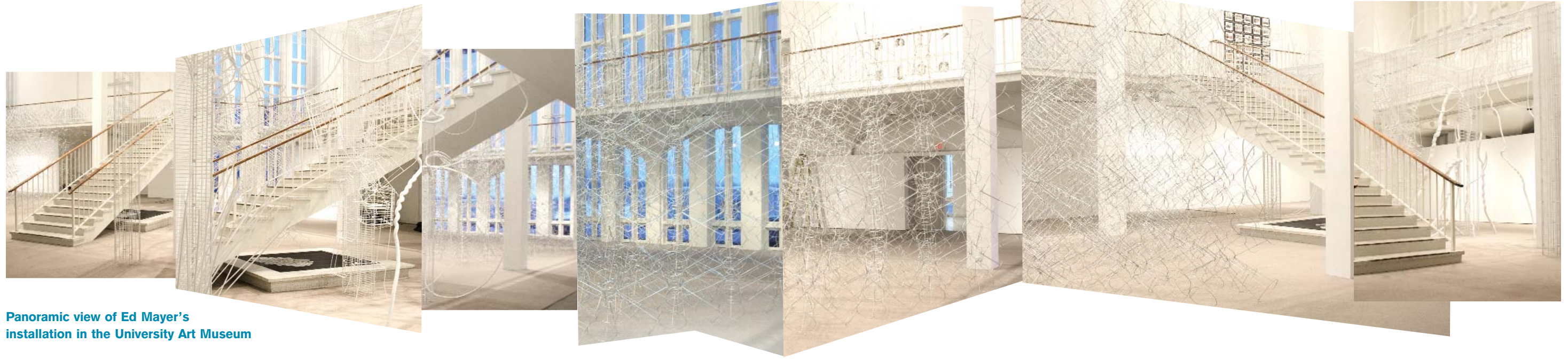


Finding Art Everywhere

By **Paul Grondahl** | Photography by Mark Schmidt

From working with students to spearheading the drive for a state-of-the-art sculpture studio, Ed Mayer defines what it is to be an artist for all seasons.



Panoramic view of Ed Mayer's installation in the University Art Museum

Firewood stacked in asymmetrical rows alongside a farmhouse. The pattern ice makes as it forms on plastic snow fencing. The geometrical shapes created by the fronds of palm trees swaying in a tropical breeze. These are the phenomena that excite Ed Mayer, the University at Albany's professor of sculpture, who discovers art all around him - especially in the temporary, random assemblages of our quotidian experience.

Mayer encounters the world with a cocked head and a wry grin.

When he is at work imagining the possibilities of a large installation piece, he dreams in the complex, repetitive geometric shapes - "modules," he calls them - of his favorite metier. "I can never really let it go when I'm working on a piece," Mayer says.

An advocate of "found art," he's an unrepentant scavenger who stops his Honda Element (the back seats were removed to make more cargo space) any time he finds an amusingly shaped junked appliance left for garbage collection at the curb. The salvage gets piled up in his downtown Albany studio to appease his wife, Judy, a printmaker and graphic artist, and to maintain some open space in their smallish

Delmar home.

We're walking toward the magnificent, \$5 million Boor Sculpture Studio, opened in 2003, for which Mayer campaigned for two decades. We're traversing an icy, snow-covered expanse on the park-like eastern edge of campus, across the University's Perimeter Road, skirting a parking lot for the New York State Police headquarters, when we pass a Dumpster. "I'm a Dumpster diver," confesses Mayer, who's willing to root around in rubbish for his art. "I found some great old Geiger counters they were throwing out in this one."

It is early January, and Mayer is putting the finishing touches on "Tracing Change," a 30-year retrospective of his work that opened on January 25 in the University Art Museum. His last large solo show here was in 1985, shortly after he came to the University. "Tracing Change" reflects two decades of balancing the demands of making art and teaching it at UAlbany.

"I was a painter when I came to the University and Ed helped make me a sculptor," says Luca Buvoli, who came from Italy on a Fulbright scholarship and earned his

master's degree in art from the University in 1989. Mayer's concern extended beyond teaching Buvoli techniques such as welding and casting and how to shape fiberglass and aluminum. On Buvoli's first Thanksgiving in Albany, Mayer invited him to join the Mayer family for its meal. When one of Buvoli's early welding projects singed a wall in the old sculpture warehouse, Mayer took it in stride and remarked about the artistic effect of the soot marks.

"Ed taught me new ways of looking at everyday urban life and to retain an openness about the variety of materials available to a sculptor and the ways to use them," says Buvoli. He lives in New York City and is one of those rare artists who makes a living primarily from his art, with occasional part-time teaching at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Buvoli works in fiberglass and plastics in large-scale sculptures,

"Ed Mayer's concern for his students' success has always remained foremost in his efforts."

—Sculptor Brian Caverly, B.S.'99

and he also creates animated films that blend live-action images and sculptural forms. His work is in several museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"Ed has such a wonderful rapport with the students and is a kind, gentle soul," says Terri Boor, a major donor for whom the sculpture studio is named. She's a sculptor, too, and has studied alongside Mayer for two decades. She describes Mayer skipping his lunch hour to help students work out technical problems and finding common ground among an international array of students from Somalia, Russia, the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

Boor remembers vividly Mayer's kindness when she was struggling with a monumental white alabaster sculpture, "Denial," a tribute to poet Robert Penn Warren that now graces the lobby of the University's Performing Arts Center. "I was so frustrated that I'd sit on the floor in front of that one-ton stone and just cry," recalls Boor, of Loudonville, N.Y. "Ed came in and saved it for me."

He's also slyly subversive. Who else could take the everyday materials of your local Home Depot store - cone-shaped wire tomato frames and plastic

zip ties, for instance - and turn these mass-produced hardware items into a large-scale sculpture installation? After viewing Mayer's bungalow-sized, challenging, whimsical and gravity-defying piece titled "Bloculus," you'll never look at a backyard beefsteak tomato climbing a tomato frame the same way again.

At 18 feet wide, 18 feet long and 12 feet high, "Bloculus" fills much of the University Art Museum's first floor and looks like a strand of DNA run amok. The piece consists of 1,152 tomato frames connected across 144 modules - each module being a self-replicating mini-sculpture. The only things holding it together are the plastic zip ties. Although it weighs more than a ton, it appears weightless, resembling a nimbus of soap bubbles overflowing a sink.

"I am constantly and continually amazed at the imagination and energy Ed brings to his work," says Joan Wick-Pelletier, dean of UAlbany's College of Arts and Sciences. "He brings the highest level of professionalism to everything he touches, from working with students in his classes to spearheading the drive for a state-of-the-art sculpture studio. Ed defines what it is to be an artist for all seasons."

Even when that involves Dumpster

diving in winter, the dean might have added. ■

Paul Grondahl, M.A.'84, is a staff writer at the Albany Times Union and the author, most recently, of I Rose Like a Rocket: The Political Education of Theodore Roosevelt.



Terri Boor and Ed Mayer