

Makin' It

BIG

BY HANNAH JOSEPH

If you're going to do something, you might as well do it BIG. It may sound a little Vince Vaughn from *Swingers*-like, but there is an undeniable attraction between humans and very large objects. Just look at the greatest cities, most frequented natural landmarks and of course the seven Wonders of the World. Overwhelming evidence indicates that bigger is in fact, better. Brian Mackin, owner and artist of Counterbalance, gets this concept. In fact, he's made an entire career of it.



Brian Mackin has created an entire niche market for himself by doing what no one else can do — throwing clay of epic proportions into very large ceramic pieces. Using a giant potter's wheel and his entire body as a carving tool, Mackin builds large sculptural accents for indoor and outdoor design. His classic forms are simple, symmetrical and bold, taking the shape of pins (aesthetically, of the bowling persuasion), bowls and vases. Buyers ranging from independent collectors to Saks Fifth Avenue have lined up to buy these designs for both residential and commercial use.

Mackin says that he originally started creating large ceramic pieces just to see if he could. "I just threw bigger and bigger pieces initially for the challenge of it — the challenge of throwing them and then having the technical problems of having to fire them," he said. "I can throw my weight

and I can throw the length of my arm. That becomes the unit of the amount of clay I can throw at one time. I don't know anywhere else in the world you can get a large ceramic piece thrown. I can throw a nine foot form 48 inches wide to fit in my 50 inch diameter kiln; right now the bowls I'm doing for Camana Bay are barely fitting in the kilns!"

Starting out regionally in the Northwest, Mackin considers his first big success as an artist when he made it to his first New York gallery in 2000. Three years later, he was commissioned by the The Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia to make three tangerine and two blue urns for its hotel's restaurants. This paved the way for commercial jobs, and Mackin has since been commissioned by Saks Fifth Avenue to add pins to several of the company's locations around the country. "Saks was the first huge break that

Left: Brian Mackin, artist and owner of Counterbalance, as he glazes one of his pieces (60"H x 36"W); Center: The three prototype pins commissioned by Saks Fifth Avenue.

made us sit back and think that collaborating with a specific client could become an ongoing business relationship. Now, two years later, we're finishing our ninth store for them."

Not only has Mackin managed to bring Counterbalance to a corporate level, but he has also broken into the international arena.

"We were just specified for Dubai (six gourde-like pieces, five to seven feet tall, for The Palm hotel), but it's just sitting on hold. The bigger the projects get, the more people there are who have to approve the projects and the slower the process is."

Even with the massive growth spurt Counterbalance has seen since its 2001 launch (growing about 25 percent a year), Mackin remains staunchly immersed in the labor-end of business. "I have two assistants and that's enough," he said. "I

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would rather throw clay than manage potters. I don't want to become detached from my work. I'm 45 right now and I'd like to throw as much as possible while I physically can."

With his bold approach to sculptural design and truly unique skill set, Mackin proves time and again that you can follow your

passions and turn over a profit as well. By exploring his own fondness for large proportions, Mackin created a very specific market for his company and has since become extremely successful.

What advice would he give to aspiring independent artists? "Make the forms you want to make and subsidize the forms until they can make money. I bartended and did other things and my wife worked for years so when my art wasn't making any money we could still pay the rent. You can't put financial pressure on it. As your personality starts to come through in your art, you can find a market for those pieces, but if you put pressure on it in the beginning you'll end up copying whatever is selling really well out there and you won't be able to come into your own. You'll always be behind, chasing taillights. Also, don't do craft fairs. I've never met a potter who enjoyed doing craft fairs. They're somewhat of a trap." **DB**



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