece by Jere Brookshire of midnight blue argon and galvanized steel with etched surface is backlit with clear blue argon. *INSET:* Brookshire demonstrated the versatility of his neon for *SOUTHERN HOMES*. "If you change the color of one of the light sources—the neon stays the same—the color on the metal surface drastically changes."



efficiency, design work suffered. Fluorescent tubes and plastics rapidly replaced neon, and eventually neon's esteem reached a low ebb. Recently, though, neon has experienced a resurgence as a "serious" art form. Yet, neon is anything but serious. On the contrary, neon art possesses a lustrous exuberance — largely due to fruitful collaborations between technically skilled 'glass-benders,' who are an all-but-extinct breed, and younger designers who provide the innovative aesthetic concepts.

The equipment neon artists use to bend glass and create the wondrous colors of the art resemble that of a mad scientist's laboratory. Surgical tubing, beakers, giant transformers and a 'bombarder' are the somewhat ominous accoutrements of the trade. Yet, the process is straightforward. First, four- and eight-foot lengths of glass tubing are heated over a flame where they become soft and are bent to match the sketched design. Electrodes are fused to either end of the tubing, and the air is vacuumed out. The tube is then bombarded with 30,000 volts of electricity, followed by further pumping out of the air and impurities. Then, either neon or argon gas—and a bead of mercury—is pumped in. The tube is then sealed, ready for a blast of 15,000 volts to its electrodes from the transformer. The climactic finale occurs as the gas ionizes and begins to glow, light at first and then deepening to its full intensity.

The bewitchingly diverse colors of neon are the

result of combining either clear or colored glass tubes with powdered phosphors that coat the tube. A skilled craftsman can create about 40 to 50 color variations with neon and argon this way.

Some artists, like custom neon designer Tomas Valenti of Caribeso Studios, both design and fabricate. "Neon is color, line and texture," explains Valenti. "With clear glass, you're seeing the gases themselves igniting, so the colors are more vibrant. The powdered glass produces more pastels. Each produces its own color temperature that can markedly vary the effect on a room. Too much green or blue can really cool down a room.

ABOVE: Neon in the bathroom? "Sure," said Kimo Chamberlain, co-owner of Deco Neon. The jagged, electric waves start out as a dark blue on one side and blend into a soft white on the other.

RIGHT: Designed by artist Jere Brookshire, the surface color of this piece is provided by two theatrical spotlights. The cables are part of Brookshire's art—"they provide support as well as a visual center for the sculpture," he explains.

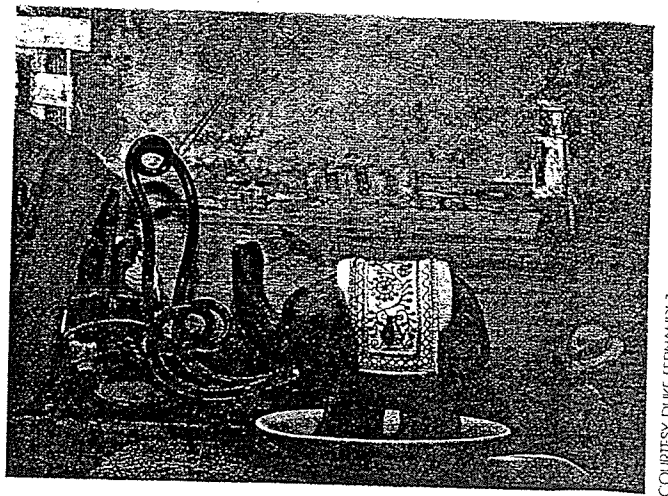
And, no matter how understated it is, you can't ignore neon!"

Neon is primarily a radiant light source, and a powerful one (in power usage, however, it uses about as much electricity as an incandescent bulb). Thus, dimmers have become available to subdue some of its luminescent energy, resulting in more ethereal, even sensual, effects.

In designing a sculpture, Valenti works closely with the client to develop a concept that works with the environment in which it will be placed. He considers the room's furnishings, natural and electric light sources, and the client's own ideas. In addition, there are installation problems to solve: Wires and a transformer must be hidden from view, an electric outlet must be available, and the mounting material must suit the wall it will rest on. Accent pieces that highlight the architectural features of home or office are in demand, Valenti says, and large installations are becoming more popular. The ideal way to accommodate a piece of neon sculpture is to consult with the neon designer during the process of building a home, re-decorating or renovating to assure the piece will harmonize with the home's structure and style.

ABOVE: Several years ago, Duke Fernandez was one of the Southeastern artists requested to submit sculpture in "the watermelon theme" for an exhibition at Peachtree Center. Fernandez created this fantasy creature—"the Melophant"—as his entry. Standing on a slice of watermelon, the porcelain pachyderm was perceived as the mythical helper of the watermelon fairies.

FAR RIGHT: John Wellborn suggested several neon designs for this client, and *Neon Chandelier* was one of the designs chosen. Wellborn worked with the high ceilings of the house to create dramatic entryway lighting. The owners' home was "a collage of different things and bold enough to handle a neon chandelier," he says.



COURTESY DUKE FERNANDEZ

Walk into Atlanta's newest downtown nightclub, the Rio Entertainment Complex, and you will see how neon changes a room's ambience. Owner and neon artist Julian Duke Fernandez has delineated seating, dancing and drinking space with neon, which also doubles as a soothing source of indirect lighting. An accomplished sculptor, Fernandez approached neon with an extensive background in color healing and the effects color has on human behavior. He has created an array of ceramic bases with twisted neon forms that are less rigid than most neon tubing, allowing the easy interchange of various colors to suit the decor of different rooms.

"The simplicity of radiant color is its essential beauty," remarks Fernandez. "I see myself as orchestrating color and light." The easiest way to acquire decorative sculptures, he suggests, is through gift shops, which offer pieces which are more accessible to the neon neophyte. One such shop is Deco Neon in Atlanta, which also operates its own fabrication plant. Todd Sokol, co-owner of the business, feels that while public interest in neon as a decorative art form has increased over the last 10 years, an even greater interest has been sparked by the television show *Miami Vice*, with its tropical setting that hints at pink flamingos, palm trees and cacti. However encouraging this may be to neon fabricators, most neon designers would prefer to explore more challenging and abstract designs.

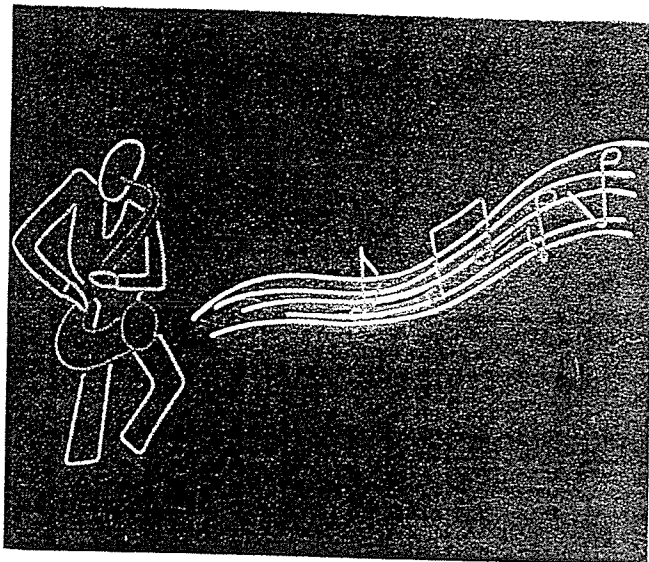
In general, patrons of neon seek exciting colors and designs they can identify with, according to John Wellborn, owner of the Atlanta Neon Company. But, he has also noticed a burgeoning desire

for more three-dimensional, experimental works, installed on bases of acrylic, metal and porcelain. "It used to be the older glass benders would be exactly duplicating a pattern, but now there is more free-form work being explored," he observes.

Such work is characteristic of sculptor Jere Brookshire, who nonetheless prefers not to be pegged as a neon artist *per se*, and who feels "all other light is just as important." For inspiration, Brookshire enjoys spending evenings driving to construction sites. He finds them "intriguing because lights are shining on structures that have yet to be built — they don't make sense yet. They are real playgrounds of light and form."

Brookshire uses for his neon pieces galvanized steel backgrounds, into which he has ground and sanded a series of seductive twists and curls. These play an integral part in the total effect of a piece, as do the wire cables used to mount the structure on the wall.

Another essential element in his pieces is colored incandescent track lighting. Reflected on the metal twists along with the color of the superimposed neon, it causes an interplay of color and light that surges with movement and creates a feeling of surreal three-dimensionality, wherein the work seems to 'float'. Explains Brookshire, "The track lighting allows the viewer to 'see' more than just neon. I work neon into the piece as an element rather than the focus of it. I involve neon with other media that cause both to do more as a unit. It's a fun medium to use. I enjoy playing with it." Though he designs the pieces for a local fabricator to produce, Brookshire is sensitive to the subtle



differences in quality of available glass tubing. One of his favorites is a 'midnight blue' antique glass, originally manufactured in Germany, which is all but impossible to find anymore. He finds the colors produced in years past yield a superior and more pleasing intensity of color.

Neon's resurgence expresses a gutsy re-acquaintance with a time that was—a time when every new movie house, restaurant, fast food joint and roadside attraction sent its message to the world through neon—in a way that is astounding in its irrepressible buoyancy and in its joyous unexpectedness. One is impressed with the sense of nostalgia that neon rekindles. Yet it also generates an excitement that is original and worthy of future investigations by artists with vision. This technology was never developed as an art form until recently; neon of old was relegated to outdoor use only. Now it has been brought indoors so that we can view it as sculpture or pure form rather than as an extension of graphic art. ♦

ABOVE: Tomas Valenti designed this piece for a client who went looking for books on neon and found instead a saxophone-playing friend of Valenti's. The client decided on this abstract jazz man. Valenti added the "blues line" coming out of the sax.

RIGHT: This untitled abstract by Tomas Valenti was done for a client who had a large wall to fill. After reviewing some photos and sketches, the client decided on an abstract design in hues to go with the room's color scheme.

Ellen Berman Fix is an Atlanta-based freelance writer and communications specialist. Her articles have appeared in a wide variety of publications.