



PHOTO BY MINDY DUNCAN

Thomas Nolan Finds Treasure in Everyday Objects

BY STEPHANIE KRULIK

Thomas Nolan's clever artistic talent has given new meaning to the adage, "When was the last time you did something for the first time?" He uses everyday materials such as staples, duct tape, glue and paint, as well as found objects from local dumpsters and office supply stores, to create two- and three-dimensional works of art that both surprise and amaze.

The 29-year-old native Floridian has created visual stories from old elementary school desks. His miniature microscopic cities, reminiscent of Batman's underground Gotham City, are painstakingly crafted, often taking several months to complete. For example, Nolan's 2004 *Lemon City* was designed by adding staples and screws to the outer dimpled lemon skin and hanging the small formed piece by a thin wire.

"I am an artist; I have always believed in the very creative aspects of what I do. I like to get into the 'making of something,'" says Nolan. The term "making art" is a constant part of Nolan's speech because he has made art all of his life.

Nolan is one of three Broward County mixed-media artists to receive a \$15,000 Visual and Media Arts Fellowship Award from the South Florida Cultural Consortium for 2005. "The award is really a blessing," he says. "I was overwhelmed. It is still pretty amazing." His work is part of an exhibition of all of this year's South Florida Cultural Consortium Fellowship recipients, *New Art South Florida*, on view through November 6 at the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale. Other group exhibitions in which his works have been shown include *OMNIART II* presented by Omniart Project 2005; *2004 Scope* at the Leonard Tachmes Gallery; and *Alternative Show* at the South Florida Art Center in 2004.

Nolan studied art at South Florida magnet schools, received an Associate Degree in Art from Broward Community College and subsequently received a Bachelor of Fine Art in 2004 from Florida International University. He says, "I think when you are an artist working today and struggling to pay for things, using everyday objects keeps life in perspective for me."

Interestingly, Nolan's mother, Peggy Levison Nolan, an adjunct professor at Florida International University, won the South Florida Cultural

Consortium Fellowship Award twice – in 1994 and 2002 – for her photography of everyday, ordinary family life. "The photographs appeared to me to be like sophisticated still-life paintings," Thomas Nolan observes.

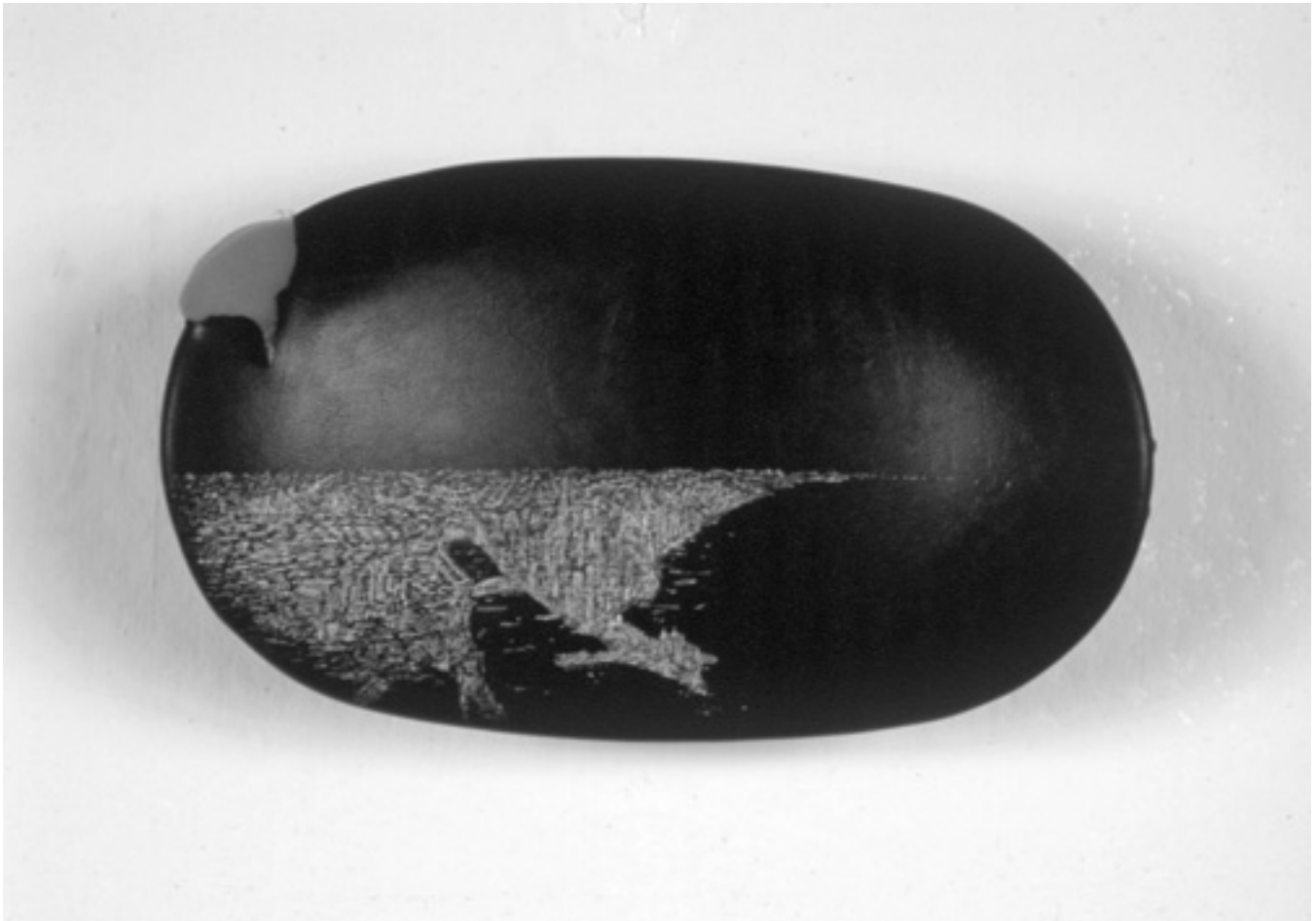
The apparent pre-existing artistic language imbued by his talented family has formed Nolan's own work. At an earlier age, he painted old photographs as objects on a canvas. His own personal e-mail writings became the background for a 1940s first-grade class photo. In another, Nolan's words were arranged in a spiral and provided the background for a 1950s yearbook photo.

A recent trip to Japan with his newlywed wife, Harumi Abe – an artist whose work also contains everyday subject matter – gave Nolan the ideas, he says, "for the miniature cities that I make. The Japanese create 'miniature everything's.'"

Nolan's art studio is a small 500-square-foot building behind his mother's Hollywood house. He created his definitive *City of Staples* here, which is described this way: "Maybe it is a utopian place, a state of my mind. It is a nostalgic, panoramic, God-like view, like seeing a city from a descending airplane."



Untitled, school desk, ink, oil, paint, 2004



R.F.B. Series, vinyl chair backs, ink, oil, paint, 2004

The work's tiny city lights are revealed, much like the soft glow from millions of fireflies, in the overhead spots and fluorescent bulbs above his machine shop gray metal desk. He likes to work here – and he also likes to tie flies here. An avid fly fisherman, Nolan has a job selling fishing boats at Dania's Legacy Fisherman dealership that brings together his love of water and his own imagination.

"I constantly work on a thread," he says. "I try to make something new happen by keeping an open mind. That's what keeps the work interesting for me." He crafted his newest piece, *Untitled*, by rolling and cutting the tape into small and tall tubes and placing them together to form an actual miniature city. Nolan adds, "I like the contrast of the neutral, mun-

dane material (the tape) as I place it on top of a wooden desk already covered with children's drawings."

In his piece *Newerness*, a 1960s chair pedestal is finished in a bright orange color that gleams like a custom-painted automobile. Staples and screws were adhered by silicone and glue. The electric motor mounted underneath spins the chair in circles. Nolan says, "When the chair spins and lights hit it, the piece twinkles like a lady's diamond necklace."

A playful, whimsical piece, *Untitled* (four used school desks), is a world within itself. The desks are attached horizontally to a wall and Nolan provides a narrative story from the shape of the desks. He says the shape reminds him of comic book story bubbles, adding that he wants the viewer to see the objects as he

does. He wants them to know he found the desks in a painter's studio where people were mixing paints on them. Speaking softly, he says, "I hope the viewer understands that I didn't create the desks; I just worked with them."

Nolan's world is constantly filled with everyday excitement. The Fellowship has enabled him to balance his high volume job with his artistic life. He and Harumi plan to take turns going to graduate school.

The language of art has found a permanent home here. "I am interested in the whole artistic dialogue," Nolan says. "I like the continuousness of it. That is the way I make art." ★

Stephanie Krulik is a writer in Coral Springs.