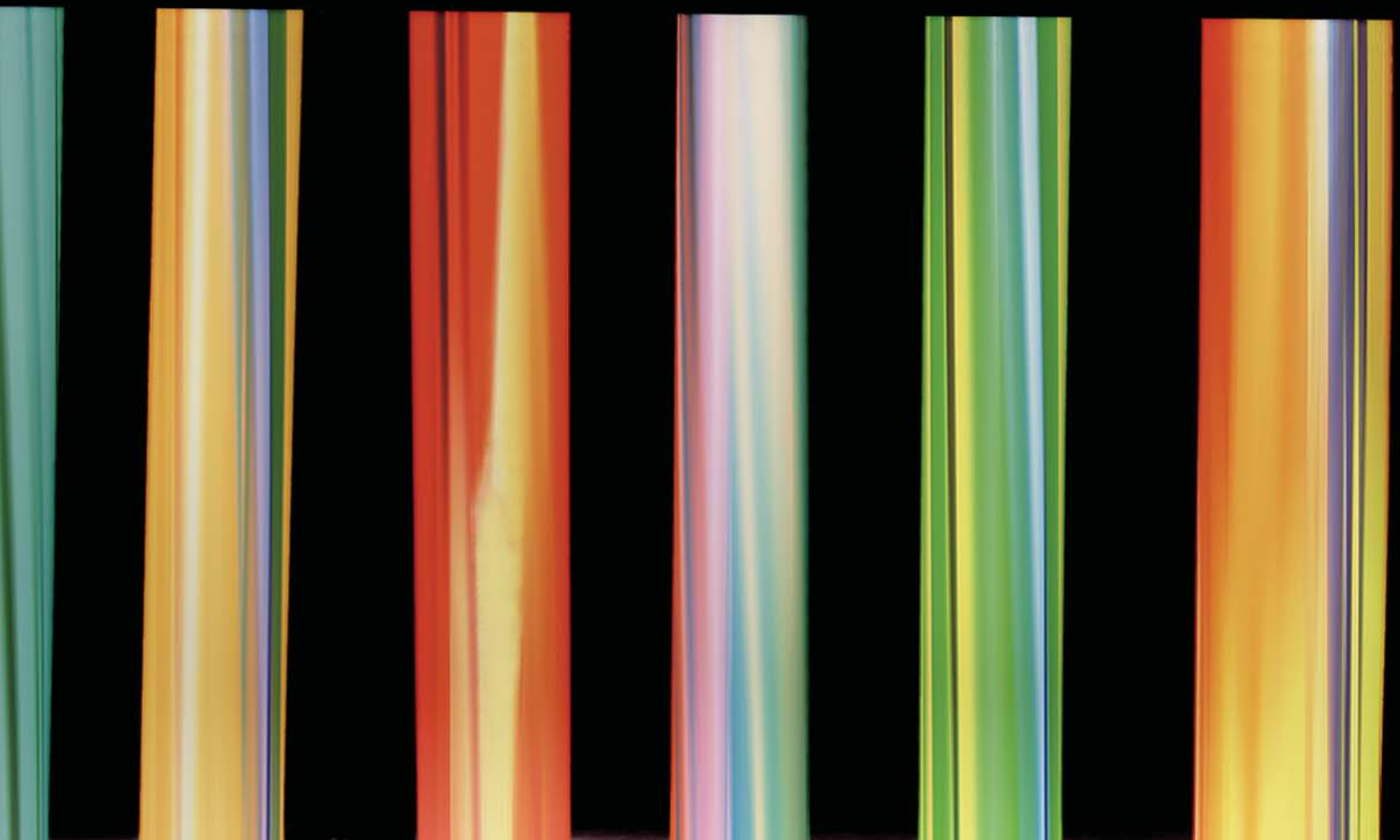
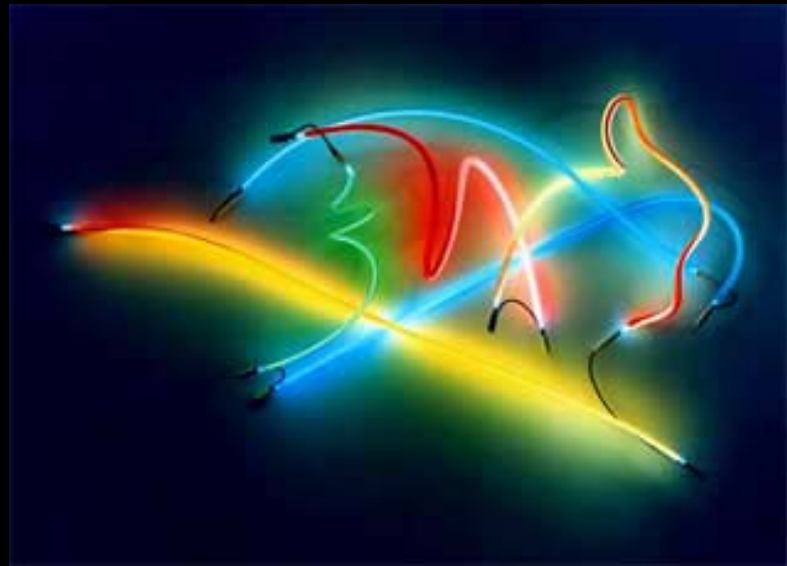


the  
new  
neons



An installation, for the Square One Cineplex Odeon in Mississauga, Ontario; a SWON product, below, that shows off a variety of twisted tubes.



In the early nineties, artists' collective Skunkworks Outlaw Neon tagged statues, city squares and back alleyways with unique blown-glass tubes, creating a glowing graffiti effect. A decade on, Skunkworks has become SWON Design. SWON produces high-end lighting for an international audience - but hasn't lost sight of its roots. By Lianne George

For Orest Tataryn, neon, that gaudiest of all light sources, was an epiphany. Back in 1989, Tataryn was working full-time as a firefighter in Toronto. One afternoon, he was called to a local restaurant in flames. Through the smoke and chaos, Tataryn saw two neon signs swinging back and forth, creating wonderful colours and shadows.

"I stopped and thought, 'What's creating this beautiful effect?'" he says, relaxing in his workshop in Toronto's west end. "I'd been surrounded by neon all my life and never been conscious of it, except for its glaring commercial ugliness. And I thought, 'Look, it's a noble form of expression.'"

Tataryn decided to try his hand at neon art. He was fascinated by the works of such early neon artists as Wayne Strattman, Rudy Stern and Stephen Antonakos, whom he calls "the godfather of neon art in America." (Antonakos was one of the first to merge neon with sculpture.) Tataryn started creating small, multimedia sculptures that accentuated the mood-setting properties of neon at night.

In 1991, Tataryn met Andrey Berezowsky, a woodworker and glass-blower, and glass sculptor Alfred Engerer. The three formed a group called Skunkworks Outlaw Neon, styling themselves an avant-garde artists' collective-cum-lighting design firm with a mandate to "bring neon into the public consciousness as a beautiful thing." Each contributed specialized knowledge to develop their signature art form: multicoloured hand-blown neon tubes.

Eleven years later, the collective, now operating under the acronym SWON Design and repositioned as a commercial design firm, has transformed public spaces across Canada. Last May, they attracted

international attention with a display of lighting fixtures at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. An installation at the Design Exchange in Toronto followed in the fall, and they've been invited to participate in the 2003 Westonbirt Festival of Gardens in England, which showcases modern outdoor design by international artists, sculptors and landscapers. Evidently, SWON's success in commercial lighting design is only just beginning.

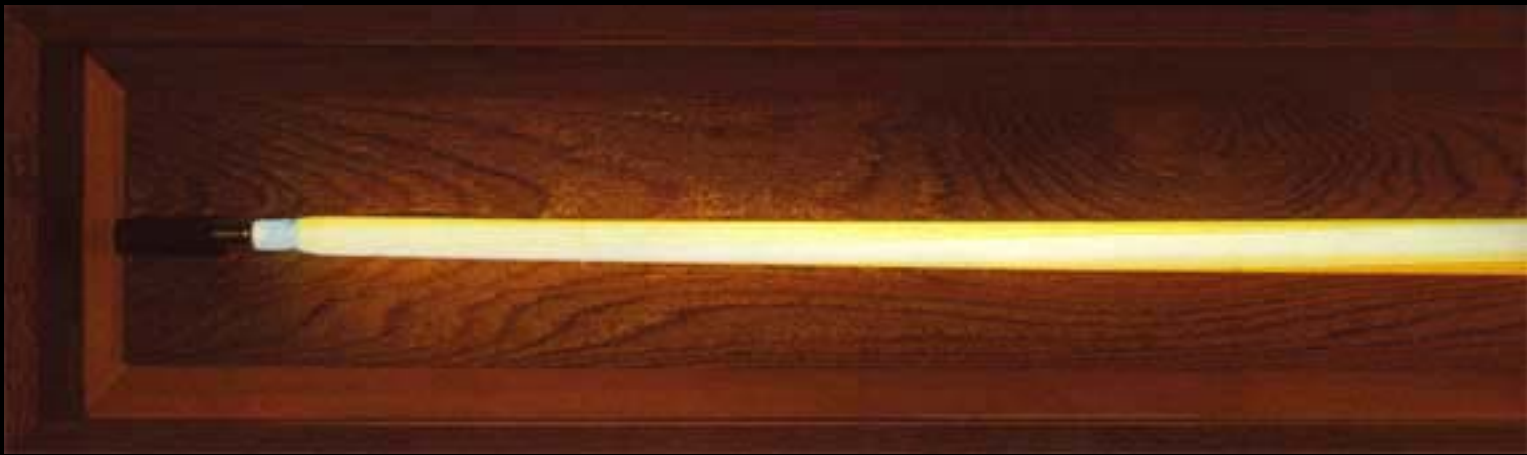
Still, for SWON, the road to legitimacy has been a tumultuous one. In the early 1990s, frustrated by their inability to showcase their work in a slow economy, Tataryn, Berezowsky and Engerer adopted guerrilla tactics. The collective ambushed cemeteries, abandoned freighters, billboards, bridges and waterfalls with dozens of intertwined one-of-a-kind neon tubes. For one night only, their installations transformed ordinary places into something extraordinary.

The following day, they'd clean up. (Only once were they almost arrested for trespassing, at an abandoned distillery in Toronto. Luckily, they convinced the policeman they meant no harm.) To fund their elaborate projects, Tataryn, Berezowsky and Engerer held day jobs. Sometimes, they'd put their installations on hold for months, in order to accumulate enough money for materials.

SWON's unique technique of neon-tube creation evolved through experimentation. The process brings together two artistic mediums - glass sculpture and neon art - that generally do not meet. Layers of clear and coloured glass are blown into tubes and twisted into the desired shapes.

Skunkworks  
Outlaw Neon  
members  
adopted  
guerrilla  
tactics to draw  
attention to  
their hand-  
blow, multico-  
loured neon  
tubes. They  
saved for  
months to buy  
materials for  
their on-  
night-only  
installations.

Left: A tracery  
of neon on  
Strawberry Hill  
in Surrey,  
British  
Columbia,  
now a perma-  
nent installa-  
tion  
Right:  
Webster's  
Falls, near  
Flamborough,  
Ontario,  
acquires a  
neon accent.



Right: A 1988  
installation of  
tumbling neon  
tubes on the  
exterior wall of  
the North  
Vancouver  
Centennial  
Theatre was  
an early  
high-end  
commission.



Michael Batchelor,  
Andrey Berezowsky  
and Orest Tataryn.

SWON design recently began  
experimenting with new  
techniques, such as cast  
glass. This waterfall, for  
example, was commissioned  
and constructed in 2002 for a  
private home in Toronto.



Left: swirls of vibrant red light surround headstones St. Michael's Cemetery, Toronto; Right: an early installation at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario

The tubes' interiors are then acid etched to rough up the surface, so that phosphor powder colours can adhere on the inside. Finally, electrodes are welded onto the ends of the tubes.

In the late 1990s, as the members of the collective's reputations as lighting innovators grew, they were commissioned by such patrons as the Cineplex Odeon theatre chain to create large commercial installations. They also won a bid for a \$100,000 public art project, designing an installation called *Veil*, in which neon-coloured lava appears to be cascading from the roof, for the exterior of North Vancouver's Centennial Theatre.

In general, though, these large-scale projects were few and far between. About two years ago, Tataryn and Berezowsky decided to rework their strategy. If they were ever going to earn a steady living through design, they would need to learn how to market and package themselves. Engerer, meanwhile, left the group to pursue other artistic interests.

Part of their new approach was to rein in the scope of their works. With large installations, it was difficult for audiences to see the detailed nature of SWON's unique neon tubes. They hired Michael Batchelor, a photographer and communications consultant, changed their name and began experimenting with fixture design. For example, last year, Tataryn and Berezowsky collaborated on a very simple fixture, a wall-mounted

cedar box containing a single five-foot twisted neon tube. Roy Banse, the founder of Fluid Living, a design-retail store in Toronto, saw the fixture at an auction and approached SWON about making more to sell exclusively in his store. "I liked the sculptural aspect of the glass," says Banse, "and I loved the juxtaposition of the cedar and the handcrafted glass. Also, I like the multifunctionality of its doubling not only as art, but as a light source for your room."

Response has been so positive that SWON is now developing other prototypes: pairing neon tubes with other materials, integrating other forms of lighting and designing hand-blown objects for use as wall sculptures and chandeliers. Although unquestionably targeted at a consumer market, this new small-scale work still retains basic SWON elements: vibrant coloured tubes blown into sinuous shapes which, when lit by neon, create a sense of infinite motion.

"We are striving to create not just neon light," explains Batchelor, "but hand-blown objects using different light sources, whether tungsten, halogen or some form of incandescent lighting." With new, diversified techniques, high-end showrooms showcasing their products, an attention-grabbing display at a major trade show and an international commission in the new year, the former outlaws have come a long way. Could it be the only thing they are now risking is respectability?