

# Building the Better Cow

## Resin, polymers and rawhide

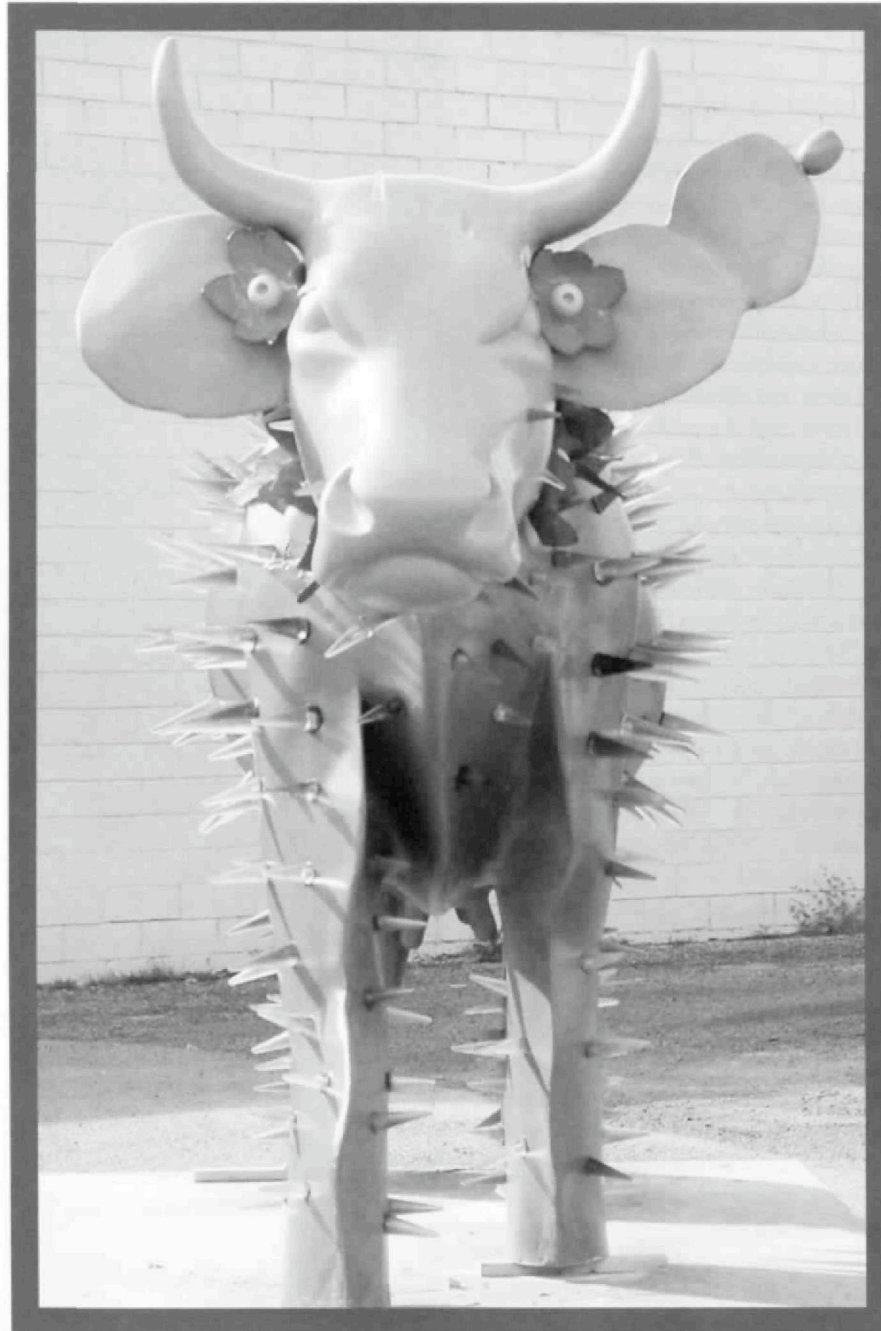
BY CRAIG MINOR

**IN EARLY SEPTEMBER**, more than 300 whimsically decorated cows will appear throughout Houston. There will be cows standing on sidewalks, cows grazing on medians, cows resting in city parks. One of those cows — a cow named Cactow — will be ours. It will belong to the designers and friends who were the collaborators in creating the fiberglass sculpture, and at some point it will belong to the person who buys it (if someone does buy it, as we hope they will). In the interim, between creation and sale, it will belong to the city at large.

It is that last little fact that gives CowParade Houston, of which Cactow is part, its greatest interest. Begun as a public art event staged in Zurich, Switzerland in 1998, the CowParade spread to Chicago in 1999, then to New York, Stamford, Connecticut, and West Orange, New Jersey, in 2000. This year the herd has moved on to Kansas City, London, and, from September 6 to November 7, Houston. In each of its previous cities, the CowParade has proven enormously successful, both in showcasing the local artists who designed their city's cows and in raising money for charity when, at the end of the parade, the cows were auctioned off. In Houston, the beneficiaries of the CowParade will be Texas Children's Hospital and the Texas Children's Cancer Center.

But in Houston, as is often the case, things are a little different. I began thinking about this when my studio was chosen to be among those designing a cow. Like all the others who were creating cows, we were given a base bovine to work from. The three available cow poses — standing, grazing, and reclining — are all the product of Swiss-born artist Pascal Knapp, and though all are a bit different, each fiberglass cow form is approximately eight feet long, four feet nine inches high, two feet five inches wide, and weighs about 100 pounds. This is the canvas on which we were to begin work.

And this is the canvas we were supposed to make stand out in the Houston landscape. In New York, making a cow stand out isn't hard. Who expects to see a cow on Broadway? Even in Chicago and Kansas City, each of which have cattle as part of their slaughterhouse history, a street cow today would be a surprise. But in Houston, cows graze beneath power lines, and when the rodeo rolls around it's not unusual to



see a herd of cows strolling down a highway. The notion of a cow in Houston just doesn't feel as foreign as it does in other large urban environments.

Houston is also a place where odd things are easily accepted. A car decked out as an armadillo cruising through an intersection evokes little more than a shrug. In the home of the Art Car Parade, the Orange Show, and a multitude of other everyday curiosities, how do you make a decorated cow break through? In Houston, the bar for the CowParade is set unusually high. In Houston, not just any cow will do.

That was our challenge: to infuse a Texas theme into a bovine form, and to make it something people would notice. Our solution was to have the cow bloom with spikes and flowers, a merging of cactus and cow, a Cactow in an urban desert. Will it work? After six weekends

of intense labor, and an immersion into such foreign technologies as resins, epoxy paints, and polymer concoctions, all needed to bring our idea to life, I can only hope so. It is, I suspect, a hope shared by a few hundred other artists for a few hundred other cows.

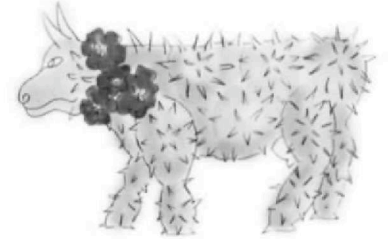
Still, for me the CowParade has already done what public art, at its best, should do: It has made me look at the city in a fresh way. And if it can do the same for those who simply stumble across a cow on their way to work or play, then perhaps the parade will have earned its grazing rights. ■

For more details on the CowParade and its history, go to either [houston.cowparade.net](http://houston.cowparade.net) or [cowparade.net](http://cowparade.net).

#### Project team

Cheryl A. Beckett, Phil Beckett, Jarrod Glick, Craig Minor, Eddy Roberts

Cow to cactus



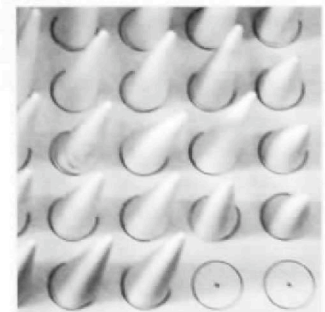
1 The vision: first, a concept sketch.



2 Then using a wire frame and fiberglass, the basic form is altered.



3 A long, dirty process of grinding and sanding refines the form and prepares it for spikes and painting.



4 The spikes of a bendable, child-friendly polymer were mass produced in the various designers' kitchens.



5 Each spike, all 300 of them, had to be attached to the cow individually.



6 Add some flowers and finally — Cactow.