

Objects of inspiration

Exhibit to include sublime Forever, by found-art virtuoso John Salvest, whose medium was 4,000 romance novels

By [Cyd King](#)

This article was published September 14, 2014.



PHOTO BY [DAVID GOTTSCHALK](#)

John Salvest, an artist and professor of art at Arkansas State University, stands in front of Forever, which was assembled from romance novels. The work is part of a new exhibition at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art titled "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now." It hangs through Jan. 19.

BENTONVILLE -- Artist John Salvest appreciates a good secondhand romance novel.

He values its place in society as a harmless addiction for the lovelorn and as an instrument of art. Salvest, an art professor at Arkansas State University for more than two decades, works in large quantities of found objects, creating meaningful art from otherwise mundane materials -- like well-worn paperback romance novels.

For his 2013 work *Forever*, he stacked some 4,000 of them on a three-sided wall mount to spell out the title in red against a mostly cream-colored background of book spines.

The piece is one of 227 on view in a new exhibition at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art titled "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now." The long-awaited show of contemporary works by emerging and recognized artists runs through Jan. 19.

Crystal Bridges Curator Chad Alligood saw *Forever* about a year ago in Salvest's Jonesboro studio while on an extended cross-country trek to find artists and works for the exhibition. Since then, *Forever* has been shown at a solo show Salvest had at Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York, and at ASU before that.

The piece, 74 inches by 210 inches by 4.5 inches, displays well within its space at Crystal Bridges. "It's like a big billboard from far away but when you get up close to it, if you're willing to take the time, there are other rewards for the interested viewer," Salvest said recently after installing *Forever* in the Bentonville museum's temporary exhibition space.

The books' titles range from innocent to tawdry -- *First and Forever*, *Naughty by Night*, *Man Under the Mistletoe*, just to name a few. Salvest began collecting them in all colors six or seven years ago from flea markets, yard sales and thrift stores, not yet knowing what he would do with them. Some verge on tattered, with yellow pages and curved spines, depicting many years of reading pleasure.

"*Forever* has the unmistakable patina of human use," Salvest says in his artist statement for the piece. "The title of the work refers to one of the longed-for aspects of idealized love featured in these stories. Unsurprisingly, the word also shows up frequently in their titles."

Salvest says he's not poking fun at romance-novel readers -- just the opposite.

"Although this class of literature is often derided, many thousands of people worldwide find comfort and pleasure in these tales of elusive doctors, millionaires, cowboys and sheiks," he says. "It would be foolish to dismiss the Harlequin fan, for we all have an anodyne of some kind or another."

Salvest's creative process works in one of two ways: He has an idea for a piece that involves a particular material then goes out and tracks down large quantities of what he needs, or in the case of *Forever*, a certain object catches his eye and the idea for the work comes later.

"I thought that of romance novels," he said. "It just seemed like something that had a power to it that could be used as a raw material. So in that case, I just started accumulating them, not knowing what I was going to do with them."

Earlier this year, he suspended partially folded newspapers and other printed matter to fill a room for his project *Disappearing Ink* that was well-received at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis. The work lent a sympathetic tone to the newspaper industry. He's currently collecting the plastic clips off the ends of store-bought bread bags with the intention of turning them into art.

Salvest's work has been reviewed and featured in publications including *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Sculpture*, *Art Papers* and *Number*. Among his many awards and grants is a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. He has also done public art projects for the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts in Memphis and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, among others.

He drew international attention with a mammoth work he erected in 2011 on property across the street from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Mo. He configured a 65-foot-tall wall of 117 cargo and storage containers with an in-your-face statement embedded on each side. One side declared "IOU"; the other side read "USA."

IOU/USA's political message was relevant, as debate about the national deficit and budget shortfalls resounded in boardrooms and coffee shops across the country and the Occupy Wall Street protests began to spread.

The project was funded by Grand Arts, a nonprofit gallery and sculpture studio in Kansas City. Salvest said it took almost a year to get permission to build it, and it required around-the-clock security because of where it was.

"State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now" -- aka SoTA -- is unique in that Crystal Bridges scoured the country to find artists like Salvest, who demonstrate great talent but were previously

undiscovered or not commercially successful enough to catch the attention of high-profile museums or other institutions. Officials knew by March that they wanted *Forever* for SoTA. Out of almost 1,000 artists visited, only 102 were picked, with many having multiple works in the exhibition.

David Rubin of San Antonio, an independent veteran curator familiar with Salvest's work, categorizes him as "under-recognized."

"There are many artists who are deserving of wider exposure and wider recognition," Rubin said. "Sometimes it just has to do with, unfortunately, where they're based."

Artists in the larger cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco are able to gain higher visibility because there are more media there, he says.

"As much as I have shown throughout the United States, I honestly feel that being based in a small town in the middle of the country instead of a major metropolitan area has kept my work a bit under the radar," Salvest says. "So the irony of a museum in Arkansas perhaps bringing greater attention to what I do is not lost on me."

Rubin describes Salvest as being incredibly inventive with a great sense of humor.

"His work appeals both visually to the eyes and to the intellect," he says. For a show that Rubin curated titled "Birdspace: A Post-Audubon Artists' Aviary," Salvest created a piece made of black taxidermied birds arranged on a telephone wire spelling out the word "Fly." The work included a soundtrack of bird sounds made by Salvest.

"On the creativity scale, I give him an 11 out of 10," he says. "His craftsmanship is great, his ideas are brilliant and he has an incredible sense of humor so his art tends to delight the audience."

While he may live in somewhat of an artistic backcountry, Salvest and his wife Les Christensen, also an artist, get satisfaction -- and security -- from teaching at ASU. It's an enviable place to be for artists trying to scrape out a living only on their art.

ASU System President Charles "Chuck" Welch has a work by Salvest, *Blue Y* (2011), hanging by the front door of his university-provided home. Welch described it as "a thousand blue Ys"

symmetrically rubber-stamped on paper. It is displayed with two works by French artist Edgar Degas.

"To me it's one of the pieces that really jumps out at me," he said of *Blue Y*, which he deems his favorite in all the home's collection. "It continues to intrigue me. I continue to look at it to see if I've missed anything."

Like *Forever*, *Blue Y* appears simplistic but has an interesting story to tell. The back story on *Blue Y*, according to Welch, is that Salvest lost his parents "and that he had a thousand questions why and that he had a very blue period after he lost his parents."

Salvest visited Crystal Bridges shortly after it opened in 2011 and says he was impressed by the building, the setting, the permanent collection and the first temporary exhibition, which happened to feature contemporary art.

"I imagined that it would be a great place to someday show my own work," he said. "Little did I know that it would actually happen, let alone so soon."

Salvest is scheduled to present a public lecture about his work and influences in Crystal Bridges' Great Hall at 7 p.m. Nov. 7 and at a teacher development workshop the following morning.