



# Reinventing Repetition

*How an Austin attorney sees beauty in bits and pieces.*

**MODERN LIFE IS FULL OF MONOTONY, FROM SITTING IN RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC TWICE DAILY TO EATING THE SAME MEALS TIME AFTER TIME.** Some run from this redundancy

by seeking thrill and adventure, while others discontentedly submit to its reign. But Austin attorney Philip Durst embraces such repetition while also finding a way to turn it into something more meaningful. Working as an artist when he's not lawyering, Durst aims to assemble hundreds of pieces of things into a pattern that amounts to "something bigger than the whole." He succeeds at this mission, having produced numerous collages that can be found in galleries in Austin, Dallas, and Charleston, South Carolina.

"It's all about looking for what stuff amalgamates into," said Durst. "I wonder what a million of something stuck together is going to look like."

Every day after leaving the firm of Deats Durst Owen & Levy, where he is a partner, Durst retires to his son's former bedroom, which he has used as a workspace since becoming artistically inspired by his wife's quilting about a decade ago. This is where he gets lost creating his collages, often with Netflix playing on a nearby TV. "I think an art form where you can watch documentaries in the background is the greatest," he said, with his characteristic sense of humor. "You realize how little of an actual movie you have to see."

Durst's medium is what many people consider trash. He needs materials that are available in abundance, and he particularly likes bright colors, post-consumer product packaging, and pages ripped from old law books. He collects many things from the result of his family's consump-

*Above: Philip Durst standing by his piece, "Valet," which he produced using parking tickets, acrylic, and tape.*

tion—discarded La Croix boxes, for example—and salvages them from public receptacles, such as paper coffee cups taken from the trash cans at local Starbucks locations. Friends and colleagues also donate items, and Durst is known to give out Tootsie Roll Pops to his students at the University of Texas School of Law where he teaches. He sometimes buys materials online or contacts a company to send him unused packaging, like Dum Dum wrappers. “There’s so much real artistic talent—graphic design talent—that goes into stuff that’s totally meant to be thrown away. So I try to capture that.”

Durst puts in at least an hour each evening, and more on the weekends, driven by his desire to “knock it out.” He starts by sketching a design to assess if his vision is doable and how long it might take. Once satisfied, he collects the desired materials and then faces the most time-consuming part of the process: breaking down the items into dozens and sometimes hundreds of pieces. For some works, Durst uses glue to form the cutouts into their own shapes. Other times, he attaches them flat to the matte board to make a pattern. A typical piece takes about four weeks.

In setting out to highlight other artists’ labor, Durst creates an interesting and beautiful aesthetic of his own. In each collage, the hours of work are evident and the intricate details stand out, such as the way he imparts texture and movement and a subtle, sometimes whimsical yet impactful design. While he appreciates the creative fruits that come from his “hobby,” Durst also



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAVIS GALLERY AND FRAMING

Durst used La Croix packaging, acrylic, and pages from an old law book to create “Final Deliquescence of the Baroque.”

describes the process as being about more than art. “It’s very therapeutic to have something to zone out about and not obsess about,” he said. “It makes me a million times more patient. If you can get into it, it’s like no time has passed.” And, it is “just a hobby,” Durst stressed, “like jogging or being a parent.”

Durst has produced numerous works, many of which are scattered throughout his home and on almost every wall at his law firm—except those within his own office. “I’m not going to stare at my stuff all day,” he said. The one exception is a large desk consisting of a glass top that rests upon dozens of stacked

Topo Chico bottles, which Durst described as “harder work to drink than to assemble.”

Although Durst isn’t “hurting for buyers,” he experiences vulnerability when displaying his art in public. “It’s totally fear-inducing,” he said. “You like people to see it and you like people to comment on it—there’s nothing greater than when kids recognize it as Skittles or Tootsie Rolls. It’s nerve-wracking.”

Despite his artistic success, Durst, who has practiced employment and civil rights law for more than 30 years, isn’t one of those people who dive into creative side projects as a respite from loathed day jobs. “My standard joke is that I’m not going to be a starving lawyer forever.” LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

*Durst will have a show at the Davis Gallery in Austin from March 7 to April 18, 2015. For additional information and photos, go to [philipdurst.com](http://philipdurst.com) and [davisgalleryaustin.com](http://davisgalleryaustin.com).*

*To suggest a candidate for In Recess, please go to [texasbar.com/inrecess](http://texasbar.com/inrecess).*