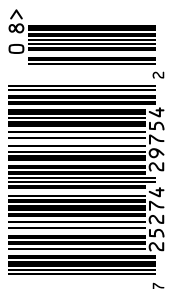


UPSTATE DIARY



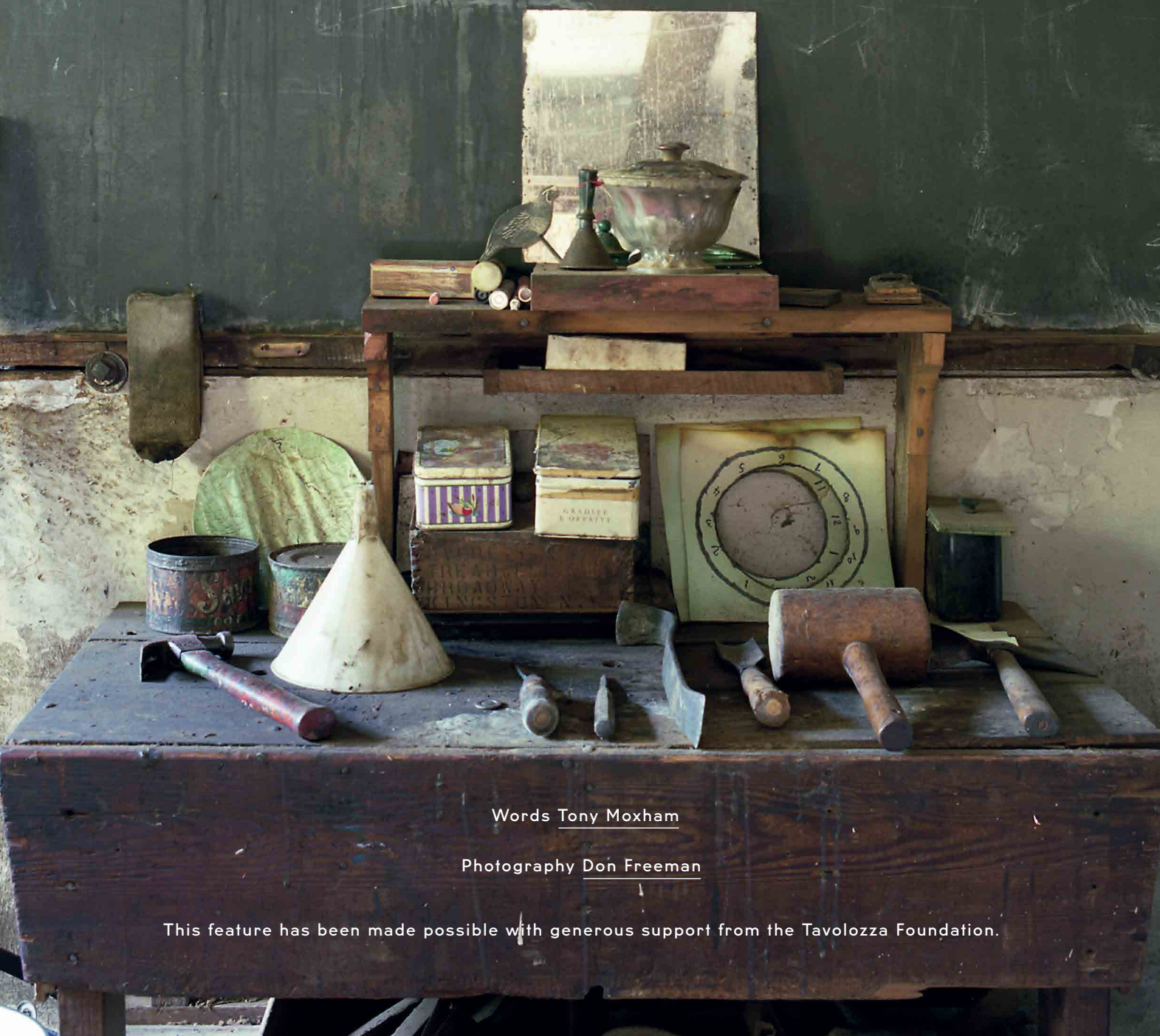
HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Mickalene Thomas / Sean Kelly / Judy Pfaff / Mary McCartney / Donald Judd's *Casa Perez*
Terhi Tolvanen / Brice Marden / Letha Wilson / Georgie Hopton / Kirsten Owen



Preserved Eccentricity

Perfection in isolation — the well-kept home of Raoul Hague



Words Tony Moxham

Photography Don Freeman

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This page: One of Hague's many clocks above the daybed where he took his naps. **Opposite:** Black board in Hague's studio with various tools.

Instagram can be blamed for a lot of things — from the proliferation of Kardashians to the death of language itself — but one of its more curious effects has been on the “house tour.” Once something reserved mostly for genteel aesthetes, the house tour has become a fixture on Instagram, giving rise to the terms “architecture-porn” and “ruin-porn,” which are self-explanatory. But undeniably these homes are also what we crave today — spaces often entirely handmade, isolated or romantically situated, overflowing with art, and most importantly for today’s FOMO generation (those of us gripped by the “Fear Of Missing Out”), one of a kind. The eccentric homes of eccentric artists and architects are often decades ahead of taste and trend, so there’s a lot we can learn from them. Case in point: the still relatively unknown home of artist Raoul Hague, occupied for fifty years until his death in 1993.

Born Haig Heukelekian in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1904, to parents of Armenian descent, he eventually found his way to Chicago and took classes at the Art Institute, a move that would solidify his path as an artist for the rest of his life. There, Hague befriended a number of fellow students, discovering also his own lack of skill as a draftsman. As Hague recalled in 1981, of his time in Chicago, “I learned more from the students than the teachers. I don’t blame that fellow at the Art Institute in Chicago who said, ‘Give up, boy. You just don’t have any talent drawing.’ He was right. I can’t draw. I met an Italian girl. She tried to teach me tango dancing. It was her idea to change my name from Heukelekian to Raoul...

You go into the woods and take an axe and wound the tree. It’s very hard to look at. That’s what you see in the studio, what you call wounds.

Raoul and Maria, tango dancers. But I was very, very poor and I broke away from her, and at that time I met artists, all from the west, and through them I got into the Art Institute. After a few years all of us moved to New York City. Those western students were very wholesome boys, now dead, all of them.” Hague moved to New York City in 1928, where he was introduced to stone carving by sculptor John Flannagan. During these years, Hague’s studio moved from one soon-to-be-demolished building to another as he developed both his artistic style and his own idiosyncratic way of living. In the early ‘30s, now an American citizen, his work was included in a shuffle of important modern art shows that cemented his reputation and, more importantly, awarded him a level of independence he’d never experienced before. While other artists would have taken this spark and dashed with it into the fires of fame, Hague ran away to a cabin outside of Woodstock that was formerly the printing press of the legendary Maverick Artists Colony.

The sculptures Raoul created at his cabin were a departure from his previous work — they were all in wood, and they further concreted his artistic reputation. Through the mid to late ‘40s and early ‘50s his work was included in important shows at both the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art. Sales to both museums and collectors resulting from the publicity these shows generated allowed him to retreat further from the New York art scene and into his eccentric solitary lifestyle through the ‘60s and into the ‘80s. What this isolation and

eccentricity yielded — quite specifically — was a hugely respected but largely unknown body of work, one solitary interview (given to Paula Giannini in 1981, which we, in part, quote here), and his home, whose protection is now under the wing of the Raoul Hague Foundation. Photographer Don Freeman shot Hague’s home originally for *World of Interiors* magazine in 2009 and later incorporated it into his hypnotic 2015 film, *Art House*, a poetic documentary about the idiosyncratic homes and lifestyles of artists; and his images are featured in this article.

Hague’s eccentric artistic legacy is twofold and his home, despite its diminutive size, is a veritable labyrinth of stuff. Hague hints at its early inspiration when recalling his own childhood. “When I was five years old, my uncle one afternoon took me to a place like a store with a stove in the center. An old man was sitting there. He had a paper book and he was cutting the pages. He had a pot on the stove and now and then he would stir it. It was peaceful there. What a difference from the bedlam of our house with six children, the mother and aunt and all. I have drifted to this old man’s peaceful way of life in a cabin. I chose this house because I saw his image here.” Don Freeman recalls in Hague’s cabin an almost identical scene. “I loved his stove, and how it kind of fit in the cabin,” says Freeman. “It was a *really* big, huge old stove. Everything else, the cabinets, *everything*, was black. And when you walk in, you see pots and pans hanging around, and

the little dining table facing these two windows that look out over the yard. That’s where he sat and “visited” with people. He loved to cook. I think he died of a heart attack because he used to eat a lot of bacon, apparently a pound of bacon a week or something like that. The cabin was great for him,” continues Freeman, “it had a concrete floor and Hague put in this huge crane. All the local people got word that he was looking for big trees trunks. So he would apparently ride around on his motorbike looking for fallen trees and then contact the owner and get the tree for free. It was really great for him because the resources were here.”

Over the decades, Hague’s work became less polished, and also larger. “I cut the mass into fragments and I move in it.” Hague said of his process. “One can orchestrate the wood — I don’t have a clear idea when I start. You stare at it, and finally you have to do something. You are not making a story out of it. You make a cut. From then on it follows. Like the jazz musician, music comes out of you. You make one cut, then you become intimate. That thing becomes humanized. It becomes part of my life for the next three or four months. I do my chores around it. I drink evenings, looking at the progress of my work during the day.” Hague’s wooden forms were reflections of both natural and human shapes, “mountains and caves” as he reductively referred to their sexuality. “There is a battle in the forest,” Hague explains, “one growth trying to kill or choke another, like animals.”

In Freeman’s photos, we can see the accumulation of 50 years



Clockwise: A Hague tableau in main room, seen again next to the daybed in image on right. Sculptures by Hague. Tableau of found items.



This page: Main room with stove and tableau.
Opposite, clockwise from top: Main room with daybed;
exterior of the house; Studio with stove and black board.
Another lovingly arranged tableau in the studio.





of life and creativity. Hague fashioned a lot of what he lived with from his own hands, and decorated the walls of the small space with the images of a life that wasn't his, images of women, children, and events cut from magazines and assembled like a ghostly autobiography Hague was never physically a part of. A lot of this imagery was clipped or copied from his visits to local libraries, which constituted a huge part of Hague's contact with the outside world. "In the thirties a friend of mine got me in touch with Henry Miller. He used to send me lists of books to read. I remember the books he suggested. *The Egyptian Book of The Dead*, *Seraphilia Seraphitus*, and *Louis Lambert* by Balzac. I borrowed books (from Vassar Library) for twenty-three years steady. I hitchhiked there at first, then owned a motorcycle, then a Model A Ford, and finally a VW. My reading, as I see it now, because I have no one to talk to, is like a lot of newspapers left out in the rain."

"There he was," says Don, "this burly guy making these really heavy pieces of art, but he had pictures of ballerinas and a Nazi march. There is a feminine naivety about him I found really attractive. He had a picture of what looked like a mother and her two children, but they were probably from a Sears catalog. Apparently if he *did* date anybody it didn't last long because they wanted to clean the house, they wanted to cook for him."

But we digress... the patina in these photos took Mr. Hague a good fifty years to create, and in the world of design and luxury this is something in itself. The Japanese have the term *wabi-sabi* to loosely describe the beauty in things that are fleeting, in decay, in death, in the passing of time itself, and for the beauty in the handmade and the imperfect. Hague was acutely aware of the fleeting, living nature of his materials. "You go into the woods," he said, "and take an axe and wound the tree. It's very hard to look at. That's what you see in the studio, what you call wounds." In places like the United States, where time *really* is a luxury and emphasis has been placed on the new for so long, *wabi-sabi* is something of an underdog's undertaking. It's extremely difficult to convince Americans that anything old has any worth unless it has passed into the category of artifact or antique, and the homes of artists like Raoul Hague balance precariously somewhere between wreck and treasure.

Hague's cabin teeters on the crest of a wave. The more press it receives the more likely it is to gain visibility with a younger audience capable of making it a viral ruin-porn location on social media, a blessing of publicity that carries its own burden. In the case of Hague, an important artist's legacy is literally at risk of being overshadowed by his charming home. Trying to preserve artists' studios or homes can also be a fraught undertaking. In turning them into museums we sterilize them — they cease to function as homes, their spaces fetishized, no longer really illustrating an artist's passions, daily rituals, or work habits. In the end the artist can be marginalized, their lifestyle fetishized, and their work largely forgotten. ■

Art House is available at Amazon. Artists' Handmade Houses (out of print) published by Abrams. Photographer & Filmmaker Don Freeman contributes to World of Interiors. www.donfreemanphoto.com. Tony Moxham's artisanal Mexican design work for DFC and MT Objects: @mtobjects @totaldfc



Opposite: Collage of collected pictures. This page: Hague's sculptures and hot plate with cups.

