

# Austin American-Statesman

## Van Ryzin: New federal courthouse art project celebrates nature both abstractly and realistically

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Saturday, June 15, 2013

BY JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Luminous and variegated, “The Austin Wall” — a monumental glass mural by artist Clifford Ross in the new federal courthouse — is a study in contrasts.

And those contrasts are set to be celebrated. On Tuesday, “The Austin Wall” receives its official unveiling at a free public reception hosted by the city’s Cultural Arts Division, AMOA- Arthouse, the Downtown Austin Alliance and the Austin Parks Foundation, all informal stakeholders in the project, though it was commissioned by the U.S. General Service Administration’s Art in Architecture program.

The 28-by-28-foot glass wall in the main lobby of the new federal courthouse weighs nearly three tons. And yet its translucence gives it the illusion of lightness.

The upper portion features a vibrant, abstract collage of geometric shapes in ocher, azure, violet and amber.

The wall’s bottom third, however, sports a quasi-realistic black and white negative image of a place on the Bamberger Ranch near Johnson City. The dreamlike negative panoramic image captures a fork in a ranch road, each branch plunging off in a different direction.

Even the artistic techniques behind “The Austin Wall” bear contrasts. Though Ross created the composition in part by digitally manipulating his landscape photographs, he also collaborated with stained-glass artisans whose techniques vary little from those used for centuries.

True to its nature as a federal art project, “The Austin Wall” stands as a monumental civic artwork, joining a historical trajectory of public murals most commonly remembered in the Depression-era Works Progress Administration.

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U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew Austin helped steward the project and says “The Austin Wall” is “an absolutely stunning piece of work.”



Designed by artist Clifford Ross for the new federal courthouse, “The Austin Wall” separates the lobby from the jury assembly room. The lower, black-and-white portion functions as motor-driven wall that connects the two spaces. A detail of “The Austin Wall,” a massive new stained glass mural designed by artist Clifford Ross for the new federal courthouse in downtown Austin. U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew Austin helped steward the project and says “The Austin Wall” is “an absolutely stunning piece of work.”

But more than just artwork, “The Austin Wall” also has function. The black-and-white sections are motor-driven doors that pivot open to connect the lobby to a large jury assembly room.

Ross will be on hand Tuesday to speak about his project.

Reached by phone at his home in New York recently, Ross reflected on the dichotomies his work contains.

“I think (“The Austin Wall”) lands midway between where realism and abstraction can meet. And I think that is one of the most thrilling places to operate as an artist. It’s not a picture of nature as we know it, but an abstract composition where color and movement and contrast mimic what you would see in nature.”

The eight-story, 252,420-square-foot courthouse opened in December, a \$123 million building designed by Mack Scogin/Merrill Elam Architects of Atlanta.

Clad in cut Texas limestone set in varying size rectangles that alternate with sections of darkly finished stainless steel, the sleek modernist courthouse fronts onto Republic Square Park, a nicely featured plaza now occupying San Antonio street between Fourth and Fifth streets. The lobby’s east-facing curtain wall of windows allows for tantalizing glimpses of the colorful mural from outside.

Inside, though, is where “The Austin Wall” gains its glory. U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew Austin calls Ross’ mural “an absolutely stunning piece of work.”

Along with U.S. District Judge Lee Yeakel, Austin served on the committee that selected Ross for the project, both serving as representatives for those who would occupy the building. (Among others on the panel were former Arthouse director Sue Graze and former Austin Museum of Art director Dana Friis-Hansen. The Art in Architecture program earmarks one half of one percent of all new federal building construction costs for art.)

“In his art, Clifford Ross is a mad scientist, in all of the best senses of that term,” says Austin. “He dreams big, but has the intelligence, skill and patience to make his dreams artistic reality.”

Though neatly integrated into the building’s design, the monumental stained glass wall actually isn’t the first creation Ross proposed for the courthouse when he began work on the project in 2008.

Adhering to the committee’s desire to see the Texas environs



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A detail of “The Austin Wall,” a massive new stained glass mural designed by artist Clifford Ross for the new federal courthouse in downtown Austin.

reflected in whatever art inhabited the courthouse, Ross initially planned to use his experience creating large-format, high-resolution landscape photographs. Only he wanted to print his landscapes directly onto the pecan wood paneling that lines the courtrooms and judges' chambers.

After all, Ross's nationally recognized portfolio of intensely detailed landscape photographs was what originally compelled the committee to offer him the commission. (Ross's photographs were featured in a 2009 solo exhibit at the former Austin Museum of Art.)

And while Ross conquered the technical difficulties of printing a 9-foot-by-4-foot photograph on wood veneer, he came to a realization.

"What I had originally planned to do would be a disservice to the architecture," says Ross. "My (artwork) would have intruded on what the architects had designed."

So he started from the beginning, again.

A visit to the architects in Atlanta gave Ross a chance to pore over the building's design. And in so doing, he discovered the architects' plans for a lobby glass wall, a functional feature designed to separate the jury assembly room from the main lobby but also have the ability to open up, creating a more gracious public space for events.

Never mind that Ross had never worked in stained glass before — he proposed to the architects that he take the glass wall as his canvas. And the architects agreed.

"It was incredibly generous of them to just give over a part of their building to me," says Ross.

Still intent on making landscape the focus of the artwork, Ross used digital animation techniques to break apart a color photograph of a Colorado mountainscape, isolating colors into rectangular bits, then orchestrating them into a complex abstract arrangement.

"I like the idea of a tiny piece of nature being deployed to tell the whole story of nature," he says. "I like the notion of a modernist abstraction of the colors in a landscape as an oblique reference to nature."

But a riotous field of colorful forms didn't seem complete to Ross.

"The building wanted a significant jolt of color, but that alone would have been too festive. It needed gravitas, too," he says. Thus the black-and-white image from Bamberger Ranch, the result of 10 days of Ross tooling around the Hill Country looking for just the right spot.

Months of work with stained glass artisans in Germany resulted in the finished mural, though Ross took his own best advice when it came time to install last fall. "I decided I didn't want to be there," he says. "I would have just been a wreck."

In the meantime, "Clifford Ross: Through the Looking Glass," a book documenting Ross's creative process and collaboration with stained glass artisan Franz Mayer, has just been published.

And those who spend their days in the new courthouse find "The Austin Wall" a marvel. "Only time will tell," says Austin. "But I think both the courthouse as a whole, and Clifford's 'Austin Wall' itself,

are going to be viewed as very significant examples of American architecture and art for many years to come.”

*“The Austin Wall”*

*When: 6 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday.*

*What: Artist Clifford Ross will give remarks at 7 p.m. Live music on the courthouse plaza by Austin Jazz Workshop. Food trucks Chi’Lantro BBQ and Coolhaus will be on site.*

*Where: U.S. Federal Courthouse, 501 W. Fifth St.*

*Tickets: Free. Photo I.D. is required to enter the courthouse.*

*Information: 512-974-7700, [www.austintexas.gov/event/unveiling-austin-wall](http://www.austintexas.gov/event/unveiling-austin-wall)*

( Original post on Austin American Statesman is [here](#) )