



"It's just junk": Detail of Cleveland Turner's Third Ward yard show.



Turner's Alcoholics Anonymous sobriety certificates.

## Transcendent Shelter

Cleveland Turner's house contains the whole world

A house is often much more than where you hang your hat. Its location, style, and the appearance of care (or disregard) convey something about the people who live there. Once you enter the perimeter of a private home, the sense that the inhabitants are trying to express themselves through aesthetic signs increases. Visitors are meant to "read" a home's yard and entryway—the occupants have designed them (or hired someone else to do so) for just that purpose.

But what can be made of a house that seeks to engage you on seemingly every topic—history, culture, childhood, self-expression, waste, transformation, spirituality, transcendence—and right this instant as you pass, stop, stare?

The house at the corner of Francis and Dowling in the Third Ward was once run-down and unassuming. Now it's downright forward: The house intrudes into its context as much as any downtown superblock. You can't miss it. Cleveland "Flower Man" Turner, one of Houston's longest-enduring yard-show artists, has made sure of that.

The exterior is painted a yellow somewhere between lemon and school bus. The two- to mildly three-dimensional objects Turner has fastened onto the outer walls pop against it. (It's hard to imagine another background that would achieve the same effect—solar panels? LED?) Even though the color pounds at the retinas, it is homey, still humble, and not unnatural.

It's the color of the center of a daisy, writ huge. Has Turner intended for it to call down some giant, supernatural bee? Is his house shouting for our attention, or for the attention of the higher power that has kept the artist sober for the 22 years he's been working on his yard shows?

Children's toys—dolls, skates, all manner of molded plastic—are a recurring motif in his assemblages. But the juxtapositions Turner subjects them to tend to send the narrative spinning off. *Sesame Street's* Grover shows off a capital "G" to the right of Buddha's head (which has been made up with lipstick and earrings). Thumb-sucking baby dolls settle inside the upturned arms of a glass tulip lamp. Another doll reclines on a pipe that dives into the ground like an elephant's trunk, or an anthropomorphized oil derrick, working to enrich its youthful rider.

A refugee from Houston's fiberglass Cow Parade perches on the roof, recalling the freedom of imagination offered by a child's plastic farm set. Cow on the roof? Why not? And from the ground, the whole display seems to shrink for a moment to the scale of a toy or a nativity scene, as if Turner had merely walked out there one morning after his Cheerios and picked up the eight-foot-by-five-foot, 100-pound cow, thinking it looked better up there than in the barn.

Turner's explanations of his compositions often seem just that spontaneous, as if there were no filter of planning between

idea and execution, just logistics. His reasoning also underscores the sense of unreality and transcendence that runs through all of his preparations. "The cow on the roof makes me think of old Westerns," he says. "They're running up through the smoke in the sky. They run through the clouds and come out the other side."

Another recurring and always startling device in Turner's yard is his use of mirrors: Bits of mirrored ball are nestled in flower beds, sheets of mirrored tile are draped over his chain-link fence, and mirror shards stand against the sides of the house, awaiting inclusion in some future configuration. They catch the sun and the colors of the yard, winking up at the eyes no matter where you turn. Writing on forms and historical significance in African-American art, art historian Robert Farris Thompson points out, "Mirrors and flash throw back envy,"<sup>1</sup> offering protection to those who stand inside their perimeter. But for Turner, again, there's more to it. "A mirror is not natural on the outside," he says. "When you look through a mirror on the outside, you're looking into heaven."

And yet the terrific din of objects does seem to shield the house and yard from something, even if it is only ordinariness. What would an ordinary Third Ward life look like for Cleveland Turner? Would he still be a drinker? Would he have survived to reach the age of 70, as he will this year? Would he enjoy the support of

Project Row Houses and the respect of the larger folk art community?

The layers of miscellany coat the site of Turner's house like a suit of armor, a protective shell. If he could carry the place with him when he goes to his West University gardening gigs, would he? In fact, he almost does: The flower-covered bicycle he rides to work and around town is a clear-cut indication of his desire to be always decorated, to throw back manic beauty to the eyes of all who pass.

Cleveland Turner turns the judgments of people inside out. If you want to pick apart his aesthetic choices, he will tell you, "It's just junk." If what he has done to his house offends your sense of sanctuary, he'll say, "My house doesn't look real without all this stuff." He is slippery, elusive, dodging the forces that have brought him pain and discouragement. And taking a tip from the very best infiltrators and spies, he is hiding in plain sight, waving his arms.

Turner's house will not be ignored; it will never just slip by unnoticed. His house shouts into public space, like a preacher on a street corner: You will hear it, even if you don't listen. ■

1. Thompson, Robert Farris. "An American Classic," printed in *The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room*. Abrams, 1995.