



LOUISE BOURGEOIS
Installation art in the new millennium

Margo Sawyer relaxes in the light-filled living room of her historic building in Elgin. (The upstairs space used to be a hotel, where, she says she was told by Elgin residents, "Lots of souls were created here.")
Photo by Mary Bruton
Makeup by Danielle René

A Life by DESIGN

There's a synchronicity to Margo Sawyer's life that has led this multifaceted artist from tragedy to joy.

Story by Julie Tereshchuk

Photos by Mary Keating Bruton + Courtesy of Margo Sawyer

CHRISTMAS, 1973. EGYPT. NOT THE most auspicious time for a single mother and her daughter to be touring the war-torn Middle East. Yet the raw tension of that trip combined with the sheer wonder of visiting the Valley of the Kings – where architecture, painting and art merged as one – left an indelible impression on 14-year-old Margo Sawyer. It's an impression that today haunts, fuels and focuses Sawyer's work, her artistic success and the direction of her intriguing career.

Ironically, the same trip also marked a high point in her relationship with her mother – a woman who died just six years later, disinheriting her only child and providing a legacy of guilt and regret that have taken Sawyer years from which to recover.

Fast forward to 2008. Could things be going any better for Sawyer? She's a tenured professor at The University of Texas at Austin (her full title is Professor of Installation Art and Sculpture, Area Head of Sculpture), and just coming off what she calls "the biggest project of her life." And, at a youthful 50, she's in a new relationship. Yet, Sawyer has lived her whole life on the edge – in so many ways. In fact, she admits that feelings of uncertainty, discomfort and isolation, plus the

"famine or feast" finances of a working artist, still spur her creativity and clarity as a sculptor, installation artist and designer. It's also easy to argue that those same feelings have contributed to her empathy and generosity to appreciative friends, fellow artists and students. Unaware of the high regard others have for her, Sawyer says, "I've never really fit in wherever I am. But there's a kind of freedom in not belonging – of not feeling constrained by cultural stereotypes."

Sawyer's parents were the perfect couple – if they hadn't fallen in love during the 1950s, with its rigid cultural prejudices. Photographs show a beautiful, tall, blonde, white woman, fashionably dressed whatever the occasion; and a handsome, tall, equally debonair, black man, 10 years her senior. Their only child, Sawyer has her mother's skin color combined with her father's features. "I'm an Obama mix," says Sawyer, her hazel eyes watching to see the impact of her quip.

As one of the first African American diplomats (he served in the United States Information Agency), Eugene Sawyer's marriage to his English bride Joan Alford caused comment – unfriendly comment – in the tabloid newspapers of the day. Nonetheless, the Sawyers lived their globe-trotting lives happily. And nothing added >>>

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: "This is my favorite picture of me as a kid." Sawyer, c. 1962, Washington, DC.

"My mother and father in Africa, probably 1957." Joan Imogene Sawyer, née Alford and Eugene Douglas Sawyer.

"When my father died, my mother and I sailed on the Queen Elizabeth when we moved to England ... My mother had a job and a house [lined up]. During the trip somebody mentioned a small town called Lewes. She said, 'Oh, I love Lewes,' ... and completely changed where we were going." Joan and Margo Sawyer (right), on board R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, 1964.

Sawyer (center facing camera, arms folded), at a reunion of friends from Yale, taken at Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, MA, c. 1984.

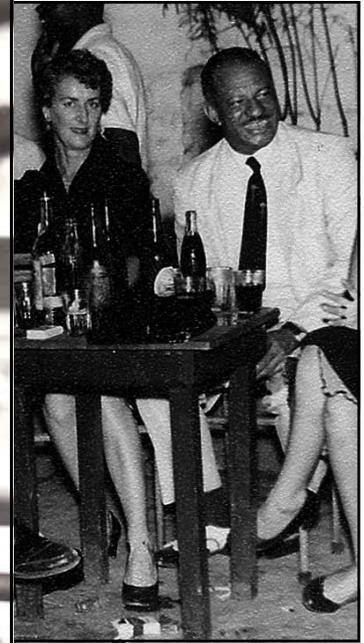
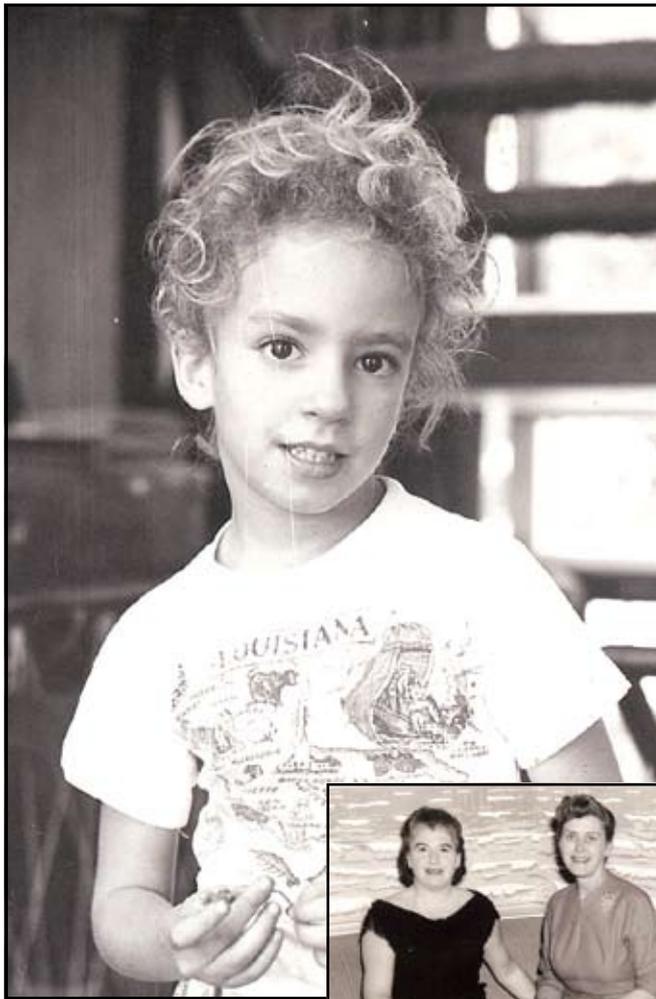
Includes Denis Johnson (far right), poet and writer; Sam Messer (second from right) now assistant dean of the Art Department at Yale; Susanna Coffey, painter; Jean Blackburn, now professor at Rhode Island School of Design.

more to their joy than the 1958 birth of baby Margo in a Washington, DC hospital.

Yet when she was six, tragedy struck the small family. The untimely death of her father of heart failure at age 54 created more than just emotional turmoil in Sawyer's life. Her mother rapidly moved the bereaved pair to England, where Sawyer was raised, attended school and college, only returning to live in the United States in 1980 when she enrolled in graduate school at Yale University. It was 1988 when she made it to Central Texas and a tenure track position in UT's Department of Art and Art History. Since then, she's honed her teaching skills alongside her career as a professional artist – as her 13-page CV of awards, commissions and shows attests.

Ironically, the woman with a yen to travel moved to small-town Texas in 1998, making her home in historic downtown Elgin, 25 miles east of Austin. Sawyer finally feels at home, and although it hasn't quenched her thirst to travel, her new home does provide her a welcome sanctuary to return from her frequent trips.

At 50 she's just coming off the three-year, \$400,000 project *Synchronicity of Color - Red & Blue*, a public artwork created for the City of Houston at Discovery Green, close to the George R. Brown Convention Center. Sawyer was part of the design team commissioned to develop unique artworks for the new park. The resulting two brightly colored buildings, covered with a myriad of carefully arranged tile-like boxes, are, in fact,



emergency exits for the underground parking garage, and are already being described as “a visual icon.” For Sawyer, the “thing about doing something outdoors on a grand scale is that it touches the community in ways that artwork in a museum doesn’t.” With her dry wit showing, Sawyer – albeit fondly – also describes the project “like juggling fireballs. If you hold the ball you get burnt. To not get hurt, you have to keep them in the air, be mobile, be open to change, and willing to go with the flow, and think in both illogical and logical ways.” Turning serious, she adds, “It’s been a phenomenally challenging and exciting project on multiple levels.”

The inextricably linked visual and emotional impact of the buildings – like so much that Sawyer does – is indeed far-reaching. Naturally, there’s the intrigued reception from visitors to the park and the wider artistic community. Austin Museum of Art Director Dana Friis-Hansen says, “It’s wonderful – it’s so unexpected, and is a clever solution to a challenge.” There’s the emotional impact of its success on Sawyer’s view of her own abilities and her career as she moves forward. “I would love now to do the skin of a building on a massive scale.” Then there’s the more intimate emotional impact on Sawyer’s close friend Mike Reusing, his wife Melissa, and Sawyer. As Reusing’s battle with cancer was reaching its end, Sawyer dedicated one of the Houston buildings to him. “Even with all his battles with cancer, we’d have wonderful conversations on creativity and the complexities of this project. He was a man who made his excitement contagious in others, always >>



LEFT: “Me at seven, kind of doing what I do now ... I’m in the tiny back garden of our tiny, three-room cottage, with my cat Tom Sawyer. Every day I’d be out there playing with blocks and making my fantasy.” Lewes, England, c. 1965. RIGHT: “I call this Queen of Boxes. I’m sitting in a pile of blocks from the Houston *Synchronicity* project. And it’s almost like being a kid again – having all these toys that you play with.” Sawyer, at Austin-based Brooks Industrial Coatings, 2008.

Sawyer Speaks: Guilt, God + Guys

Guilt: “My mother died of pneumonia at 57 when I was 21, and disinherited me. That was probably the most challenging thing of my life, although the horrible experience that it was, also made me incredibly resilient, tenacious and self-reliant.

Early on we were the best of friends, very free and open. Most people separate some from their family – to become an adult. But in our situation, that rip was really hard. Before she died, I hadn’t spoken to her for three years, and was advised not to by various family friends ... When I was at Chelsea, [College of Art and Design, in London] I would get these horrible letters ... It was heart-wrenching. But I think because of that separation, I was able to move on when she died. The year after, I came to Yale to go to graduate school. That plucked me out of my familiar situation in England and made it like beginning my life again. But it took me a good 10 years to feel sorry that she was gone ... There was that much anger. And I still don’t have a photograph of her out in my house. It’s really complicated. When I’m around people who get on with their parents, I have a longing to have that myself.

You are meant to love your mother ... For years I felt guilty [because] I was glad she was gone. That’s a terrible thing to say. But my life was very tormented when she was alive, so it was actually freeing to have her not be there. It took decades for me to even say that.”

God: “The contemplative traditions have always been things that I’ve been fascinated by. In fact, for my art, my interest is really about creating contemplative spaces in a public realm ... My mother was so agnostic – maybe that’s why I’ve had a complicated relationship with Western religions. Yet the Eastern religions I find fascinating ... A couple of years ago I was a Humanities Fellow at UT – it was on religion within humanities. It was wonderful.

I’ve been studying with a Zen priest, Reb Anderson ... Being quiet and silent for an extended period of time really changes one’s mental state, letting go. You get in touch with raw emotions. For me it’s really scary ... My artwork becomes a way to instill being in the moment, being very present and quieting myself down.”



“Me as a tiny baby. About the only photo I have of us all together.” Washington, DC 1958.

Guys: “Having not really lived around men most of my life, it’s hard [being in a relationship]. I’m so used to doing things my way. I am just being me, but sometimes it can be taken the wrong way ... On the flip side of that, I’m not constrained by stereotypical ways of being around somebody. I think it’s about realizing that – especially in moments of conflict – and learning to use that as an advantage.”



60 Seconds with Sawyer

⌚ **AUSTINWOMAN: YOU WERE MARRIED FOR SEVEN YEARS. WHY DID IT END?**

MARGO SAWYER: Oh ... So complicated. We had different needs, and goals. I felt held back, doing too much, and could do the same just for me, and be OK alone. But, ouch – this is such a complex question.

⌚ **AW: NO KIDS?**

MS: I never really wanted children. Maybe because I had a hard childhood. Funny thing, when I was single again, I wanted a kid. But it was not to be. My students are like an extended family. I keep in contact with a large number of former students.

⌚ **AW: HOW COMPETITIVE ARE YOU?**

MS: Very, that's what has driven me.

⌚ **AW: WHAT THREE THINGS WOULD YOU TAKE TO A DESERT ISLAND? IN ORDER OF PRIORITY.**

MS: Another hard question. Books: Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*; *Bhagavad Gita* edited by S. Radhakrishnan; a dictionary. Plus some reading glasses – for the new part of my life. [Sawyer turned 50 in May.]

⌚ **AW: DO YOU NEED ALONE TIME?**

MS: I need a LOT of alone time. And I'm lucky that I'm able to have a lot of alone time. In a relationship you have to negotiate your own space.

⌚ **AW: DESIGNER OR SCULPTOR?**

MS: Sculptor, installation artist, closet architect and landscape architect.

⌚ **AW: YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH AS AN ARTIST?**

MS: Tenacity, to not take no as an option, has been my saving grace. As an artist, you are your own worst critic. As an artist, you have to listen deep within, and believe and love your work.

⌚ **AW: THE IMPORTANCE OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN?**

MS: In our everyday world we really don't live around jubilant joyous colors ... Art and architecture enhance our everyday lives.

⌚ **AW: THANKS TO EXHIBITIONS, AWARDS AND COMMISSIONS, YOU'VE TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY, INCLUDING OVERSEAS.**

MS: Yes, and my travels began as a baby with my parents. As an adult I've had Fulbright grants to India – that was when I was 24, and Japan; and have also been a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

⌚ **AW: WHERE CAN WE SEE YOUR WORK IN AUSTIN?**

MS: Whole Foods at Sixth and Lamar [landscaping around the outdoor café]. My piece in Houston really jumps out at you, but the piece at Whole Foods is quieter, more contemplative. Dusk is probably its best time. And there's a piece at the Convention Center. I also have work throughout the Kimber Modern hotel that opens in October. It will be a gorgeous addition to Austin and a unique opportunity for people to stay in beautiful contemporary architecture.

⌚ **AW: DESCRIBE THE HOME YOU'VE CREATED IN ELGIN.**

MS: It's in the Bright and Early historic building – I took the name from an old ad on the wall. It's 6,000 square feet and I have two studios downstairs, an office in the middle space, and a bedroom. The top floor is a 3,000-square-foot living room with windows on all sides. I have a roof garden which is my test space for landscape projects.

⌚ **AW: WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE TWO OTHER BUILDINGS YOU RECENTLY BOUGHT?**

MS: They're one block from my studio – 5,000-square-foot historic brick buildings from the turn of the last century and are both in a state of disrepair. I've dreamed about doing something with them for the 10 years I've lived in Elgin. Short term I need more space to expand my studio; the long term vision is an art foundation, exhibiting my work with an artist-in-residency program.

I love Elgin. It's a good place to work and step back for a while. I've encouraged a number of artists to live and work there. The City and the banking community have been very supportive.

⌚ **AW: WHAT ELSE?**

MS: Here's what I'd say to young artists and architects: "Be centered and strong in yourself, listen to what makes you feel excited and challenged, follow that inner voice. Most of all don't let anyone take that away from you."



giving and never complaining,” says Sawyer. “As you look at all the colors, the collisions of color and light, there’s an essence of that special energy that Mike had held within this piece.”

And lastly, there’s the project’s impact on Sawyer’s love life. Yes, who would have thought that toiling for three years during a hard-earned sabbatical from UT, hiring a team of over 160 people, renting a 10,000 square-foot warehouse and bulk ordering 52 different paint colors would be the scenario for meeting the new love of your life? Yet, that’s exactly what happened to Margo Sawyer, who lights up when she talks about Lawrence A. (Larry) Speck, head of PageSoutherlandPage Architects (one of her collaborating partners on the project) and former dean of UT’s School of Architecture. “It sort of happened through the *Synchronicity* project,” says Sawyer. “It was very surprising ... Collaborating and working together has been fantastic.” >>



Synchronicity of Color 2008 at Discovery Green in Houston. (Editor’s Note: Fortunately, it did not sustain any damage from Hurricane Ike.)

What Others Say ...



Sydney Yeager, Austin-based artist who teaches at ACC and Austin Museum of Art

Met Margo: At a reading group made up of artists, c. 1998.

“Margo persuaded me to move my studio on East Sixth to one in Elgin ... She is a generous and enthusiastic supporter of the artists that she knows, and is always willing to push people to do more than they think they can. She encouraged me to apply as a visitor to the American Academy in Rome. I wouldn’t have gone without her encouragement. It’s inspiring for any artist to see someone move forward in a very significant way, which I’ve watched happen with her.”

Amy Miller, Community Development Director for the City of Elgin



Met Margo: When she leased studio space in the historic Bassist Opera House.

“She’s genuine, warm and approachable. It’s always been a joy to work on things with her. After she moved to Elgin, she started doing shows in her space. It was vibrantly responded to. She’s bought two more properties downtown which is, without question, a project that mere mortals would walk away from! ... Elgin is very lucky to have her as one of our amazing supporters.”



Dana Friis-Hansen, Executive Director of Austin Museum of Art

“I knew Margo’s work from when I was visiting New York City in the mid-to-late ‘80s. She had an important gallery there and some wonderful shows ... I was in Japan from ‘91 to ‘95 and she tracked me down when I had just returned as she had just received a fellowship to live in Japan.”

Person: “She has this high energy and genuine curiosity. And it’s not just limited to her narrow field, so we have great conversations about the interconnectedness of art, religion, politics, architecture, literature.”

Teacher: “She is a go-getter, and one of the big fish in the artistic eco-system of Austin, but she’s also become an advocate for her students. She’s pushing the limits not only for herself but also for them.”

Her work: “She looks to the artwork and practices of other cultures for inspiration. There’s this intellectual curiosity that drives her to look outward. And that’s the way the best art gets made.”

Molly Alexander, Associate Director of the Downtown Austin Alliance also owns a historic building in downtown Elgin.



Met Margo: When she became an Elgin resident [in 1998]. “At the time she also had a gallery and she’d have other artists exhibiting there. I’d always go to those events ... She brought a new dimension to the community.”

Alexander is also producer of the DAA-sponsored television show *Downtown*. In its first season, Alexander chose Sawyer to lead a gallery crawl through Austin. “She is vivacious, she is energetic, and she is articulate ... She is not also only good at teaching the people with her, she also helps the viewer engage and learn as well.”

“One of Margo’s greatest qualities is that she is so generous ... I think most of Margo’s friends would say they feel very close to her and she’s a very special person.”



The green roof, or sky garden, of Sawyer's home and studio in Elgin.

Synchronicity is a term coined by philosopher and psychiatrist Carl Jung for “meaningful coincidences.” Sawyer translates it as destiny and “being open to everything.” That’s certainly been a theme of her life to date, whether it be running into David Hockney in an Edinburgh art gallery; bumping into Spike Lee in downtown Elgin, or spending three days working with influential artist Donald Judd after sending him fan mail. Now the same destiny has manifested itself in her new project, a plaza in Dallas. “It’s another huge project. But much more a linking between landscape architecture and hardscape architecture,” explains Sawyer.

Destiny or meaningful coincidences? Either way, this woman of intriguing contrasts and contradictions, tragically deprived of her parental legacy, is now boldly stepping forward to claim her artistic legacy. A legacy that is as large as her talent, a legacy that is as inspiring as her creativity, and a legacy that is so rightfully hers. ★

MORE INFO

www.margosawyer.com

www.elgintx.com

www.downtowntx.org – look for Sawyer’s 2004 “Gallery Hopping 101” in the Art category. Season four of Downtown launches October 16th on KLRU.

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