

franklin parrasch gallery, inc.

53 east 64th st. new york, ny 10065
www.franklinparrasch.com
t 212 246 5360 f 646 429 8770

Forbes

There's A Secret Artwork In The Midst Of The World's Best Restaurant

Brienne Walsh, CONTRIBUTOR

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Visitors to Eleven Madison Park in coming months will likely anticipate the restaurant's renovation and new menu. What they won't realize is that when they step through the entrance, and into the main dining hall, they will be walking on a piece of art.



Daniel Turner, EMP Step, cast stainless steel kitchen, 192 x 15 x 4.5 inches, 2017

In their defense, the work is nondescript. A 16-foot monolith by the artist Daniel Turner, it looks like a smooth metal step. Closer examination reveals the work's many nuances — imperfections on the surface that tell the story of how it was created.



Detail of EMP Step.

Commissioned by Eleven Madison Park's owners, Daniel Humm and Will Guidara, the work was created by melting down roughly 1,000 objects from the restaurant's kitchen, which was completely renovated along with the dining area. Turner chose the objects based on their forms, and their material limitations. "There was a stipulation about which metals could be melted together," he told me as we traversed the piece one afternoon before the restaurant opened. "We couldn't mix aluminum and steel, for example, or there would be an explosion."

Turner has long been interested in kitchens. Although he professes he cannot cook, and has never worked in a restaurant, his first studio in New York was housed in an abandoned kitchen in Chinatown.

"I was granted the studio by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and when I arrived, I thought, 'Wow, this studio is so odd, and so surreal,'" he said. "It was really difficult for me to make any work there. My work couldn't compete with this environment. It began to make sense to me that I should look at the actual environment. I started abstracting these kitchen forms, and producing these kitchen units, but skewing the composition and scale so they really served no function at all."

Distorting forms led to dissolving them. In 2016, at König Galerie in Berlin, Germany, Turner showed "Particle Processed Cafeteria," which consisted of a stain created by reducing the components of a cafeteria — wooden tables, steel chairs — into a liquid, which was then poured on the gallery floor.

By happenstance, Humm had seen the show. Turner was introduced to him at a dinner thrown by a friend. "He's been in a kitchen his entire life, and I had just dissolved one," Turner laughed. "So there was this spark of immediate interest."



An image of the materials melted down for EMP Step.

Humm gave Turner free reign over both the kitchen, and the interior of the dining room. "I knew I wanted to introduce a form into the architecture," Turner told me. "So I thought, 'Well why not introduce a form as a step that enters the restaurant, so that one steps over all of the material it took to get where the restaurant is today?'"

The final sculpture is just about 1,000 pounds. It joins other pieces commissioned by Humm, including works by Rita Ackermann, the Sol Le Witt Foundation, and Olympia Scarry.

After years spent on ephemeral pieces that were dissolved or dismantled after they were shown, Turner likes that his sculpture at Eleven Madison Park has permanence. We discussed the way stairs look in old New York buildings — grooved and shiny from thousands, if not millions, of footsteps. "I like the idea that you walk through the doorway, and once you are in the dining experience, you come to learn that wait, I stepped over eleven years of work." The story of how the work was created has been woven into the storytelling aspects of the dining experience; servers will give a general background and history of the art in the restaurant as they serve the meal.



An archival image of a sink used in the piece.

Next up for Turner is working within an institution he has more familiarity with — a mental institution. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, he has spent time in hospitals. “It’s a gift,” he says when I noted that I have some family members with the same mental health diagnosis. Turner plans on acquiring a medical facility, and then melting down its components so that they can be used as structural beams to construct a mental health facility. A way of inserting his own moods, different from one day to the next, in something steady and long-lasting.

I can’t wait to be in the presence of another of Turner’s works, which until they are revealed, function as secrets in physical space.