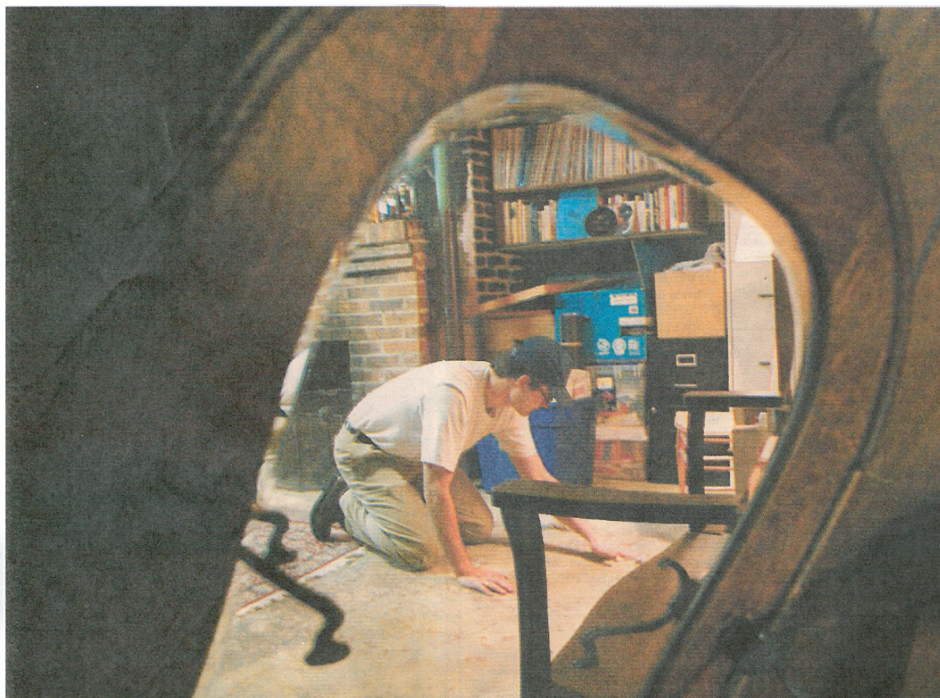


The Boston Globe

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2004

Life at Home

THE BOSTON GLOBE THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2004



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/BILL GREENE

Artist Douglas Weathersby works with dust in the basement of Beth Kantrowitz and Ben Scheindlin of Brookline.

Gathering dust

This artist works wonders with the dirt in your home

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

For the last three months, Douglas Weathersby has spent two days a week at the Institute of Contemporary Art, sweeping, scrubbing, and mopping. He's been paid, although not as a regular janitor. He received \$2,500 as the winner of the 2003 ICA Artists Prize.

Weathersby's medium is dirt; his process involves eliminating it, organizing it, or making sure the dirt, once arranged, doesn't get dirty.

His company, Environmental Services, "brings the conceptual focus of art making to the many cleaning and repair projects offered for your home or place of work," according to his brochure. "It is my aim to provide you with fresh perspectives on your living and working space."

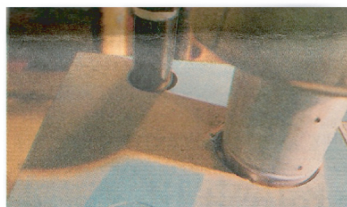
In other words, Weathersby will create a work of art out of the dust and detritus he finds in your house, while reorganizing your possessions — and your life.

Cleaning houses is a time-honored way for young artists to support themselves; Weathersby, 31, has elevated it to an art form.

The process begins with a period of contemplation as he studies your particular household filth — or lack thereof.

"I was in the cleanest house ever the other day," he recalls with dismay. "I had to hunt for dirt. Finally, I did a little water piece on

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/BILL GREENE



PHOTO COURTESY/DOUGLAS WEATHERSBY

At top left, Douglas Weathersby's artwork on the boiler in the basement of Beth Kantrowitz and Ben Scheindlin. "He's made me think of this space in a different way," Kantrowitz says. Bottom left, Weathersby's previous artwork depicts a chair's shadow.

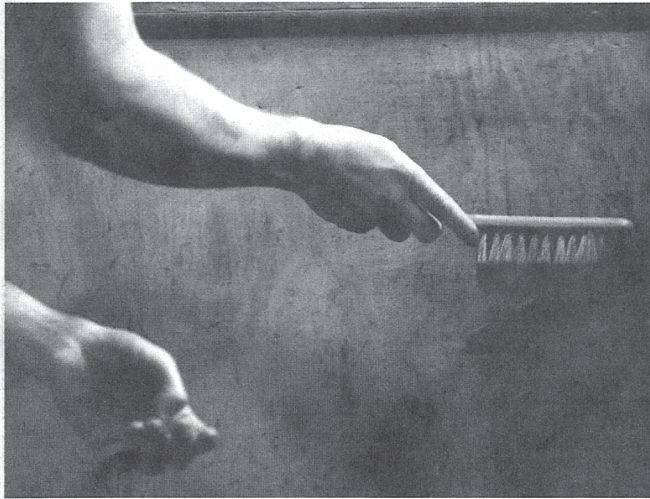
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GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/BARRY CHIN

At left, Douglas Weathersby sweeps dust from the stairs of a Brookline home to use for his artwork. Right, the artist chronicles his work with a video camera while working in the basement.

For this artist to work his magic, dust is a must

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the kitchen floor, in the shape of a chair."

An artist he may be, but he conducts Environmental Services as a business, although one occasionally reminiscent of Ghostbusters. Clients sign a contract, specifying what they want done. Assignments range from rubbish removal to storage construction to making a piece of art in a floor-to-ceiling crack in a masonry wall. His fees are \$20 an hour and up; photographs, videos, and a full project report are extra, from \$350 to \$2,000.

Weathersby has sound credentials for an aspiring artist: degrees from the Atlanta College of Art and the Massachusetts College of Art, and a modest string of awards and exhibitions on his resume. He started out conventionally enough, as a painter.

"I did heavily layered pieces, with a lot of repetitive gestures," he says. "It was just like sweeping."

His signature is a form he calls "shadow drawing," in which he gathers dust into the shape of a shadow thrown by a piece of furniture or a tool or, even, in a poetic pun, a bottle of spray cleaner. For one part of his ICA installation, he spent a day scrubbing an ancient, encrusted sink, restoring its whiteness except for a shape that echoes the shadow cast by the faucet. Weathersby makes shadows tangible, like Peter Pan's.

As he goes along, he photographs and videotapes both process and product. These records are the residue of an art that is by definition ephemeral. His color photographs often zero in on a detail, and lighting is critical. One particularly lyrical image shows light streaming into a barren basement room (his mother's, in North Carolina).

"There was all this mud there," he recalls rhapsodically, "and flecks of mud filtered through the light."

"My sense of beauty is traditional. I like sunsets and flowers."

Indeed, the photo of his mother's basement could be the setting of a Renaissance painting of the "Annunciation," where a shaft of light represents The Holy Spirit.

Beth Kantrowitz was drawn to him because she's an artworld insider. As co-owner of the adventurous Allston Skirt Gallery in the South End, she's no stranger to the farther shores of contemporary art. She inhabits a world where art is made from dryer lint or Cheese Doodles.

Weathersby has become the darling of Boston's art scene: Gallery owners, art historians, and artists are among his clients.

"I used to do more work for normal people," he says, adding that he'd like to get them back into the mix.

Entering the suburban Boston home of Kantrowitz and her husband, Ben Scheindlin, for the first time, Weathersby remains calm and composed, despite the place's discouraging condition: It's immaculate.

"This is really disgusting," Kantrowitz says of the one piece of litter in the place, the Dunkin' Donuts coffee container Weathersby has brought with him. She tosses it.

Fortunately, the project is salvaged when Kantrowitz confesses to a dirty, damp, musty basement filled not only with her own family's stuff, but with that of the previous owner, who died at 90, after a lifetime of not throwing things away and keeping handwritten notes on such gripping subjects as "manual control of gas valve."

The basement is home to costumes, musical instruments, an old fireplace, plastic flowers, and unidentifiable detritus, none of it organized, much of it blanketed with dust and cobwebs.

"A lot of people I've worked with haven't had a clear idea of what they wanted," he tells her once they've descended to the murky depths.

Kantrowitz does. It's "a place where Lily can dress up and play with her dolls." Lily is her 9½-year-old daughter.

Kantrowitz's basement pre-Weathersby was reminiscent of the one in "Phantom of the Opera," only on a smaller scale, and

Lily would probably have had to be disinfected if she spent long enough there.

Like many of us, Lily isn't happy about strangers handling her belongings.

"The one time I had people in to clean," her mother says, "Lily freaked out because they touched her stuff. She wrote a story about it for her school newspaper."

"I just threw everything down here when we renovated the kitchen," Kantrowitz says as she and Weathersby rummage through the rubble.

"You're not afraid to touch anything, are you?" she asks as he sticks his hand into a hole under some wooden boards in the floor.

"I can always wash my hands," he says, reassuring her that when he gets down to business, he wears a mask to prevent breathing in the toxins he encounters.

While Weathersby plans his strategy, Kantrowitz instinctively

starts picking up toys. "Beth, you're cleaning," he says accusingly, adding, "I had a meeting with this couple, and the woman spent the whole time walking around with a bottle of Windex and paper towels, wiping up."

Later, Weathersby would make order out of the chaos in the Kantrowitz/Scheindlin basement,

getting rid of the spiderwebs and designating a place for everything. He even discovered and hung a painting Kantrowitz made decades ago — and he made an ethereal little dust drawing on the boiler.

"Exquisite," she calls it. He, meanwhile, frets about the other, uninvited dust that keeps landing on it.

"He's made me think of this space in a different way," Kantrowitz says of the artist's overhaul. "It's much more inviting. It doesn't even smell musty anymore. He was so committed to the project. It was so pleasant to have him around."

Weathersby acknowledges that "It's neat to come into people's houses and work with their stuff. I

give them an alternative view of their space." This is one thing artists are supposed to do: Make people really see things that have been in front of them all along.

The basement has become the best possible version of itself. Weathersby took what was already there, and cleaned, sorted, and organized so it became a comfy place rather than a creepy one. He hasn't introduced new elements: An interior decorator he's not.

"The biggest job was untangling all this yarn wrapped over everything in the toy basket," Weathersby says. The toys have now been liberated and the yarn rolled into a tidy, knitting-ready ball. He's also created little vignettes with chairs, tables, and lamps that, to him, are fodder for his two-dimensional work.

"I place imaginary frames around things," he says. Looking down at the cement floor of Kantrowitz's basement, with its several generations of colors wearing away, he says, "I used to make

paintings that looked like that." Now he's moved on to a role resembling that of a conservator.

"I like it when designers and architects leave a building's history, or even uncover it," he says.

The bathrooms in the Cyclorama of the Boston Center for the Arts are an example: Boston architects Kennedy & Violich stripped them down as close as they could to the original surfaces, then added elements that complemented what they'd revealed.

The Cyclorama was the site of the ICA Gala where Weathersby received his award. He spent more time in the men's room than strictly necessary, taking pictures.

Contact Douglas Weathersby at douglasweathersby@hotmail.com.

"Douglas R. Weathersby/Environmental Services: 2003 ICA Prize" is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 955 Boylston St., Boston, through Sunday. Hours are tomorrow, noon-5 p.m.;

Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$5 for students and seniors, and free for those under 12 and for ICA members. Call 617-266-5152. "Domestic Archeology," a group show including documentary work by Weathersby, is at The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Jan. 22-March 28. Call 781-736-3434.

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D. WEATHERSBY

