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HOME Assemblage

Assemblage artist Dan Dowd lives in what could be considered his largest art installation

BY **JORGE S. ARANGO** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ERIN LITTLE**

About 25 years ago, Massachusetts-born Dan Dowd was in Boston painting landscapes after attending art school and living in an old house filled with antique Empire furniture and family heirlooms. "I was calling myself an artist, but I was really making very little art," he admits. "Though I was a landscape painter, I was also interested in assemblage and materials. I've always been fascinated by painterly mess. So my move to Maine was a conscious decision not to work for someone else so that I could pursue art."

Dowd's plan worked for the most part. The landscapes are now history. He is indeed making assemblage art from old clothes, rubber tires, pieces of rebar, and other materials, many rummaged from a beloved transfer station near his current home in Phippsburg (he is represented by Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland). Not surprising for a working artist, however, Dowd also moonlights as a security guard at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

His home, too, represents an aesthetic shift, one closely paralleling his turn of focus toward a more modern art form. A quick glance reveals, irrefutably, that his love of assemblage and "painterly mess" also pervades his entire lifestyle and environment. "It was a challenge to figure out what to embrace with this house," he concedes. "I came with antiques but ended up spinning the house more midcentury and industrial." He did so, however, without abandoning his former aesthetic, amalgamating old and new viewpoints into a fascinatingly eclectic salmagundi.

Dowd says he liked this 1,800-square-foot building for its three bedrooms and separate studio: "I felt like it was in overall good shape, had an interesting layout, and I thought I could work with it." It had been built as a year-round residence in 1978, but he discovered that the former owners had used the house only seasonally and neglected the structure. "It wasn't long before I realized it wasn't airtight, so I spent



some months chasing leaks, which eventually led to replacing the windows on the ocean side," he recalls.

Swapping out these windows with modern versions helped Dowd pivot his aesthetic notions about what he wanted from his new abode. "I was going to give it a traditional spin," he recalls, one that would accommodate the style of his furniture from Boston. "Sometimes people have this initial idea of what a house is going to be like. But it can change."

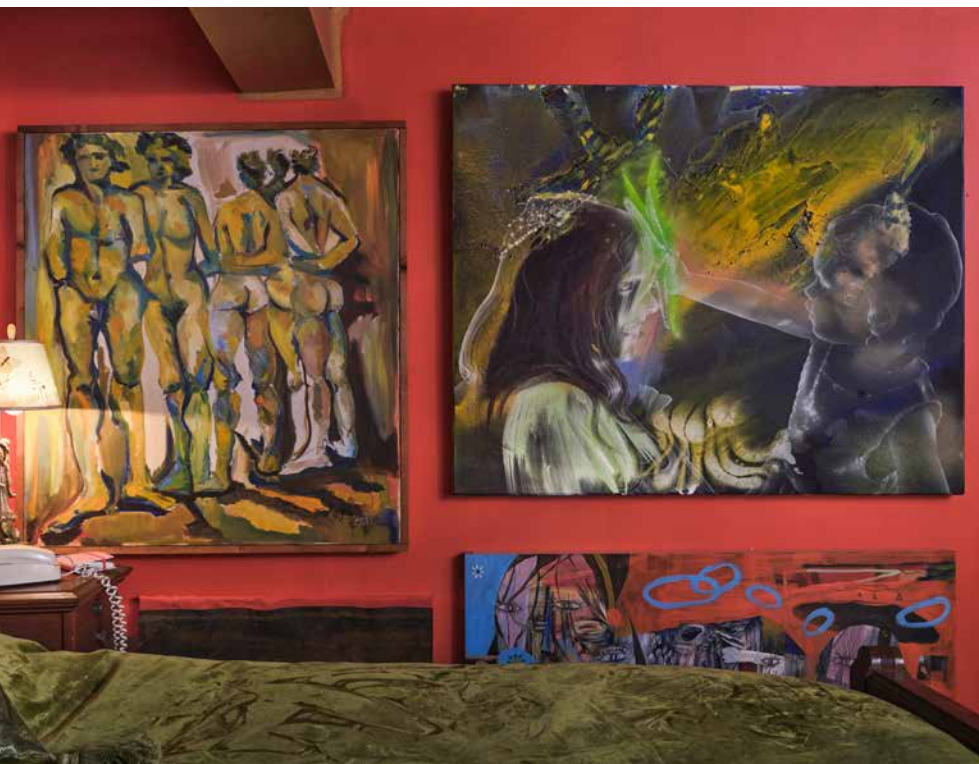
Before getting to interiors, however, he had other headaches to address. Doing all the work himself with help from his long-time partner, David Tosches, he says, "I had to patch it up a lot to make it airtight, and I added a furnace. Everything was a shade of light pink, and it had 1970s carpeting and linoleum." Structurally, he modified the staircase that led from the downstairs bedrooms to the living area on the second floor, substituting it for a switchback-style stairwell, at the top of which he added a wall. The latter mainly functioned to accommodate two enormous landscape canvases by Tel Aviv-born Shlomith Haber-Schaim (today almost 100 years old and living in Jerusalem), whom Dowd had met in Boston in the 1980s. One hangs on each side of the wall. It also served to break up the open-plan space, partially delineating a dining area and hiding the stairs.



Dowd clad the house with Galvalume, a sheet-metal siding coated in an aluminum-zinc alloy; ripped up the carpeting (replacing it with 26-gauge sheet-metal plates and wide-plank flooring in other rooms); and, inspired by frescos he loved, painted the walls a vivid scarlet red. The kitchen and ceilings got a coat of moody charcoal gray, an idea he took from a restaurant in Beacon, New York. The color scheme was a two-pronged strategy: "I wanted the room to feel cozy and inviting," he notes. "But it was also a way of using color and finishes to disguise things I didn't like, such as the kitchen cabinets and closet doors. I'd rather modify something to my liking. I'm not a fan of ripping it out. I don't like wasting resources." Spoken like a true assemblage artist.

The result is a stunningly idiosyncratic backdrop for a mix of furniture that encompasses Eastlake pieces from his Boston residence (and at least one from the transfer station) and

The dining room (below) features Thonet chairs around a nineteenth-century table under a 1960s light fixture. The kitchen's stainless steel backsplashes came from Lebel's Heating and Sheet Metal in Lewiston. German ceramic mineral water bottles line the sill, while overhead is a fixture made of Chinese Joss paper.



(Opening spread) Assemblage artist Dan Dowd in his Eames lounge chair being watched by one of a couple plaster busts.

By Dowd's red door from Hammond Lumber Company (above), are various of his assemblages. Dowd's bedroom (left) boasts a flea market nude next to an Emilie Stark-Menneg painting.





Dowd clad the home in Galvalume siding from Copper Tops in Brunswick and added trellises to dissimulate the amount of steps on the facade. He also reconfigured the deck and replaced windows on the ocean side of the house with Harvey models from Wiscasset Glass. In front of the trellis hangs one of Dowd's pinecone sculptures.

newly acquired midcentury furniture purchased from estate auctions, antique shops, flea markets, and yard sales. Among them are Thonet dining chairs, a pair of Barcelona chairs, a lounge and ottoman by the Eameses, a Jens Risom credenza, a white chair by Joe Colombo—all in the living room—as well as other 1950s and 1960s pieces with no particular provenance. Sprinkled throughout are family heirlooms, such as Dowd's grandparents' antique clock and Victorian platform rocker and a tall dresser that, he says, "came from a secondhand furniture store, which my dad and I refinished when I got my own bedroom in 1976."

Dowd clearly has an egalitarian eye for design. Into the mix he threw various Asian pieces—everything from a gold-glazed Chinese garden stool snatched from the side of the road and a Chinese carved-wood planter (atop a low sixteenth-century English chest) to a Tang dynasty horse and a ceramic *Guardian* sculpture by contemporary Korean American artist Hayun Surl. There is a circa-1800s boxed moth collection in the primary bedroom, an artifact from a film in which Dowd served as an extra. A rustic carved console with cabriole legs, used as a display table at a now-closed interiors shop in Biddeford Pool, stands next to the Eames lounge. There is even a petrified mouse (a deceased resident of his former house) in a shadowbox frame as well as some metal springs Dowd salvaged because they emanated a sculptural presence.

Light fixtures range from kitschy lamps ("As much as I think they're very beautiful, there's something animated and fun about them that adds action and a little levity to more serious spaces," he observes) to Jetsons-style 1960s versions to a pendant light made from whiskey barrel slats and a shade fashioned from a Tupperware cup. Incurably analog, Dowd also has—gasp!—a landline, plugged into various push-button Trimline phones (which were introduced in 1965).

Dowd's taste in art is similarly eclectic. There are many Maine artists in his collection, including Matt Demers, Cuban-born Bowdoin grad Abelardo Morell, the late Robert Hamilton (the two works were gifts from Hamilton's widow, Nancy Hamilton, a personal friend), Emilie Stark-Menneg, Tyson Jacques, Tom Hall, Andrea Sulzer, the late Frederick Lynch, John Bisbee, and Amy Stacey Curtis.

But there are also various works by Portland, Oregon, artist Jesse Reno (though Dowd discovered her work at a Rockland gallery, not out west), a painting of an egg by Boston artist Ellen Rich, and a photo by the legendary André Kertész. Old portraits from Dowd's Boston residence and flea



A Shlomith Haber-Schaim landscape mounted on slices of tree stump (above) partially conceals the stairwell. Next to it, Dowd mounted a decorative corbel of a *baku*, a mythical Japanese protector who eats nightmares.

A banner (left) for a Chuck Close exhibition covers the brick wall. To its left, Dowd's grandparents' clock rests atop a 1950s desk. Barcelona chairs provide seating next to a Jens Risom credenza. Above hangs a pendant made from whiskey barrel rings and a Tupperware top for a shade.



Another Shlomith Haber-Schaim painting (right) hovers over the stairwell. Dowd found the 1960s light fixture over the dining table at an antique store in Bath. A Robert Hamilton painting and Dowd's own assemblage hang next to a low sixteenth-century English chest (below left), topped with a Chinese planter. An Empire chest (below right), stands next to a large blue Jesse Reno painting mixed with family and class photos, a dot painting by Cassie Jones, a John Bisbee woodburning (below Reno), and on the chest, a spring and a barn door hinge.

market finds (such as a painting of nudes in the primary bedroom) are sprinkled throughout, as are, of course, Dowd's own assemblages and older landscape paintings. Dowd has also dotted his property with his own pinecone sculptures made of sheet-metal squares.

"It took me ten years to get the house the way I wanted," Dowd says—that is, a decade to create his live-in assemblage. **MHD**

