

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE HOME FRONT

July 8, 2011

Southern Past, Modern Present

The Atlanta home of an artist interweaves his work and personal history



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Atlanta
A DESCENDANT of former slaves and Civil War soldiers who fought for the North, Radcliffe Bailey is known for art that incorporates objects and themes from his own life and his family's history. At his Atlanta home, his work and his past are similarly interwoven.

He lives on a heavily wooded, seven-acre lot in the Cascade Heights neighborhood, a middle- and upper-middle class area that's home to some of the city's prominent African-Americans. Confederate and Union soldiers once marched during the Civil War through a trench of the property. Occasionally, Mr. Bailey said, he'll catch Civil War buffs in Confederate hats roaming the grounds. Also on the property is a small, yellow 19th-century home that was used for card-game playing by a previous owner, who lived in a large antebellum home across the street until she died at over 100 years old. The land is also two blocks from Mr. Bailey's childhood home, where his parents still live.

But the house breaks from the typical look of a history-seeped, Southern residence. Made of glass, concrete and corrugated fiberglass, two boxy structures—a three-bedroom, 2,200-square-foot home and a 2,000-square-foot studio—are connected by a second-story rectangle suspended above an open space, revealing the woods behind it. Inside, low-profile couches are surrounded by white walls and floor-to-ceiling glass windows along the back.

Most of Mr. Bailey's work were created in his studio, a windowless concrete room with a vaulted ceiling, connected to the house by a library that doubles as a guest room. (He didn't want a lot of natural light, as he wasn't used to working in it and wanted to be able to control the lighting almost completely.) A Juliet balcony looks down on the space, which on a recent visit was filled with giant mixed-media paintings in various stages of completion, piles of black glitter and a large, mirrored



lantern with a photo emission of a Civil War soldier on it.

Mr. Bailey, 42, often rises at 3 a.m. and works until around 8 a.m., then visits the studio throughout the day "whenever it hits me," he said. Carol Thompson, a curator at the High Museum of Art, said having his work space in his home has made for a noticeable shift in his work. "His space has allowed him to have this very improvisational way of working," she said. "I think it makes him more free." Last week, the largest exhibition of Mr. Bailey's artwork to date opened at the High Museum: a solo show called "Memory as Medicine," which spans his career and explores themes of memory and identity.

Mr. Bailey was born in New Jersey; some of his ancestors got there via the Underground Railroad. When he was 4, his family moved to Atlanta, counter to the migratory trend of the time of African-Americans typically moving north. He studied at the Atlanta College of Art, and his artwork is now in the permanent collections of museums like the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Art Institute of Chicago. Prices for his work range from \$4,000 for smaller works on paper to as high as \$100,000 for a large installation.

Mr. Bailey and his wife, Victoria Rowell, have four children between them from previous relationships, ranging from ages 8 through 22. Ms. Rowell, who grew up in foster homes in rural Maine, said although the ultra-contemporary home is somewhat different from the "antique-y" style she's used to, the bucolic setting reminds her of the farmhouses of her youth. "I felt like I ran 100 miles and ended up back at my front door," said Ms. Rowell, a 52-year-old writer, children's-rights activist and actress known for her roles in "The Young and the Restless" and "Diagnosis: Murder." "I've returned to nature. I'm back in the woods."



Mr. Bailey purchased the property nearly 15 years ago. He then hired a local architecture firm, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam, which had previously designed a satellite of the High Museum. Instead of detailed instructions on what he wanted for his home, Mr. Bailey said he showed the architects slides of his artwork, letting them take the lead on style and layout. "A collector sometimes comes [to me] and says 'I don't like that color.' And that is annoying to me," said Mr. Bailey. "I wanted to treat them like artists."

Mr. Bailey spent roughly \$500,000 building his home and the studio, which were completed in 2003. The structures were made with mostly inexpensive materials like corrugated fiberglass and fiber cement siding. Building the studio without windows

also helped cut back on costs. A 4,900-square-foot, five-bedroom home down the block that was built in 2006 on about an acre is on the market for \$340,000.

On a recent swelteringly hot summer morning, Mr. Bailey, wearing a straw hat with a green feather and white cuffed pants, said he sees his home as something of an extension of his studio, but "more livable." To stay inspired, he fills it with objects and art that inform his own work.

Hanging above the living room's fireplace was a wood sculpture made of four piano tops that Mr. Bailey's father helped make before he had a stroke several years ago. In the middle is a photograph of school children in Alabama, an homage to his mother, a former schoolteacher. "I really believe in making something so personal, it becomes universal," he said.