Todd Sanders' neon art evokes a time when America fell in love with motion. We hopped in the family wagon to explore the nation's highways and byways, lured to motels, diners and curious roadside attractions by the colorful glow of gas molecules dancing inside artfully shaped tubes.

The sign masters who crafted those slices of Americana are Sanders' heroes, and he's built a career designing and creating original, entirely handmade neon works using their time-honored techniques. He calls his style modern vintage, but considers himself a pop artist, sharing a rich artistic vein mined by Andy Warhol and other pop-culture iconographers.

A Houston native who began pursuing his muse in earnest after moving to Austin, Sanders' work is prized by collectors. Clients include Willie Nelson, Shepard Fairey, Norah Jones, Johnny Depp, ZZ Top and Kings of Leon, for whom he created the neon work appearing on the cover of their latest album, 2013's *Mechanical Bull*.

Sanders' pieces have appeared in several films, including most of Robert Rodriguez's projects and Terrence Malick's "Tree of Life," as well as the pages of Esquire, Fortune, Texas Monthly and Southern Living magazines. The original version of his most popular design, his animated "Fireflies in a Mason Jar," was created for the wedding of fellow Texan Miranda Lambert to Blake Shelton. Several of his works have hung in the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles, which is now constructing a permanent home in Glendale, Calif.

Sanders also earned recognition in the Neon Group's 2010 national design competition and was invited to participate as a special featured artist in the 2014 Architectural Digest Home Design Show. The juried event, held each March in New York City, is considered North America's top luxury-market design show.

Like Warhol, Sanders started out studying graphic art in college, then worked in the field before shifting to fine art. He painted signs to pay his tuition at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, but saw his future during a spring-break trip that took him through Austin.

"We were driving around Austin for 10 minutes and I saw the neon signs and I felt the vibe of the city and it just hit me: I'm going move to Austin and I'm going build neon signs," he recalls.

He quit college and headed to Austin, where he lived in a vintage camping trailer and pestered the owners of a neon sign shop until they finally hired him for a short-term project. He wound up staying three years, learning everything he could before starting his own sign business in 1995.

"I worked as a commercial sign builder for 15 years," Sanders says. "When I finally gained the confidence to become a fine artist, I still had all this passion for neon signs. I took that and turned it into fine art.

(more)

"It took so many years to learn the craft, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I'd started out as an artist," he adds. "I'm really glad that things progressed the way they did because it allowed me to learn the technical aspects that make my work so authentic."

Each Sanders creation begins with his hand-drawn design, which he then gives to fabricators to bend neon- and argon-filled vacuum tubes and shape the metal on which they're mounted. Then he carefully paints and weathers the metal, scrubbing with Scotch-Brite pads and causing it to rust naturally via an accelerated-aging process he developed himself. "I have a week to accomplish what Mother Nature takes 50 years to do," Sanders says, "but the result looks the same."

Sanders left commercial signage behind for good in 2007 to devote himself full time to fine art. By then, his Roadhouse Relics studio had become a glowing testament to Austin's funky character, even serving as a backdrop for photo and video shoots (including one for Russell Crowe's band). Sanders' pieces hang in many iconic Austin venues, including the Continental Club ("Mercury Man") and Threadgill's. There's one he'll never part with, however; it reads, "Sarah, will you marry me?" (He proposed to her in the studio, where they met when she purchased a piece. Of course, she said yes, and three years ago, their son, Jack, was born.)

Though neon was once regarded as utilitarian, Sanders, a voracious student of its history, is devoted to preserving the art form and elevating appreciation of its importance to 20th-century pop culture.

But he also faces the challenge of conveying that his work is original, not restoration or reproduction (though he has done both in the past). Lately, he's been incorporating modern phrases; one recent creation carries a question mark and the letters WTF.

"That could have never been made in the 1950s," Sanders says. "It plays with your head; it's like a paradigm shift. When you look at that, you go, 'Wait a minute. … Oh, I get it now.'"

As for the permanence of his own work, he says, "I like to make art that, when you die, your kids will fight over."

He dreams of finding a forgotten town some day and resurrecting it as an installation full of shimmering neon, transformers buzzing like a high-voltage symphony. If it evokes a scene from one of his favorite films, Disney-Pixar's "Cars," that's fine with him. That animated film, a love letter to the same era he expresses in neon, is a future classic. Just like his art.

For more information, visit toddsandersart or call 512.761.4111.

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