

KEN GANGBAR

Playing **BIG**

by Shana Angela Salaff



Ken Gangbar's work is lyrical and flowing, yet composed of very simple components. He works in modules, creating installations at sites varying in scale from intimate home interiors to an aviation terminal. He has created indoor and exterior works for such corporate clients as Nobu Restaurants and the Four Seasons Hotel chain. Often his projects take him around the world, to sites as near and as far away as San Diego, California; Doha, Qatar; Thailand; and Australia.

Based in Toronto, Ken Gangbar began his ceramics career upon graduation in 1995 from the School of Crafts and Design

at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, following a BA in Native Studies from Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. At first, Gangbar created minimalist production pottery. He recalls feeling somewhat stifled creatively making vessels within a strict set of price points in order to be viable on the market. During this period, a partnership with Toronto chef Susur Lee led Gangbar to think collaboratively and on a larger scale—moving from designing for the table to the architectural space itself. Newly inspired, Gangbar broke from making vessels completely in 2001 and began

creating purely sculptural work. His participation in the Toronto Interior Design Show led to commissions for sculptural installations and this part of his career began to take shape.

Responding to Space

The dynamic motion of Gangbar's sculptural installations belies the meticulous attention to detail needed from the beginning to the end of each project. Gangbar designs each work in response to the space in which it is contained. His work often hugs the edges of the space, interacting directly with the architecture. A circular space lit from above inspired Gangbar to create organically round forms in thin porcelain that appear to be hanging from the sky for Visa San Francisco. A wall reaching from the main floor to an upper level at the Palomar Hotel in San Diego inspired him to create channels in which dark and light fin-like shapes swim through the space.

Playing Big

Gangbar's willingness to play big—Gangbar's term for the mindset of jumping into challenging commissions—is key to his ability to work with larger installations as well as corporate clients. Rather than limit himself to commissions that are similar in scale, he entertains proposals that afford him the opportunity to scale up. By combining a “how can I make this happen” line of thought with careful planning, Gangbar is able to work at almost any scale. With this in mind, Gangbar frequently consults with specialists in wide-ranging fields. The use of materials other than clay in many of his installations has given him more freedom to make larger component pieces. Gangbar often combines porcelain with other materials, as in his installation at Nobu Doha, where stainless-steel aircraft cable is as much an important visual component as the gilded porcelain pieces strung upon it. Gangbar has worked in various other media including wood, glass, marble, and resin. At the Adour Restaurant in New York, glass globes hanging at various levels create a visual field that both occupies and illuminates the space.

Landmark Aviation Installation Proposal

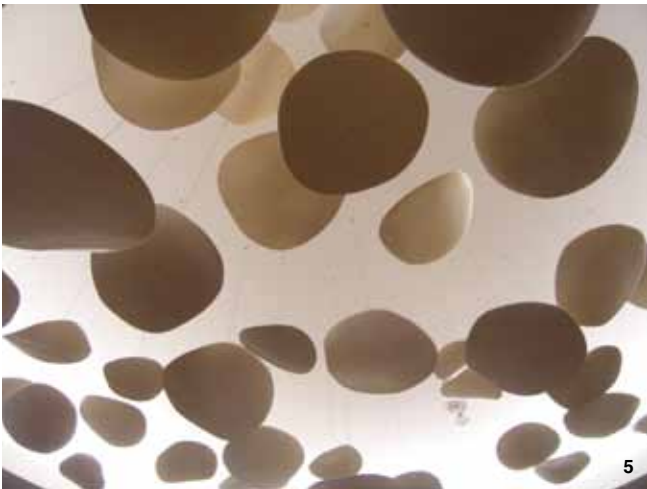
In 2014, a private airline company called Landmark Aviation opened a competition for an artwork to grace the exterior of its newly built San Diego terminal. Although Gangbar usually prefers to receive an advance before embarking on a labor-intensive project design, this time he went all out for his entry. Already familiar with Gangbar's work, Landmark invited him to California to meet with their interior design firm, structural engineer, and construction company. After conceiving and sketching his design, he consulted and worked with a number of professionals who became his Toronto team. This team included an architect, a digital renderer, a custom furniture company (they built models in balsa wood), and



Opposite: Installation at Star Casino, Sky Hotel, Sydney, Australia wall-mounted porcelain forms, 2012. **1** Ken Gangbar securing porcelain and marble components of his installation at the Palomar Hotel in San Diego, California, 2008. **2** Detail of porcelain and marble forms installed at the Palomar Hotel, in San Diego. **3** Overview of the installation at the Palomar Hotel.



4 Installation at Nobu Doha, in Doha, Qatar (overall and detail), porcelain with gold decals and stainless aircraft cable, 2014. **5** *Flight* (installed at Visa Headquarters, Foster City, California), porcelain and stainless-steel aircraft cable, 2010. **6** Ken Gangbar working in his studio, 2016.



a photographer for studio shots of the scaled models to illustrate the installation's final appearance.

The result was a proposal that covered every angle of the installation—from the visual to the structural. Gangbar's artistic vision and polished presentation (including an exact-scale model) landed him the Landmark commission. He then contracted a fabrication and installation company in Los Angeles to work on the project and also continued to work with the interior and exterior design teams, the structural engineering firm, and the contractor already onsite. This became his San Diego team. Although Gangbar is the driving force behind the design and installation of his artworks, working with a team enables him to complete large-scale commissions.

Clay remains a material with huge seductive power to Gangbar, however the overall vision of each unique installation is always primary, and materials are chosen to fit. The individual forms he envisioned for the Landmark installation were similar to forms already in his repertoire, but he knew that the project's imposing scale would require a material much lighter than ceramics. The fabrication company recommended fiberglass—a material light enough to safely project outward from the building, but strong



Twenty-3, installation at Landmark Aviation in San Diego, California, fiberglass, 2014.

enough to withstand the elements. The resulting exterior installation responds to the shifting light throughout the day.

Where the Magic Happens

Gangbar insists on personally supervising each installation himself, bringing along as many workers to the site as are needed to get the job done in the amount of time available. While components of the installation are shipped from his workshop to the building site, he travels with his own tools as well as any necessary adhesives and hardware. This enables Gangbar to be in his element even while working in a foreign environment. As the client pays for both transportation and work site accommodations, time is of the essence.

Although every project is well mapped out ahead of time, with extensive research into the site-specific engineering needs, Gangbar allows himself enough breathing room in his design to respond to the installation site. This is, as he says “where the magic happens,” when his works flow within and around the space in which they are contained. Visual movement in response to each installation’s physical space, lighting, and materials is Ken Gangbar’s signature. This, coupled with his attention to detail and excellent track record are what secure him new commissions—new opportunities to play big.

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Initial Fact-Finding Questions for the Client

- Who is the client?
- What is the project?
- Where is it?
- Budget?
- Suggested installation date?
- New build? Existing? Redesign?
- What stage is it in?
- What is the condition of the area?
- What is already there? Can it be changed?
- Can the wall or other support be redesigned or reconstructed?
- Can it be backed with plywood? (Gangbar works with clients to ensure that the support upon which he is installing meets the demand for the weight of the work upon it. Often, this means adding a plywood support or otherwise reconstructing an existing surface if it is not a new build.)

What’s in a Contract

One of Gangbar’s most important tools in his dealings with clients is the contract. Initially he created his own, but now he regularly works with a lawyer. Although Gangbar maintains studio and liability insurance, the clients must provide their own insurance for the site, and use their own engineers to make sure any structures conform to local building codes. As well, Gangbar has clients sign off on all building plans and any adhesives or other methods of attachment (always using both an adhesive and a mechanical connection). This keeps Gangbar’s liability to a minimum, and ensures that the clients know what they are getting into.

Other items in the contract include specifics on lighting, access to the site while installing, what power sources are available, and the stipulation that the client is responsible for dealing with any union issues that might arise during the install. Finally, the client is responsible for the “build out” of the surface(s) that the work is to be installed upon, and they are responsible for building this to code. Some contracts specify a warranty period of a year, but Gangbar does not provide maintenance services. He does provide maintenance suggestions as well as “attic stock”—extra parts that can be used by the client should they require them at a later date.

Timeline and Protocol for Commissions

- Initial inquiry
- Fact-finding: site inspection and customer expectations
- Preliminary concept and estimate
- Client makes payment for further design work, 30–50% of total (Gangbar purposely does not call this a design fee as the intellectual property remains with the artist)
- Drawing, computer rendering, material samples, and final price quote
- Once these are approved, fabrication begins
- Second payment after fabrication is complete, 25–35% of total
- Shipping
- Installing
- Final payment of amount owing, 25–35% of total