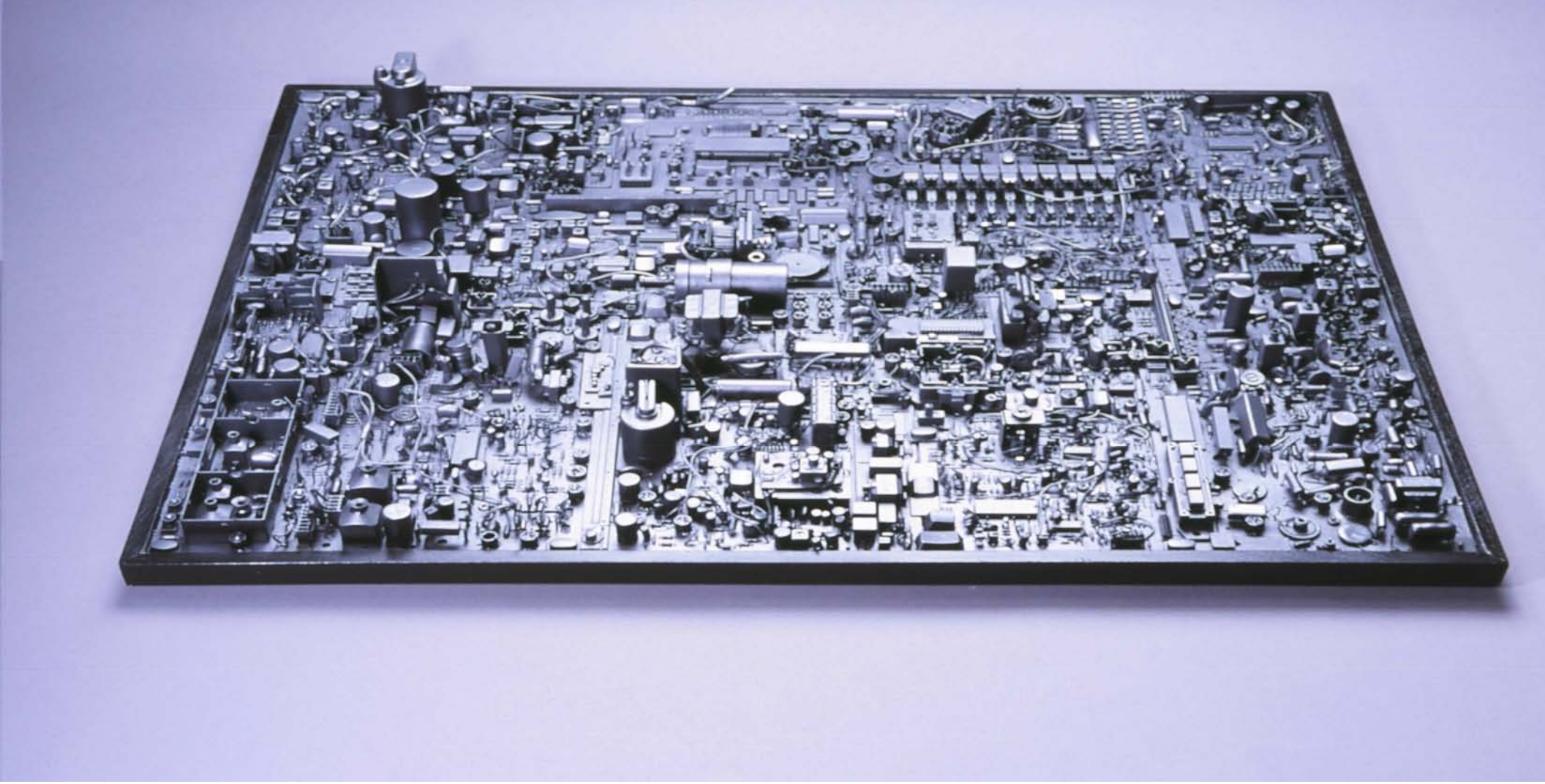


Hidden Infrastructure

Mixed Media Collage Series ▯ 2000 – 2006 ▯ by Cleve Overton

Photos and Text by Jude Andreasen

Background for the Hidden Infrastructure Series

Hidden Infrastructure is a series of collages of recycled electronic material and other mixed-media. They represent an aesthetic communication network, a true hidden infrastructure made visible. The raw materials are hidden within the everyday items we use – TVs, computers, cell phones, radios, CD and DVD players, clocks, etc. They are both miniature representations of the urban and technological centers that produced them, and a reminder that we need an effective infrastructure for disposal of e-waste. The exhibit was first unveiled in a solo show in September 2003 at HNTB Architects in Washington, DC. It has since evolved so that the pieces are transformed as *trompe l'oeil* and bring out the ambiguity of the aerial city views they suggest.

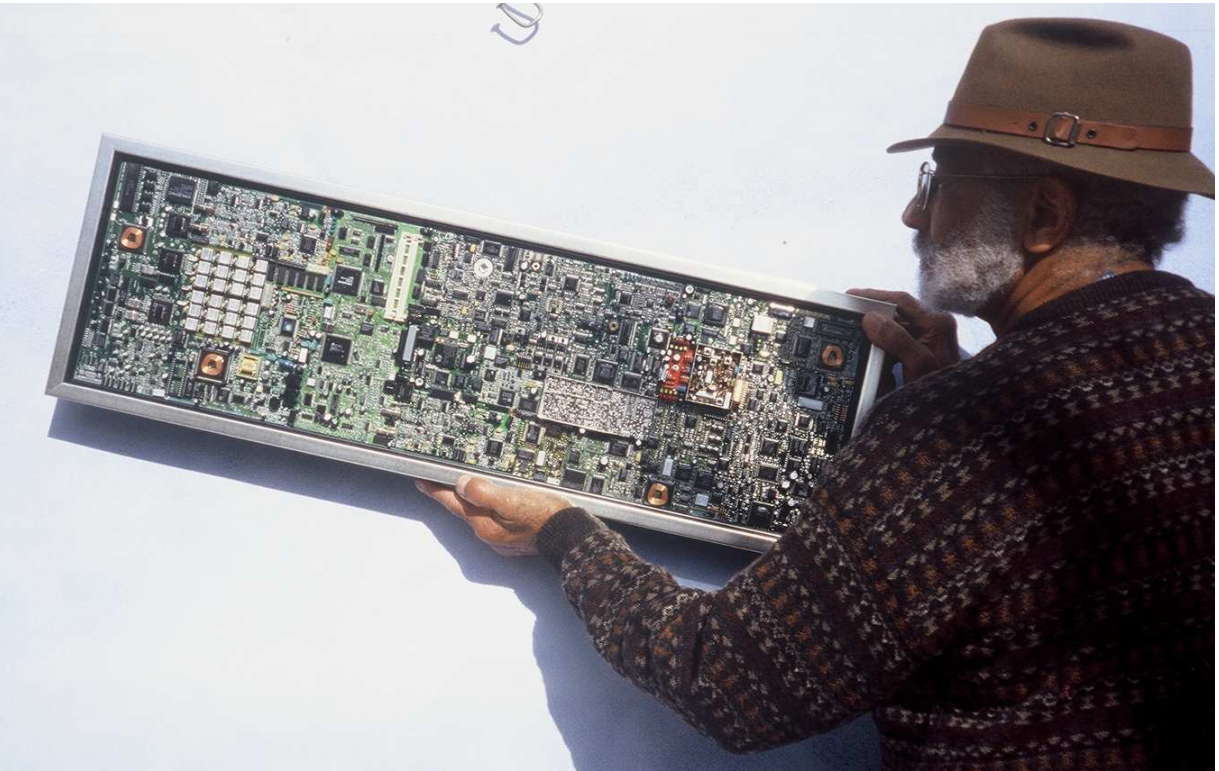
The piece entitled **"8:45 9-11 2001"** was done to commemorate the tragedy in Manhattan, and was exhibited at the Fitchburg Art Museum in Massachusetts and the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia on the one-year anniversary of the attack. It was also exhibited at the Staten Island Museum of the Institute of Arts and Sciences in 2006 for the fifth anniversary.

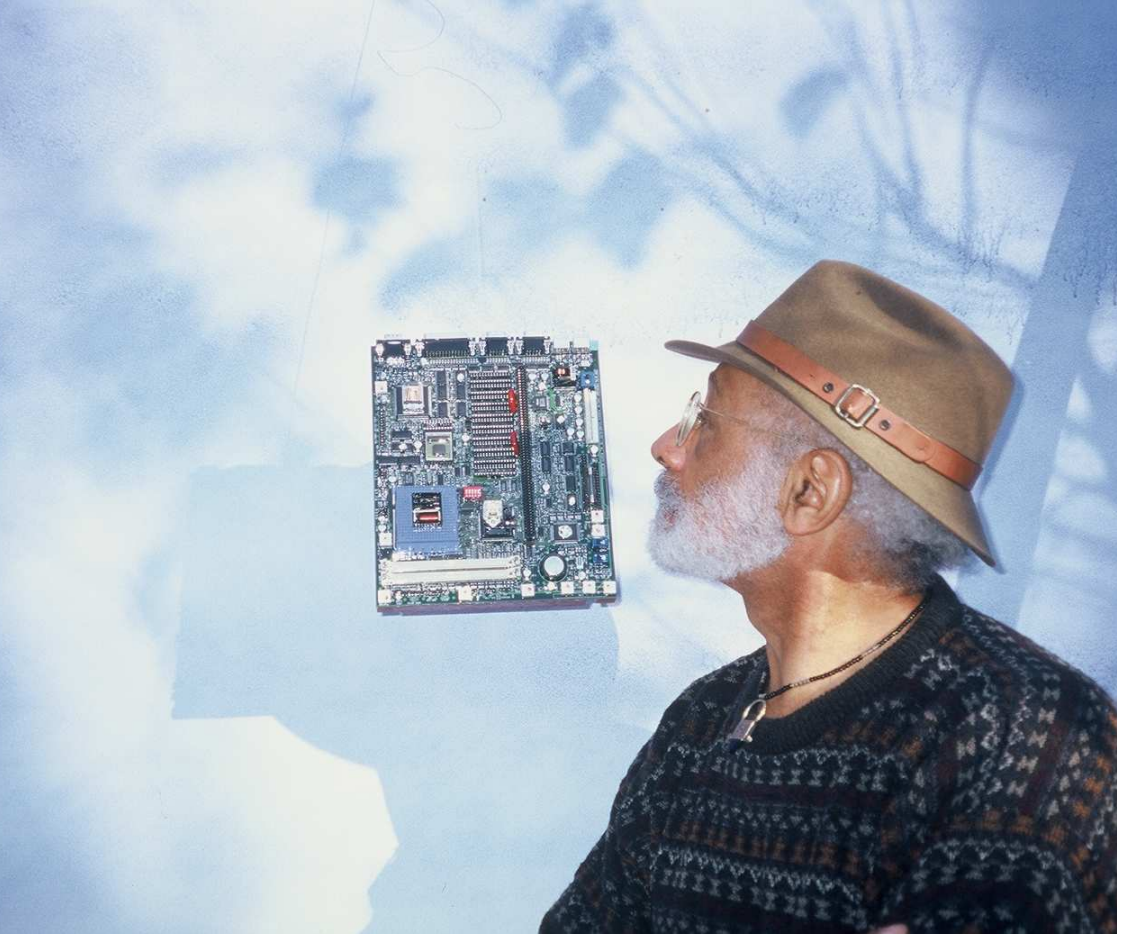
Millions of computers, TVs, cell phones and other electronic equipment become obsolete and find their way to our landfills annually, or are exported to countries with less strict pollution laws. They contain lead and other toxic materials such as chromium, cadmium, mercury, beryllium, nickel and zinc.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that approximately 40% of the lead in landfills originated in TV or computer monitors. As the world switches to high-resolution TVs and flat screens, the number of discarded monitors will continue to escalate.

The Washington Post has featured articles on the export of e-waste, including (2/24/05) ***China Serves as Dump Site for Computers***) and more recently (12/12/05) ***Digital Dumps Heap Hazards at Foreign Sites*** revealed that about 500 40-foot container loads of electronic waste arrive in Nigeria monthly. In many cases, entire communities, including children, earn their livelihood by scavenging the waste stream. Trucks must bring clean drinking water from miles away because the local water table is contaminated from the heavy metals leaching down from the scrap pile. A report (October 2005) by the Basel Action Network (BAN): ***The Digital Dump: Exporting High-Tech Re-use and Abuse to Africa***, revealed an escalating global trade in e-waste collected in North America and Europe and sent to developing countries by waste brokers (http://www.ban.org).

In the absence of a national U.S. program, some states and cities have initiated local e-waste programs and laws. Some computer companies are expanding their computer take-back programs in response to consumer pressure (www.computertackback.com). The U.S. remains the only developed country that has not ratified the Basel Convention, a treaty designed to control international trade in hazardous waste. As a result, U.S. companies are not breaking the law when they export e-waste, and many "recyclers" or waste handlers are unable or unwilling to say where the material ultimately ends up. The European Union (EU) has taken the lead in passing a directive restricting the use of 6 toxic materials in the manufacture of electronic/electrical equipment. Computer companies in Europe are already researching less toxic alternatives to replace those materials.



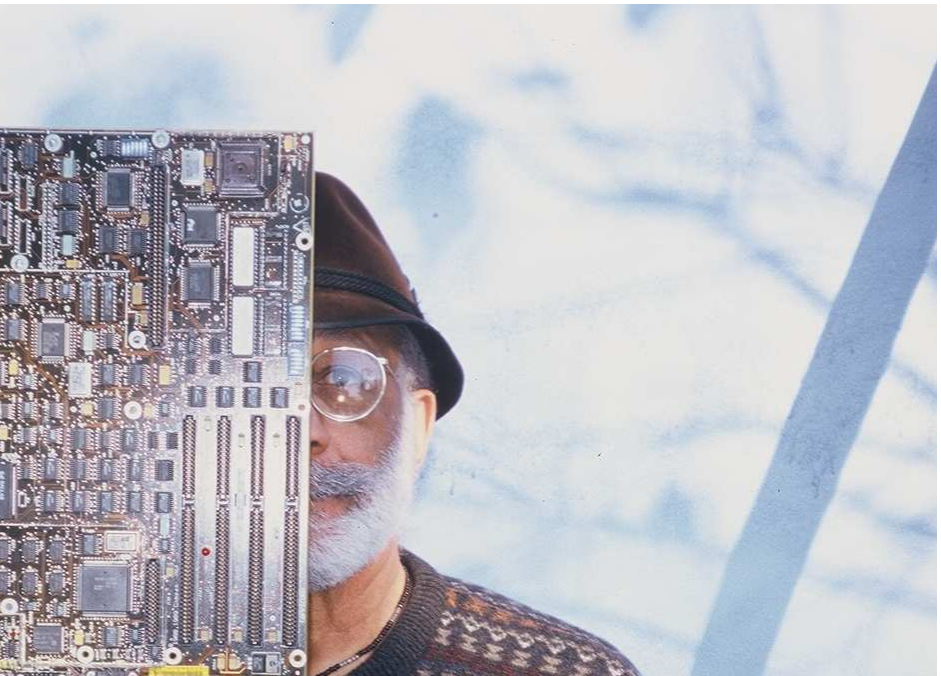


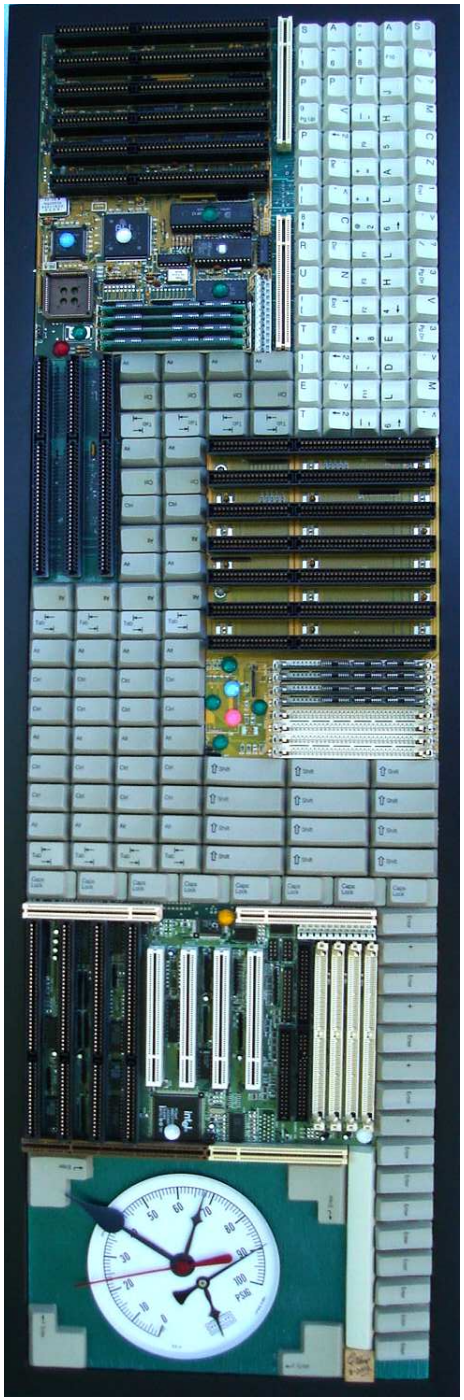
The Artist's Environmental Evolution

Cleve Overton grew up on Staten Island, next to one of the nation's largest dumps, the 3,000 acre Fresh Kills Landfill. An Australian magician who lived with him for a while, Geof Crozier, said Cleve was a A "Rag-and-Bone Man," but Cleve found magic in transforming found material into objects that catch the eye. Collages came naturally to Cleve because there was never extra money to purchase materials from art stores. Pottery and sculpting came naturally, too, because the southern portion of Staten Island had sites where wonderful clay bodies could be had for the digging.

Later, living in Africa, Cleve rarely found an art store, so his raw materials continued to be found objects and natural materials - desert sands, scraps of old metal worn and rusted into lace-like patterns, bone, wood, leaves and seed pods. After several years in Africa, Cleve returned to NYC and began dumpster-diving, finding treasure troves of e-waste with its beeps, blinks, buzzes, burps and blips, sounds of the 21st century, all emanating from equipment designed to educate, entertain, protect, transport or otherwise improve our health or facilitate our busy lives. Cleve's collages, each coated with a special sealant, are his way of recycling a minuscule percentage of the waste in an appealing and safe way. His work is intended to raise awareness that when electronics become obsolete, their disposal or recycling should be part of a cradle-to-grave stewardship plan for resource conservation.

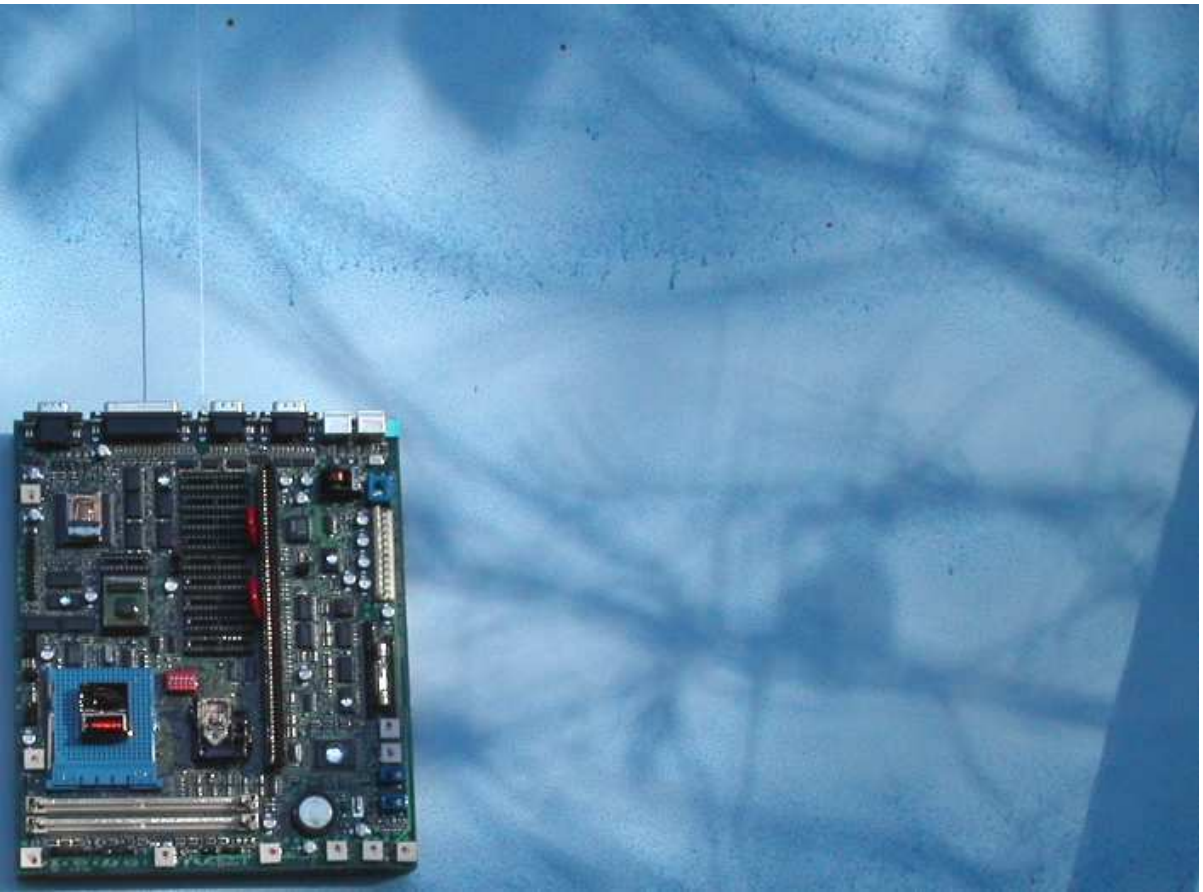
John Metcalfe wrote of Cleve in the ***Citipaper*** (6/20/03), "His sometimes haphazard assemblages evolved to mirror the precision-made nature of their materials. They became city maps of intimidating orderliness, with distinguishable byways and industrial and commercial zones. Laid in complex geometric patterns and veined with wiring, each city's infrastructure suggests a creative cross between Louise Nevelson's abstract sculptures and H.R. Giger's visions of alien technology." Metcalfe dubs Cleve, "The Transformer Man," and says that, "With a bunch of unwanted electronics, a few simple tools, and an environmentalist philosophy picked up in Africa, Cleve Overton practices his own form of waste management."

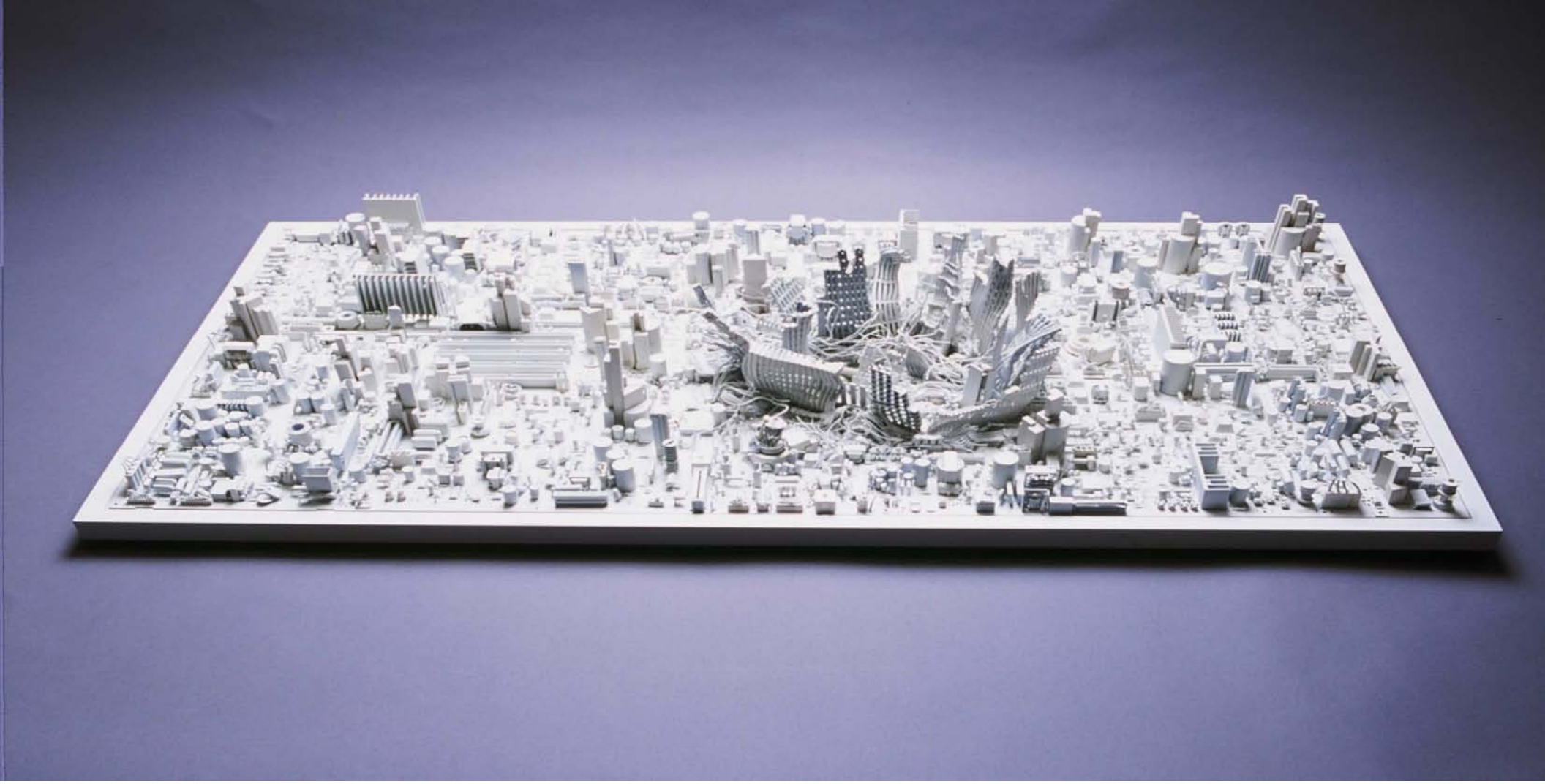




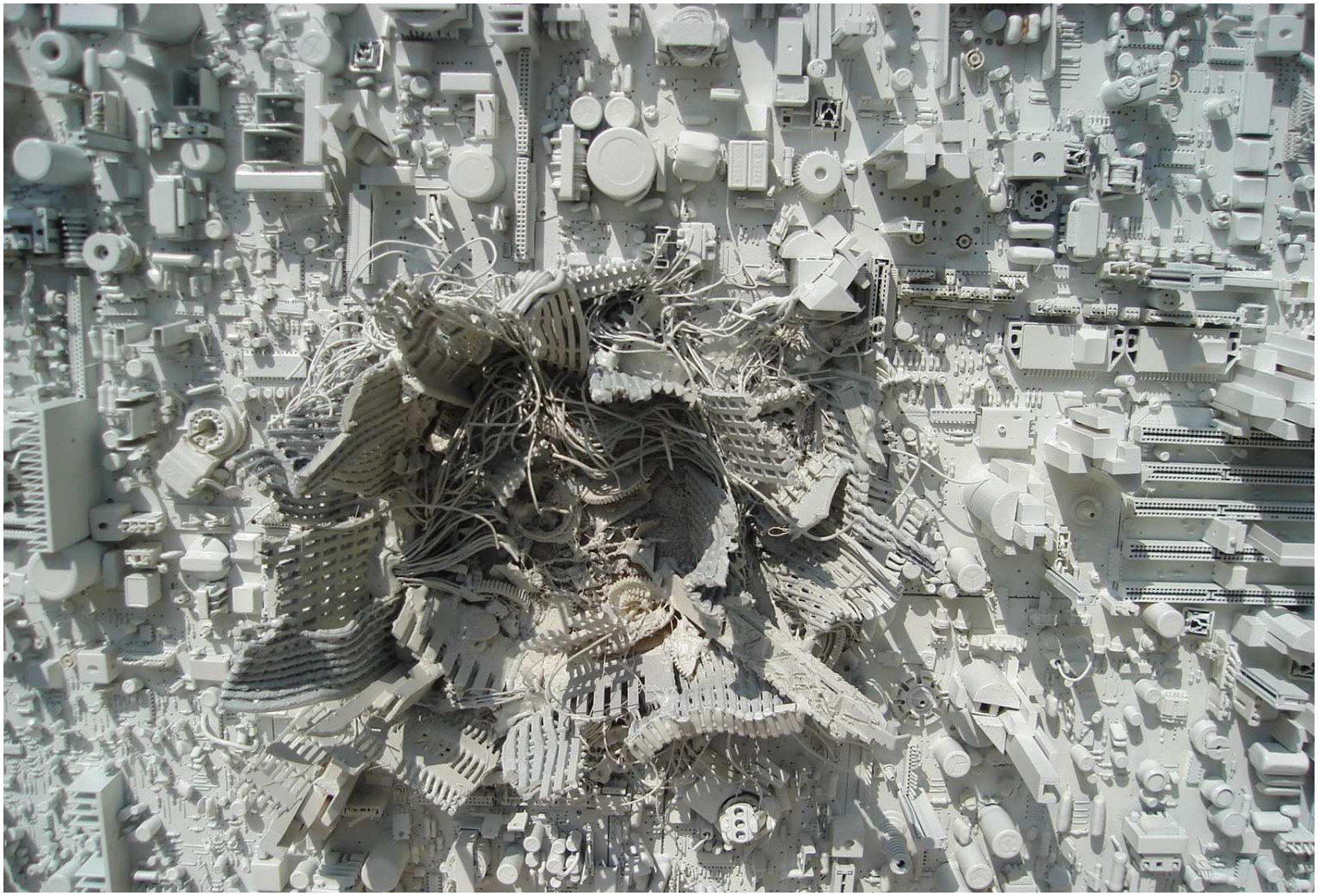
BIOGRAPHY

Cleve Overton, born in New York City, now spends most of his time working in Washington, DC. He was an Adjunct Professor in the Art Department of Baruch College in Manhattan and at Staten Island Community College. Cleve has exhibited nationally and internationally and many of his works are in private collections in the U.S., Europe, Africa, and Asia.





8:45 9-11 2001



Cleve Overton • 3301 9th Street, NE • Washington, DC 20017
www.clevesart.com • E-mail: cleveo@aol.com

Photos and Text by Jude Andreasen