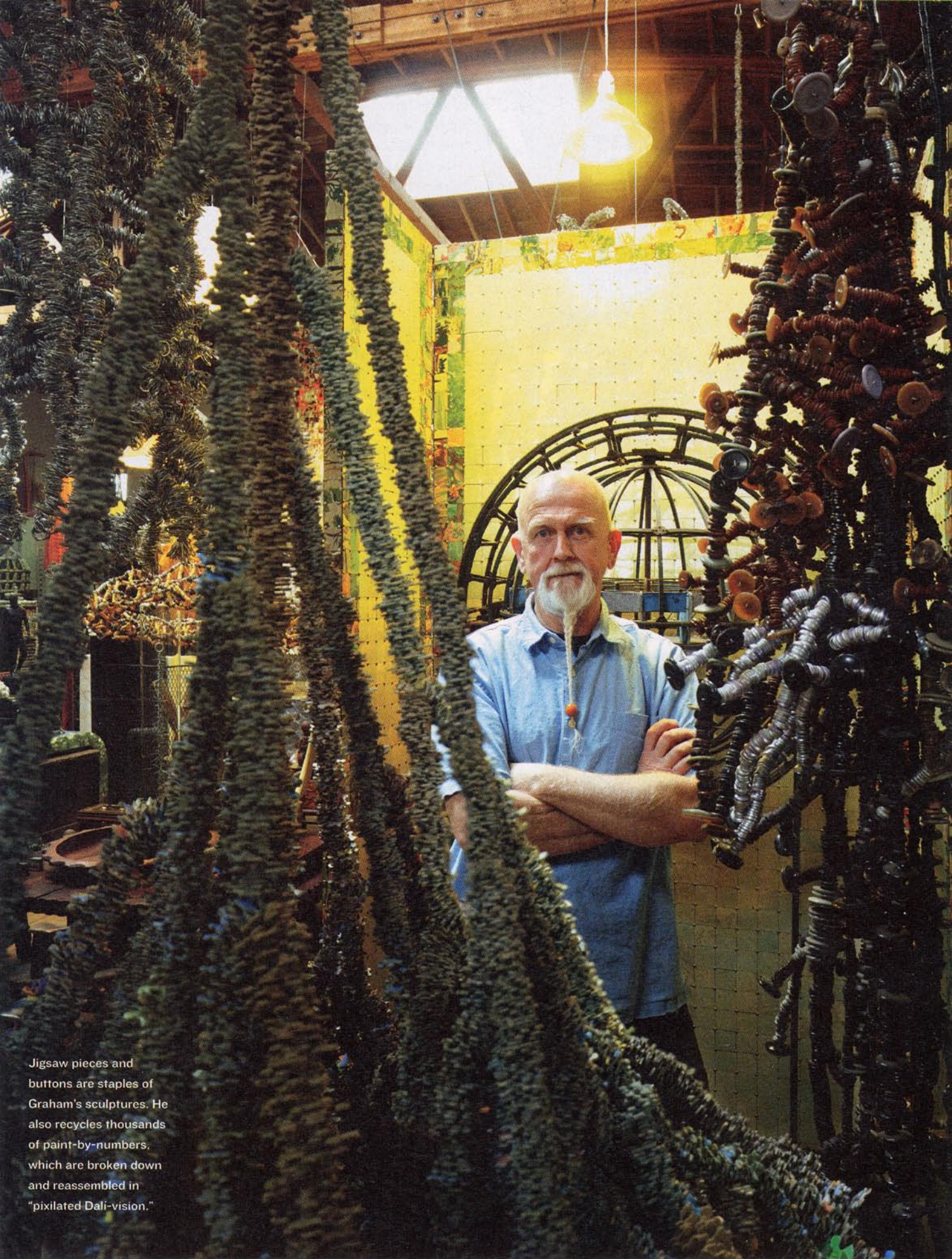




Wonderama

The surreal Highland Park studio of CLARE GRAHAM is elegant proof that one man's trash is another man's treasure *by* MAYER RUS / *photographs by* RAYMOND MEIER



Jigsaw pieces and buttons are staples of Graham's sculptures. He also recycles thousands of paint-by-numbers, which are broken down and reassembled in "pixilated Dali-vision."

“Fine art has a need to communicate something. My work is about simple processes done to the nth degree until the accumulation is significant.”

Clare Graham's work resists easy classification. Considering the otherworldly beauty of his sculptures, one's first impulse is to characterize them as fine art. Graham, however, chafes at the label. As for *craft*, the term unfortunately conjures images of driftwood clocks, batik ponchos and scrapbooking fairs. So what, then, is the proper way to describe his wild agglomerations of bottle caps and buttons? Obsession fits the bill. Alchemy, too. Perhaps mad genius sums it up best. Think of Graham as a Tony Duquette for the 21st century. Like the renowned Los Angeles designer of interiors, home furnishings and jewelry, Graham is a wizard with a hot-glue gun and pixie dust, a sorcerer capable of transforming material of little inherent value into objects of wonder with a sweep of his magician's cloak. While seashells, coral, gold paint and cheap chinoiserie were the stuff of Duquette's dreams, Graham finds inspiration in lowly castoffs and consumer refuse: soda-pop cans, Scrabble tiles, yardsticks, dog tags and jigsaw-puzzle pieces. His mission, he says with a wry grin, is “to awaken people to the potential in garbage.”

At first blush, the concept of a chandelier made out of buttons or a suite of furniture fashioned out of yardsticks sounds precisely like the kind of dreck one expects to find at a lame garage sale. But the grand scale, artistry and monomania of Graham's work elevate it from cornball into the realm of the sublime. His five-foot-tall lighting totem draped with 3,500 rosaries and surmounted by a crown of thorns made from scraps of old wire, for example, resonates with both profound beauty and meaning—however obscure. Ditto his screen of 26,000 swizzle sticks representing countless cocktails in countless smoke-filled bars and hotels.

Graham's compulsive collecting and tinkering can be traced to his childhood in Atikokan, Ontario, a town of 2,300 people. Growing up in a working-class family with limited means and four siblings,

he had to make the best of hand-me-downs and whatever raw material he could find. “Those kinds of circumstances make you frugal,” he explains. “I'm genetically programmed to deal with things after they've had a useful life elsewhere.”

In the mid 1960s, Graham escaped the Great White North for the sunbaked campus of Long Beach State University, where he proceeded to collect multiple degrees. A part-time job at Disneyland in 1968 set him on the track he would follow for the next 25 years. “It was a seminal experience. I started out wearing costumes in the 5-foot-11 to 6-foot-1 category—big animals like Goofy and Brer Bear,” he recalls. “It taught me that sweating for a living wasn't what I really wanted to do.” He quickly graduated to a job as a production assistant, tricking out the stage and dressing rooms of Tomorrowland for the likes of Pat Boone and Patti Page. By the time he left Disney in 1993, Graham oversaw a staff of a hundred as a senior art director for Disney's global network of theme parks.

Self-effacing and understated (with the possible exception of his hippie beard, braided and tipped by a wooden bead), Graham sees the impetus for creating his monumental assemblages as simply a matter of keeping busy. And busy he stays, scouring swap meets, flea markets, garage sales and thrift stores for the massive quantities of material he utilizes. Just one of his organic, sea-form chandeliers includes 25,000 buttons painstakingly arranged by color and size. He estimates he has recycled close to three and a half million buttons for his sculptures.

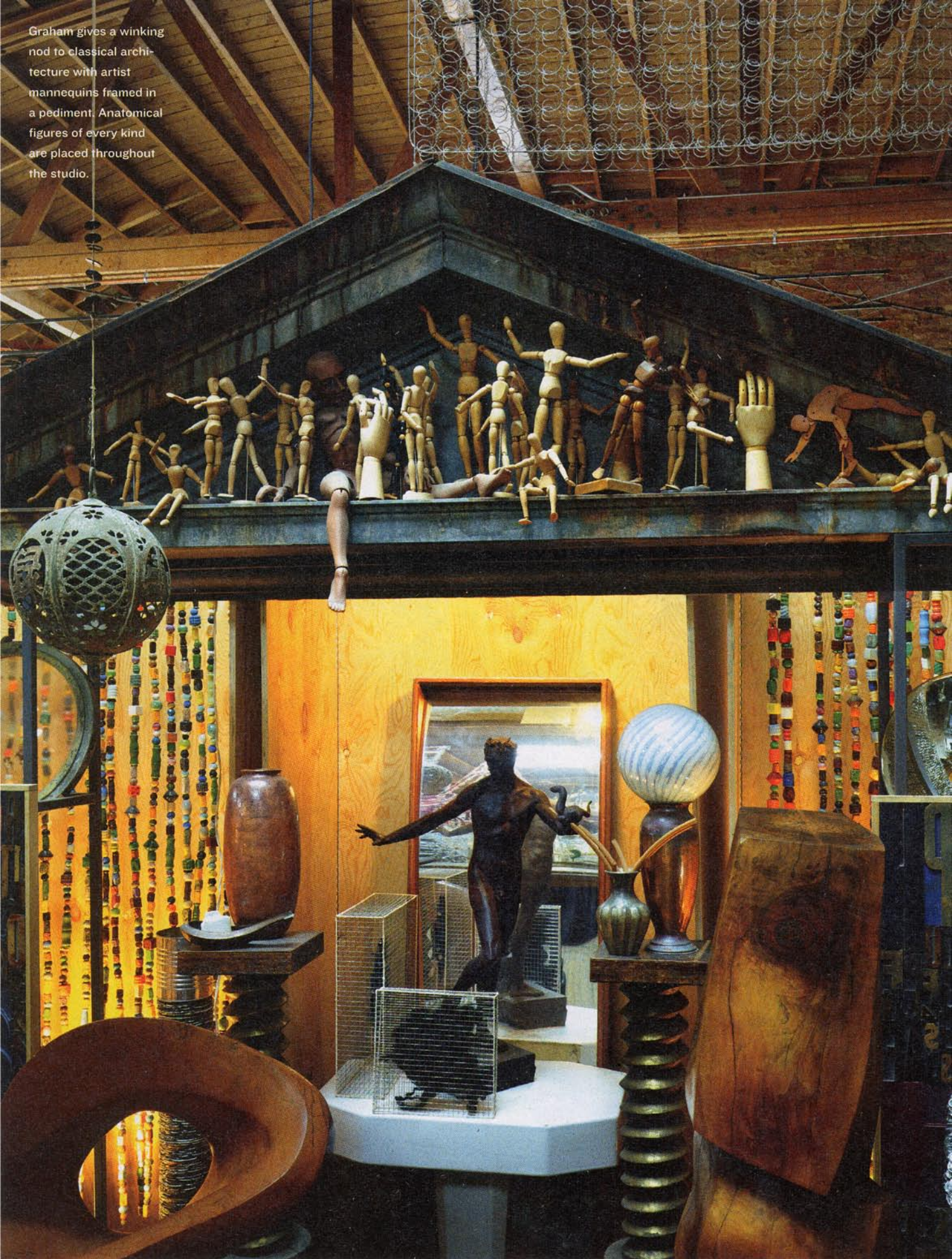
Because Graham occupies a position outside of the mainstream art world—and because of the enormous scale of his sculptures and installations—his work is rarely seen at conventional galleries. It does, however, come to life with breathtaking effect at his studio cum *wunderkammer* in Highland Park. Constructed in 1933 as a Safeway supermarket, the building serves as a showcase not only for Graham's work but for the wide-ranging collections of art, decorative objects, anatomical figures, animal bones and other curiosities that he and his partner, Bob Breen, have amassed over many years. In addition, Graham and Breen have set aside 1,200 square feet for the MorYork Gallery, an exhibition space dedicated to presenting the work of other local artists. At open-house fetes on the second Saturday night of each month, one can witness the spectacle of slack-jawed hipsters and culture vultures wandering through Graham's Xanadu as if they were on some fantastic herbal-ecstasy trip.

“When I was young, my grandparents gave me a roll-top desk with lots of tiny drawers. I was constantly collecting and categorizing rocks and leaves and anything else I picked up. I'd bury a dead hamster and then dig up the skeleton a year later. This building is an enlarged version of my roll-top desk.”

As for the question of art versus craft, Graham comes down definitively on one side. “I don't like the terms *outsider art*, or *naive art*. What I do is craft,” he insists. “Fine art has a need to communicate something. My work is about simple processes done to the nth degree until the accumulation is significant. What I produce is an artifact or byproduct of a process, not a declarative statement on its own.”

That position may be a bit of a dodge, however, because Graham clearly recognizes the significance of the raw material when he talks about his fascination with “innocent beauty” and the “memory trail that objects leave behind.” In the end, though, the debate is probably moot. For regardless of how Graham is perceived by the public or the art-world establishment, the work speaks for itself—in the most compelling, eloquent terms imaginable.

Graham gives a winking nod to classical architecture with artist mannequins framed in a pediment. Anatomical figures of every kind are placed throughout the studio.





Hanging button sculptures evoke the forms of jellyfish, anemones and other sea creatures. Opposite: Platforms and display units are clad in pressed, layered tin-can lids.

