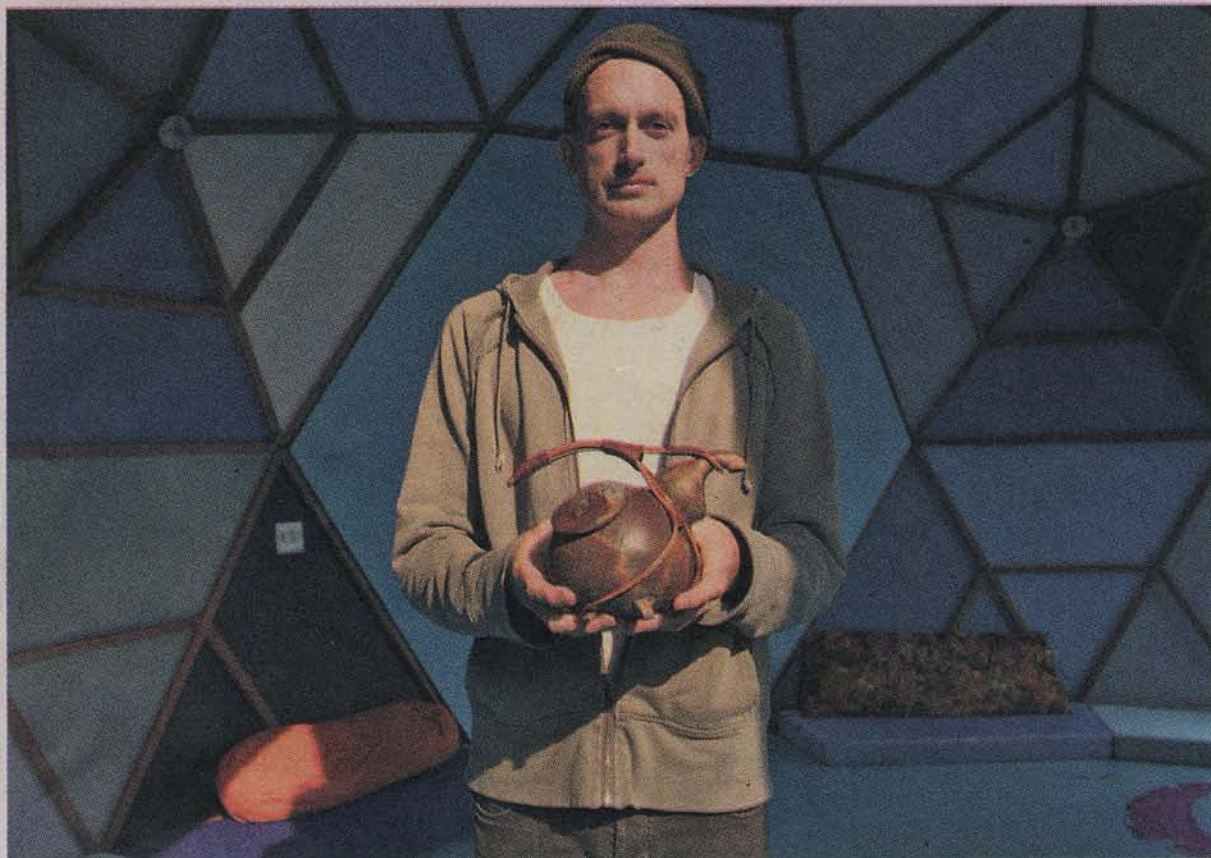


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CIRCLE IN A CIRCLE Fritz Haeg is selling his geodesic dome, but he's holding onto his teapot.

Art and Life, Steeping in a Teapot

By DAVID COLMAN

FRITZ HAEG is not the best-known artist in the Whitney Biennial, opening next month. He has not had a breakout solo show at the Zach Feuer Gallery. He is not being wooed by Larry Gagosian. His prices at auction are nonexistent.

"I don't even sell work," he said with a laugh.

But in an art world growing jaded with such signifiers, Mr. Haeg, an architect by training and a landscaper by nature, may end up the surprise star of the Whitney show. Among the "homes" he designed for 12 "clients" are a beaver lodge and pond for the sculpture court, an eagle's nest over the entry and other cribs around the museum for a mud turtle, mason bees, a flying squirrel, a bobcat and other critters that once lived on the Upper East Side.

Given that Madison Avenue is one of the world's fanciest shopping streets, you would think Mr. Haeg is casting stones. In 2005, for his first nature-ruption series, "Edible Estates," he replanted front lawns in places from Salina, Kan., to London, with vegetable gardens.

But his work is more than simple eco-commentary. From his Los Angeles home (a vintage geodesic dome), Mr. Haeg has carved out an intriguing niche

within modern architecture, performance art and eco-activism.

This is clear even with his new "Animal Estates," as the Whitney installation is called. The beaver lodge, for one, will be stained black. "It's going to look as if Marcel Breuer had designed a beaver lodge," he said.

Mr. Haeg grew up northwest of Minneapolis, near St. John's University, with its buildings that, like the Whitney, Breuer designed in the 1960s. St. John's, a Roman Catholic university run by Benedictine monks, made an impact on the young Mr. Haeg, whose father graduated from the school. "The Abbey Church there is burned into my subconscious," he said.

Today, even as Mr. Haeg is putting his beloved geodome on the market and deaccessioning unnecessary objects, there is one thing he is hanging onto. That is a teapot made in the late 1990s by Richard Bresnahan, who since 1980 has run the St. John's pottery program, working only with local materials, from clays and glazes to wood for the kiln.

"It's one of the only things I'm keeping," he said. He bought the pot, a traditional Japanese double-gourd shape, a few years ago on a return visit with his father to the campus. "The first time I visited Bresnahan's studio, I was blown away," he said. "This is a part of the art world that's really been marginalized:

handcrafts and the stories of how things are made. I don't think many artists think about where their materials come from."

The teapot meshes not only with his ideals equating art's ends and means, but with his retro '60s aesthetic, a blend of pop-kitsch and eco-sincere. "It reminds me of my geodesic dome a bit, the way it's this sphere up on three feet," he said. "And the glaze — it's very hippie, like it's still forming itself. And there's a nice conversation between the light, handmade cane handle and this big orb that's solid and made of clay."

And despite the exalted pedigree of the piece, he uses it all the time. "I drink a lot of tea," he said.

Though Mr. Haeg calls himself a lapsed Catholic, the teapot reminds him of his admiration for the integrated way of life observed by the Benedictines at St. John's: praying, teaching, farming, hiring high-modern architects.

"They really believe that everything matters," he said. "There's something so simple and primitive in the best possible way of what the life at St. John's is and what the clay pot represents. It's sort of a reminder that design isn't just about physical acquirability. It can be a means to a more fulfilled life."

If it doesn't make you embrace the Benedictine creed, it at least makes you think about switching to tea.