

Business Section

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Philip Einsohn's work is flooring viewers at the famed Art Institute of Chicago, following a successful run at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. Come February, his two efforts will be at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Then it's on to Los Angeles. The catalog listing for the larger work reads: The "Wasteland, 1986, bronze, steel and linoleum, dimensions variable. He's, the "linoleum, dimensions variable. " And his three-dimensional floors are part of a traveling exhibition by Spanish sculptor Juan Munoz, known for transforming entire rooms into stages for his art. Mr. Einsohn owns a Dallas factory that makes intricately designed floors by cutting materials - be they expensive stones or cheap vinyl. - with highly pressurized water. Hence his company's name: Waterjet Works. He creates the "fifth wall" for those who want more than four sides to decorate. Dog paws designating pet food areas at Albertsons. Quilt-design walkways leading to strollers and car seats at Babies "R" Us. A flashy star bolt brightening the MRI lab at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children. "Sometimes you're looking up, but more often you're looking down, especially when you're pushing a shopping cart," says the 49-year-old Mr. Einsohn at his plant near Denton Drive and Royal Lane. "Why not make better use of your floors as drive aisles, way finders and room décor?" Using the cheapest material - vinyl composite tile - he can spiff up a footpath for between \$10 and \$35 a square foot. He figures he can fully deck out a big-box store for about \$10,000 to \$15,000. Get tired of it? Pull it up, and plop something else down. Some of Mr. Einsohn's work is at the opposite end of the price spectrum including semiprecious stone bathroom floors for the massive Strait Lane "castle" built by PageNet founder George Perrin. He also can do murals, tabletops and signs. His company made Dallas Mavericks and Stars logos that grace the locker room walls of American Airlines Center. **MATERIALS FOR MUNOZ** More recently Mr. Einsohn teamed up with Armstrong Worldwide Industries to produce floors for Mr. Munoz's retrospective tour. Armstrong and Mr. Einsohn thought this was the perfect opportunity to prove the aesthetic versatility of moderately priced linoleum. Armstrong kicked in the materials. Mr. Einsohn donated the computer-aided drawing and cutting of thousands of flooring pieces put together like a massive jigsaw puzzle. Mr. Munoz died in August 2001 from an aneurysm at age 48, only two months, before his exhibition opened at the Hirshhorn. Days earlier, the artist had sent his final specifications for computerized mapping to Mr. Einsohn's shop. The larger floor is composed of 6,000 geometric pieces that play undulating (and slightly nauseating) tricks on your eyes. Its 1,500-square-foot expanse makes Mr. Munoz's 2 1/2-foot bronze sculpture of a ventriloquist's dummy seem even smaller. "When we received his drawings we had no concept of what Juan Munoz was after. If you look at the pieces in isolation, you think. 'What's the deal here?'" laughs Mr. Einsohn, who is blown away by the finished result. "I was under the impression that art was something you viewed. Here you jump into the middle of it. As soon as you enter the room, he's won. You're captured by the art." Many viewers have to be coaxed past the threshold. Often, they reach down to see if the floor is really wavy.

"Some people actually got a sense of vertigo." says Olga Viso, curator of contemporary art at the Hirshhorn and organizer of the four-city tour, "It's disconcerting when you enter because the floor seems unstable - which of course, is part of the artist's intent. "The perfection in the cutting and the installation makes the floor seem seamless and only enhances that effect." Each floor (eight in total) has to be produced separately since the spaces in the four museums are completely different. The Hirshhorn is doughnut shaped, which meant Mr. Einsohn was fitting corners into curves. Houston presents another odd-shaped building where right angles are few and far between, Ah, Mr. Einsohn sighs, thank God for computers and a highly skilled programmer. All told, Waterjet Works will spend about 1,000 man-hours producing nearly 30,000 linoleum puzzle pieces. He'll be out about \$50,000-plus, admitting that he hasn't had the guts to put a pencil to it. He's sure it's worth every penny because he's reaching the art crowd who ordinarily might not give him or his technology the time of day. "Architects and interior designers think anything with a curved line will be more expensive," he says "The machine doesn't know if it's curved or straight, so you can have all of this creativity inexpensively." **USEFUL LESSONS** And he understands from his former life as a kindergarten teacher that it takes money to make money. Back in the late '70s, Mr. Einsohn, who holds a degree in early childhood development from the University of Texas in Austin, designed a line of wooden-piece puzzles of alphabet letters, numbers and colors as teaching tools. People sometimes have to advertise on a shoestring. Given his teaching salary of \$800 a month.

Linoleum steps up as art form, Dallas flooring firm's work is getting noticed in traveling exhibit

Mr. Einsohn's marketing was done on a thread, and his puzzle enterprise went bust. Now he says he's come full circle with floors that piece together, while his experience with kindergarteners helps him deal with customers. "Children teach you the patience to deal with everyone else," he says. And just like preschoolers, customers have itty-bitty attention spans. "I've got just a short time to tell a story and convince them that I can be of assistance." Until Mr. Einsohn and a smattering of others came along, waterjet technology was primarily used to inexpensively make precision-cut industrial widgets. In 1993, while a sales rep for restaurant, hotel and hospital furniture, he came across a waterjet company at a convention. He thought the technology could be applied to furniture and floors, so he added the Iowa-based company to his roster. Armstrong was among his first waterjet customers. Through that relationship in 1998, Mr. Einsohn landed Albertsons, which was opening and refurbishing about 70 stores a year at that time. The next year, Mr. Einsohn got crosswise with the Iowa company, took the Albertsons account and started his own waterjet company on the kitchen table of his North Dallas home. He had no cutting machines, no employees but one really important customer to please. Outsourcing didn't work, so he leased a machine and opened his own factory. "I wanted to walk very slowly at first." Mr. Einsohn says, "Albertsons was a wonderful account because one store was pretty much the same as the next." Bill Csrnko, strategic account manager at Armstrong Commercial Flooring, has worked with Mr. Einsohn since the get-go on numerous national accounts, including Albertsons, Safeway, PetsMart, Disney stores and a slew of hospitals. "You can basically give him a picture, and Phil can produce the product." says Mr. Csrnko,

adding that Mr. Einsohn gets it done faster, cheaper and better. "So why should we try to do it ourselves?" Revenue at Waterjet Works should be just under \$1 million this year with a profit margin of about 10 percent, Mr. Einsohn says. Sales should grow 30 percent in 2003, thanks to several large hospital projects and a post 9-11 baby boom that has Babies "R" Us in expansion mode. Michael Freedman, who oversees all of the "R" Us accounts for Associated, a national flooring contractor based in New York City, has his pick of waterjet companies, but Mr. Einsohn delivers service, quality and design expertise he hasn't found elsewhere. Recently, Mr. Einsohn designed a drive aisle, the main thoroughfare of a store, for a national concept that Mr. Freedman is working on. "Philip brings to life what people put on paper. That's what customers want." Mr. Einsohn hopes to launch a line of decorative tile for kitchens and bathrooms. He's ready to show buyers at Lowe's and Home Depot about 50 small, white ceramic wall tiles with hearts, stars, flowers, coffee cups and the like cut into them. Form and Function The idea is to increase his factory productivity with a simple product that can be made whenever his machines aren't busy doing custom work. "Given the questionable economy, people are going to do things themselves to make their homes more attractive," asserts Mr. Einsohn. "Everyone targets the expensive end of the market. I want to target the other end so that price is not an issue." Although the operations are running fairly well these days, there have been a few costly mistakes. A 10-foot stainless steel monolith slated for the Dallas Police Memorial now stands in his warehouse as a reminder to get perfection on the first try. "A subcontractor doing the finishing put a dip into the metal so we had to re-cut it," he says with a forlorn shrug "It happens. But now I can't get anybody to just take it away." He says it's yours for the taking.