High Inflation

by CAROL KINO

Meticulous, mysterious, and temporary, Jason Hackenwerth's balloon sculptures draw us closer to the promise of the everyday.

JASON HACKENWERTH, *Firefly*
New York City (2007), *photograph by* SEAN GILLIGAN

HACKENWERTH

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA—
The sculptor Jason Hackenwerth was standing in his home office here, talking excitedly about his latest piece, soon to be installed in the Guggenheim Museum in New York. "Artists dream of putting something in the Guggenheim rotunda," he said, referring to the famous spiral ramp at the heart of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1959 masterpiece. "It's one of the most remarkable spaces for art on the planet."

In 1989, he reminded me, Jenny Holzer sent her *Truisms* circulating around the museum's whorled interior on a long LED display board. In 2002, Matthew Barney, wearing a hot-pink wig, scaled its eight levels to film *Cremaster 3*.

And now Hackenwerth, forty-four, known for creating fantastical installations with thousands of tubular latex balloons, would have his own shot at the rotunda, too, with a thirty-five-foot-high birdcage-shaped piece called *Aviary*. Made from a latticework of nearly six thousand balloons, woven into broad stripes whose colors would modulate from red at the bottom to orange to yellow to clear, the piece was designed to rotate slowly overhead, so that viewers could see other small balloons, inside and outside the cage, waving gently like cilia.

"It should look like a huge inverted sea anemone," Hackenwerth said, adding that it might also be "dizzying for people as they're looking up into it."

But as with all of Hackenwerth's projects, realizing that fantastical and vertiginous sight would take plenty of hard work. Months of careful planning with the Guggenheim's installation team had already taken place. Soon Hackenwerth and seven assistants (their eyes shielded by goggles and their fingers by tape) would spend over a week holed up in a Brooklyn loft inflating the balloons and twisting them together into segments small enough to squeak through the museum's doors. On the appointed day, they'd be hustled inside as soon as the museum closed. Then, aided by a team of thirty, Hackenwerth would link the segments together and suspend them from rigging near the skylight, all in the space of about half an hour.

"That's a guesstimate, of course," Hackenwerth said of his figures. "But I wouldn't be surprised if it were exactly that. I've been doing this a long time. It's a bank job."

Yet like a performance, a fragrance, or anything else whose best expression is fleeting and transitory, *Aviary* existed for only one night—April 2, 2014—undulating gently as guests gathered beneath it for a gala honoring

JASON HACKENWERTH, *Bang Bang Boom*
Camden, Maine (2012)

JASON HACKENWERTH, Installation of *Aviary*
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2014), *photograph by* SEAN GILLIGAN

the thirtieth anniversary of the Guggenheim's Works & Process series. As things turns out, it wasn't the end after all: *Aviary* was swiftly hustled out in pieces to Catskill, a small town in the Hudson River Valley, where it went on view in a different form for another month. But barring that reprieve, which came at the eleventh hour, *Aviary* would have met its fate that night, popped into six thousand or so tiny pieces by Hackenwerth himself, wielding a box cutter. "I'm just as happy either way," he said.

This blend of whimsy, ephemerality, and technical prowess seems typical of the projects Works & Process has always showcased. Founded by the philanthropist Mary Sharp Cronson in 1984, with a preview of Philip Glass's opera *Akhnaten*, it's thought to be the first performing-arts program offered by an American museum. In a recent conversation, Cronson said that her original idea had been to have the series function as "a stage, which gave people an opportunity to show new work, and to explain what they had in mind." Many museums now host performance series of their own, but before hers came along, "no-one had thought of doing it that way," Cronson said. "We created a formula of performance and discussion, performance and discussion. It was new then, and I think it is still new."

Over the years, the series has given a platform to choreographers like Trisha Brown and Edward Villella, directors like Peter Brook, composers like Robert Wilson, and playwrights like Sarah Ruhl. Sometimes the event explores a particular work; other times it tackles performance issues, such as the subtleties of dance partnering or setting poetry to music.

Cronson frequently commissions new work, too, and that's how Hackenwerth came her way, when he devised the sets for Larry Keigwin's 2011 *Balloon Dance*, in which dancers echoed the movements of long balloons that swayed like reeds around the edges of the stage. Later that year, Works & Process invited Hackenwerth to collaborate on its annual

JASON HACKENWERTH, *Emerald Sunrise*
Abu Dhabi, UAE (2013)

performance of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. He concocted several biomorphic sculptures inspired by characters in the tale; suspended from rigging and counterbalanced against each other, they hovered over the audience's heads each night like a mammoth Alexander Calder mobile.

According to Caroline Cronson, Mary Sharp's daughter-in-law and the special-events producer for the series, the show was a hit. So when she and her mother-in-law began planning the gala—the first in the program's history—they turned to Hackenwerth again.

"We're talking an iconic space in the middle of one of the most famous buildings in the world, so you don't want flowers," Caroline Cronson said. "You want something that speaks to the building and to the space." And Hackenwerth specializes in "work that is serious, but doesn't look serious," she added. "For a celebration, it's perfect."

Hackenwerth's mastery of this unusual medium is rooted in his childhood. He grew up outside St. Louis, Missouri, an only child in a single-parent home who spent hours making drawings. His mother often supplemented their income by trawling the St. Louis Union Station Mall on weekends, dressed as a clown and making balloon animals for tips. Once he started art school, he sometimes worked alongside her. "We made ends meet that way," he said. But by then, balloons had become "my dark secret that I didn't want anyone to know because I felt it was horribly embarrassing and cheesy. I wanted to be a serious artist."

For several years, first as an undergraduate at Webster University in St. Louis, and then as an MFA student at Savannah College of Art and Design, Hackenwerth stuck to traditional media, like drawing, painting, and printmaking. In 2003, for his last semester at SCAD, he won the school's coveted residency in New York. There, he began making forays into more sculptural work, with pieces that combined printing plates and lush pours of beeswax into rectangular compositions that could be read as reliefs, assemblages, or paintings.

"One curator thought that they looked almost like fetish objects," Hackenwerth said, "because they were so meticulously made."

Although he had twisted balloons to supplement his income at school, Hackenwerth vowed never to do it in New York. Instead, he worked in galleries, doing everything from assisting with sales to handling art. Along the way he worked for the Scope Art Fair, whose executive producer, Michael Sellinger, became one of a privileged few to learn Hackenwerth's secret: to make some much-needed cash, he sometimes broke down and hit Central Park, selling balloon creatures. Not just dogs and giraffes, but swords, belts, even elaborate hats.

"In the years I'd had to do it, I'd become very skillful," Hackenwerth said. "I could make anything, and I was very funny"—talents that eventually won him a birthday-party clientele and a lucrative yearlong contract with the toy store F.A.O. Schwartz.

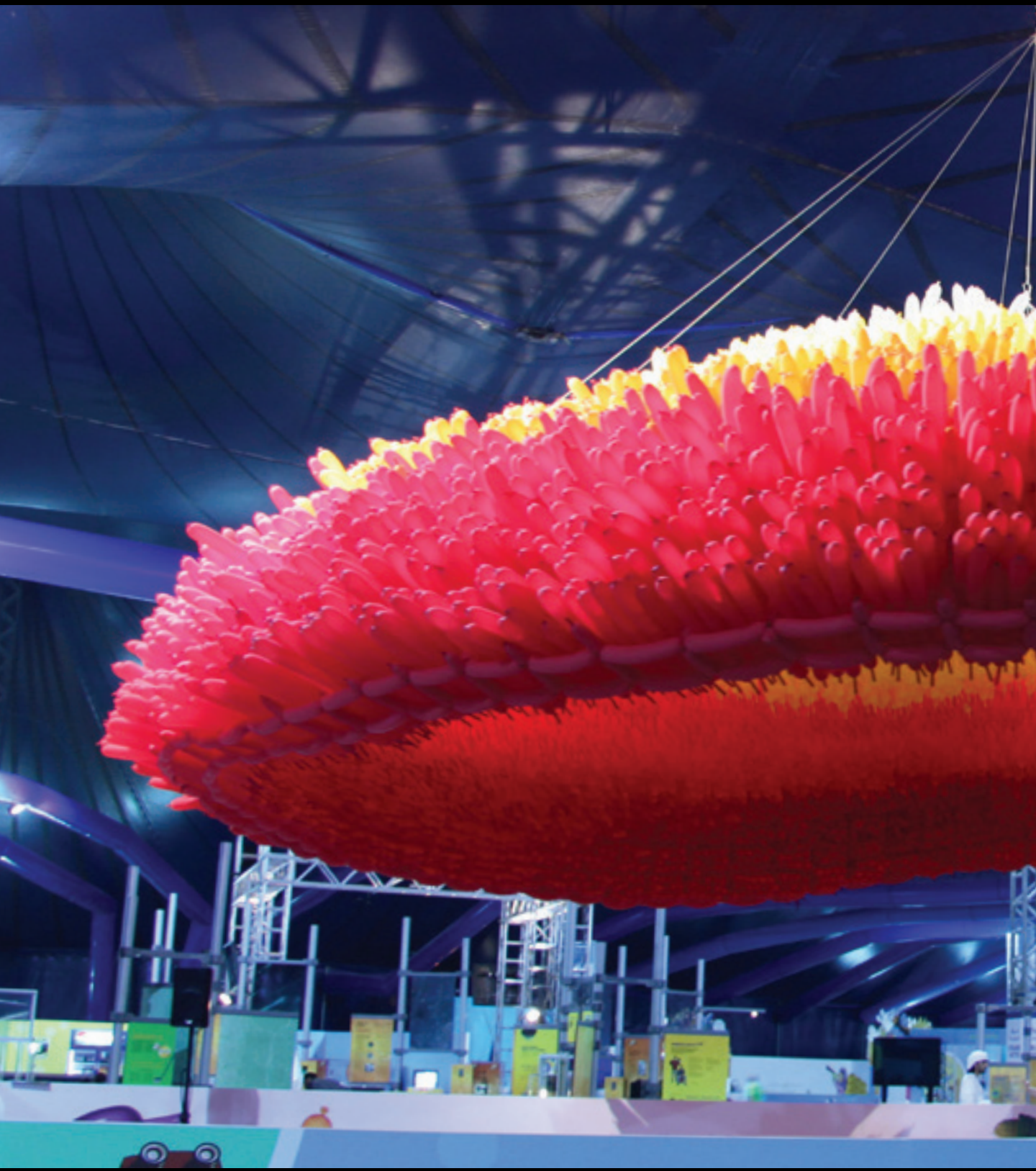
"What he was developing for people was so artistic," Sellinger said. "At some point, I said, 'Why don't you try to do something with balloons?'"

After all, they have an art pedigree of their own: think of Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* sculptures, made from helium-filled Mylar pillows, or Jeff Koons's balloon dog sculptures, or Turner Prize–winner Martin Creed, who has often used them to fill entire rooms.

Taking Sellinger's cue, Hackenwerth experimented in subway stations, making stalagmite- and stalactite-like shapes that he'd glue to the walls or floor when transit cops weren't looking. His girlfriend at the time, Anna Ortt, who went on to become a partner at New York's Lyons Wier Ortt Gallery, likened them to graffiti. "The train would come and these little things would wave back and forth," she said. "They seemed alive."

JASON HACKENWERTH, *Dance of the Honey Bee*
Manchester, UK (2013)

But the real breakthrough came in 2004, when Sellinger sent Hackenwerth to make an installation at the first SCOPE fair in London. His first try, which took three sleepless days, covered the hotel-lobby walls with flame-shaped clusters of balloons, intended to evoke the Great Fire of London in 1666. A cleaning



JASON HACKENWERTH, *Corona*
Abu Dhabi, UAE (2013)

crew, interpreting it as a prank ("the Brits thought they were little willies," Ortt explained), removed it as soon as he took a nap. Hackenwerth, despairing, suddenly found himself making a sculpture: a translucent container bursting with odd biomorphic forms that suggested long grasses, blossoming buds, stamens, pistils, or Duchampian breasts.

"It was a revelation that it was really his new medium," Ortt said.

That same year, SCOPE sent him to its Miami fair; the next, to the Venice Biennale. There, because children kept stealing the work, Hackenwerth said, he devised insect-like shells, bristling with phallic-looking quills, and wore them around the city, hurling the projectiles at passersby. Called *Megamites*, these new works were inspired by New York's bedbug epidemic. "The art world was ramping up again, and New York was a hot place to be," Hackenwerth said. "I wanted to bring something that was about New York to that international audience."

The *Megamites* evolved into a series of wearable sculptures, which soon turned up at places like Jeffrey Deitch's 2005 Art Star Parade and the 2007 Coachella Music Festival. Meanwhile, Hackenwerth was also showing balloon installations in New York galleries like the Proposition and museums like the Jang Heung Art Park in Seoul, where his work appeared in 2006 alongside that of Takashi Murakami. In another 2006 show, *Revenge of the Megadon*, for Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History, he hung giant-sized microbial forms over the skeletons in the dinosaur hall, where they cast kaleidoscopic shadows and seemed to emit primal groans. (The soundtrack was sampled from the sounds of balloons squeaking and popping as Hackenwerth twisted them into place.)

In 2009, Hackenwerth entered the first year of ArtPrize, an annual art competition in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where contestants are judged by popular vote. His submission, a crustacean-like creation that hung in the lobby of the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, proved so popular that he took seventh place out of more than 1,200 contestants. Kevin Buist, ArtPrize's director of exhibitions, recalled the piece as "really memorable."

"People love labor-intensive, large-scale transformations of mundane materials," Buist said, and they understand balloons because just about everyone has blown one up. But the way Hackenwerth transforms them is "surprising and alluring," he added, because "it's never quite clear what they're supposed to be," even though they suggest crustaceans and insects (and even though their prongs and hollows and bulges can be quite sexually suggestive, too).

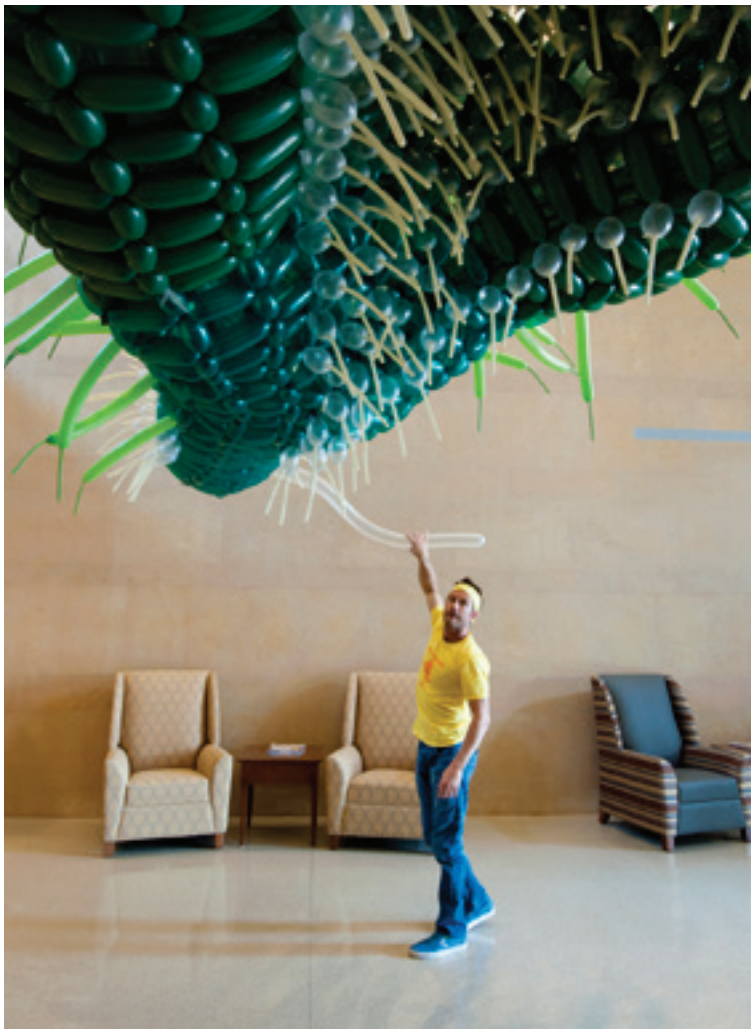
David Hoey, creative director for Bergdorf Goodman in New York, who commissioned Hackenwerth to make five window vignettes in early 2011, noted that the work's surprise and allure intensifies as it changes over time. (Bergdorf's has a long history of involving contemporary artists—from Warhol to Damien Hirst and Rob Pruitt—in its window displays.) At first, the balloons had a lush, waxy bloom, but "toward the very end of their life span," Hoey said, "when they started sputtering out and deflating, that's when they got interesting. It's like the way a rose starts to turn—it speaks volumes about time passing."

> ***"People love labor-intensive, large-scale transformations of mundane materials."***

Hoey also recalled being fascinated by the ingenious techniques that Hackenwerth used to build his work: weaving and twisting the balloons together, or inflating them to different levels to change the way they float, intertwine, or droop, and to modulate the way light glows through them. Hackenwerth calls it "a kind of architecture," and says, "There's no limit to the strength that I can get."

Yet balloons are only one of many media he is working with today. Since 2012 he has been making what he calls "cloud caves" from the translucent polypropylene plastic he uses to wrap balloons. Carefully shaped and gently inflated with fans, the material is transformed into misty-looking mazes and caverns, creating an effect that, Hackenwerth said, is "like holding fog." Since 2012 they've been shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Garage in Moscow, and the Skybox in Philadelphia, where Hackenwerth constructed his most elaborate cloud cave yet last year. The curator, Eileen Tognini, described it as "a tunneling and cut-and-tailored form that created this otherworldly space."

JASON HACKENWERTH, *Alien Rainforest*
(2008), *photograph by* SEAN GILLIGAN



Hackenwerth also works with plywood and Styrofoam, creating mobiles that suggest the skeleton of a sea creature or a boat, or a long scribbled line. Fit together without nails or glue, they waft gently as people walk past them. "The real goal," Hackenwerth said, "was to see if I could use only gravity to hold these things together. I wanted them to be permanent, but they have to have a buoyancy and a cadence and rhythm. It's my tribute to Calder."

At Hackenwerth's home in Florida, where he and his wife moved last year, the walls are covered with drawings for other inventive works, like a ten-foot-diameter bubble-making machine, which he plans to show at the Museum of Oaxacan Painters in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2017, and a highway off-ramp called *Leap of Faith*. "It goes way up into the air and then just stops," he said, the idea being to "point to our potential to go beyond the automobile."

In fact, Hackenwerth added, creating a sense of potential is what his work is really all about. The trait that balloons, plywood, and plastic all share is that "they're very accessible, they're inexpensive, and they're common," he said. "And if you surprise people by using those materials in a transformational way, perhaps you can point to their own potential for transcendence." ⧗

JASON HACKENWERTH with *The Trinity Project*
Webster University, St. Louis, MO (2012), *photograph by* INOCENCIO BOC