

Visions of thanks



Sung Park photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Using organic themes, Johnny Walker created a multimedia installation in the windows of the Scarbrough Building in downtown Austin.

Artist expresses 'gratitude' with downtown display

By Brad Buchholz

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

There are times, especially at twilight, when they look like stained glass — eight sheets of glass, eight sheets of nature, mounted side by side in the tall, ground-floor windows of the Scarbrough Building in the heart of downtown Austin.

They stand out, especially at twilight, all the more dramatic in rush-hour traffic on Congress Avenue and West Sixth Street. Tall, glassy sheets of blue water. Tall, glassy sheets of golden leaves. The images and the colors seem even more vivid when considered from a distance. Stepping closer, however, you'll notice that there are dozens of words superimposed on these colorful image-panels of leaves and water. *Gracias. Fofo. Merci.* All mean the same thing. *Thank you.* . . .

These windows are part of a new multimedia art installation — street art sponsored by the Austin Fairchild Art Foundation — designed to honor the theme of "gratitude." The artist

behind the concept: Austin's Johnny Walker.

Walker specializes in organic themes; he talks about wind, water and light as if they are colors on a palette. In this project, the artist has invited Austin to consider gratitude in both literal and organic terms — placing words over nature, words within nature.

The images in the big windows of the Scarbrough Building are the first part of Walker's statement. The second involves video images, displayed on televisions mounted in the smaller windows that face the street, in which the words of thanks *move*. The words appear, and disappear. They evaporate. They become a part of the air and the water. They intermingle with each other and become a part of something larger. . . .

It's a rare thing in Austin, Thanksgiving street art. So it seemed appropriate to take a moment to talk with Johnny Walker about gratitude — while sitting on a bench next to the Scarbrough Building, at twilight, in the midst of the street-corner bustle.

American-Statesman: Austin Fairchild

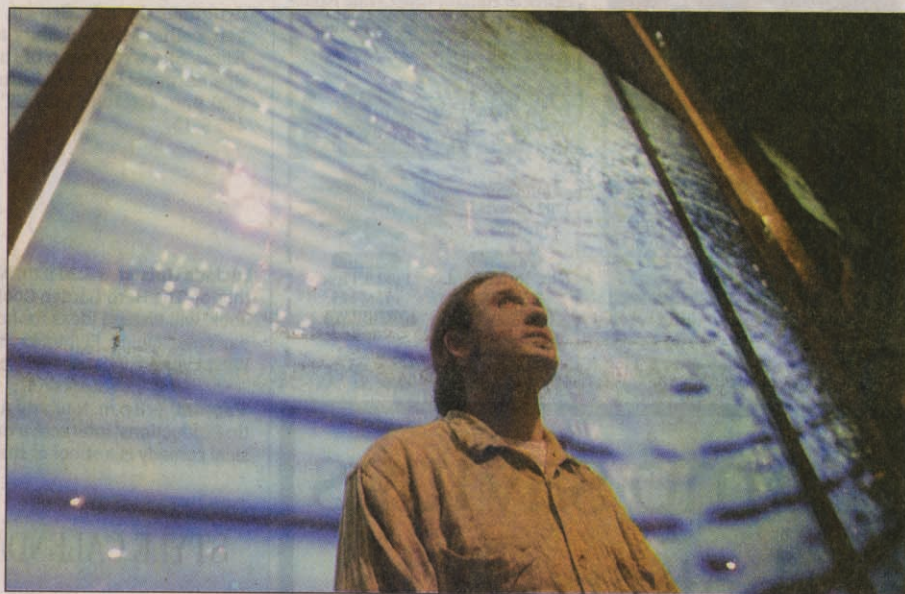
commissions an artist each year to do an annual Thanksgiving art project — but your project is a big step from, say, doing a painting or a poster. . . .

Johnny Walker: I knew the people who own the foundation also own this building. So I said, "We need to use the building and transform it into a monument toward gratitude." This is the busiest corner in the city. It was the first corner, historically, downtown. There's more activity in this spot than anywhere else. Why not use what you have?

I'm very interested in image and architecture. You see it a lot in New York, in Tokyo, in Las Vegas, in London — though mostly with electronic imagery, and most of the time it's commercial. I wanted to bring something here that was completely different from that. Not something commercial, but something devoted to the message of gratitude.

Though you're obviously a visual guy, I understand that you spent a lot of time

See **WINDOWS**, E9



Johnny Walker's display, sponsored by the Austin Fairchild Art Foundation, incorporates words of thanks into the installation. 'The most direct expression of gratitude we have is with words,' he says.



Sung Park AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Jill and Dennis McDaniel are founders of the Austin Fairchild Art Foundation, which commissioned the Thanksgiving Image Project. The project strives 'to

provoke awareness of the things for which we are grateful and to unite people through the expression of gratitude,' according to the foundation's Web site.

WINDOWS: Multimedia artist takes panes and creates 'thanks' pieces

Continued from E1

considering the literal idea of gratitude.

The most direct expression of gratitude we have is with words. So I started collecting different words from as many different languages as I could find. I ended up with about 500 different languages, and 1,300 different expressions of gratitude. I listed them, and I read them aloud so I could listen to them. It was amazing how so many different sounds can express the same notion of gratitude.

In Africa, where there are a thousand languages, you might say *fofo*. In Russia, you'd say *spasibo*. There were some from Central America that were so long I couldn't pronounce them. In Japan, you have probably six different ways to say thank you — and you say them at different times at different occasions. . . . In Tibet, the word for thank you is rarely used because it (the sentiment of thank you) is always implied.

Implied in the language? In speech?

In the culture itself.

So in Tibet, every gesture is related to thanks?

Every gesture between people — which is one thing I'm very interested in. . . . Language is an interesting thing, in that it can both reveal feeling and obscure feeling. So I gathered all these words and started to think about how the expressions work, to (identify) outward expressions of gratitude. But then I asked myself, "What

is gratitude?" And what I came to was: "A connection between you and something else."

Gratitude exists only in relationships? Gratitude doesn't live in a vacuum?

Gratitude doesn't live in a vacuum. It doesn't exist in an individual. It isn't an object. It's within the interplay between the two. It got interesting for me when I worked with leaves that are very fragile, or with things that are passing, like a drop of rain in a puddle. These events occur all around us. And if we can be sensitive to those and be grateful for those — the very simplest things, a breath you take, a drop of water — then everything falls into place. I wanted that very simple expression to happen (in the art).

As much as you love nature — and relate it to the theme of gratitude — don't you still have to admit that things in nature just happen? What does David Halley sing? Rain doesn't fall for a reason — the rain just falls?

Beyond that. How do we deal with natural catastrophe and still feel gratitude. We're at war right now. How can we sit and talk about gratitude? What about someone who has just lost a friend? How do you feel gratitude in that act? I think it all comes down to the fact that we all struggle. We struggle to come to terms with things. And I think we have to be grateful for the opportunity to struggle — and come to an awareness that that is life, right there. It isn't all milk and honey. Hardship is sort of what defines you.

Do you see the drop of rain as something that grounds us?

In the videos, you see a drop of rain land in a pool. Circles open. The circles cross over one another, and the words on the circles will sometimes blend. So there is that interplay. With the leaves, I'm thinking, "Here's this beautiful, fragile thing." I think about the light that passes through a leaf. The thing that illuminates it and makes it beautiful to us is also something that makes it deteriorate.

You've mentioned that we are at war. How have you dealt with that, personally, as you sought to convey this message of gratitude in art?

It's troubling. It's troubling to think that I'm getting stressed about finishing a piece of artwork at the same time a helicopter has just been shot down, and people who were on their way home have just died. That's a humbling thing. But at the same time, the values we're talking about are important, on a ground level. If we can learn to be grateful, to have respect, an awareness of others — and that this connection within gratitude is something that can be shared — maybe these conflicts could be resolved in different ways.

bbuchholz@statesman.com. 912-2967

out & about

Thanksgiving Image Project teaches how to say thanks and really mean it

"What do you saay?"

"Thaaaank you"

This exchange occurred between my parents and I countless times. Not so many times between my son and I, but still enough to make me cringe. While such proddings may teach a certain per-

sored by the **Austin Fairchild Art Foundation** (AFAF), a nonprofit organization based in Austin, in cooperation with the **Center for World Thanksgiving** based in Dallas. AFAF's goal is to encourage the expression of gratitude by visually conveying the spirit of Thanksgiving on a deeper level than the



functory politeness, rarely do they help us know what it means to be truly thankful.


1000 Different Ways to Say Thank You, this year's **Thanksgiving Image Project** installation, will offer gentle lessons about, and encourage reflection on, genuine gratitude.

During the holiday season, the historic Scarbrough Building at Sixth and Congress will be transformed into a monument to gratitude. 2003 Thanksgiving Image Project artist **Johnny Walker** has created a multimedia installation that will fill the building's large street-level windows. Walker will use water, the world's most plentiful element, and hundreds of the world's languages to express thank you in more than a thousand different ways. Fiery autumnal leaves serve as a contrasting canvas for conveying the words of thanks. The artwork is composed of large screens that depict the words radiating out of drops of water and superimposed on diaphanous leaves.

The Thanksgiving Image Project is an annual, juried art commission spon-

sored by the **Austin Fairchild Art Foundation** (AFAF), a nonprofit organization based in Austin, in cooperation with the **Center for World Thanksgiving** based in Dallas.

In conjunction with the 2003 Thanksgiving Image Project will be two companion exhibitions. **Shooting for Gratitude: Kids' Show & Tell Photographs** will feature works by local third- and fourth-graders who—after being trained in the principles of photography—were asked to take pictures of what they are grateful for. This exhibit will be on view in the Littlefield Mall windows on Sixth Street, opposite the Driskill Hotel. The other show, **Words of Thanks**, will feature word art created by local calligraphers in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the **Capital City Scribes**. This exhibit will be on view in the Scarbrough Building's Sixth Street public lobby.

You can view **1000 Different Ways to Say Thank You** November 4 through January 15. The **unveiling ceremony** for the installation will take place **Tuesday, November 4, from 4 to 7pm**, at the downtown **Schlotzsky's at Sixth and Congress**. For more information call **512-370-1910** or visit www.austinfairchild.org. 

—Rita DeBellis