

NEW LOOK

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Joey Skaggs
designs fish tanks that
are just like home,
only wetter.

CONDOS FOR THE UPWARDLY MOBILE GUPPY!

Text by Nancy Solomon.
Photographs by Michael Melford/
Wheeler Pictures.

A celebrity sperm bank, a 50-foot bra draped across the Treasury Building in lower Manhattan, and a "cat house" for dogs. These are just a few of the zany hoaxes perpetrated by Greenwich Village multimedia artist Joey Skaggs.

"I use the media as a medium, as a painter would use canvas," says Skaggs. His superbra could have fit perfectly around the tits of

the Statue of Liberty. In this land of the free, professional scam man Skaggs uses what he calls "guerrilla tactics" to manipulate the media. The purpose for such elaborately staged happenings is to expose how the media operates and how they mold public opinion. Such venerable institutions as *The Wall Street Journal*, "Good Morning, America," and *The*

New York Times have been duped by his outrageous plays.

In 1981, the international wire service UPI scooped up the following hunk of Skaggs bull and fed it to over 100 of their trusting subscribers, including the *Chicago Tribune*, which published this story: "A New York group called Metamorphosis, led by one Josef Gregor, 40, who has a Ph.D. from an unnamed South American university, is madly chowing down cockroach pills. The 70 persons believe that those interesting qualities that make the cockroach impervious to man's assaults will get them past the nagging everyday pain of acne, anemia and, yes, the misery of nuclear fallout." Sound vaguely familiar? Metamorphosis, Dr. Josef Gregor? "I guess no one reads Kafka anymore," Skaggs, aka Gregor, laments. A former teacher of media communications, Skaggs shares Kafka's uncanny proclivity for the ridiculous. He schemes under

who called himself Jo Jo the Gypsy and protested against "repeated slurs against our character," referring to the Congressional Gypsy Moths, or Jay Jay Skaggs, who posed as a Hawaii-born windsurfer who set out to sail the perilous Pacific Ocean to California? Skaggs, it turns out, is also a frequent visitor to pet shops. "I just like to look at the fish," he says. The idea to create fully furnished and interior-decorated tanks came to him while visiting a toy museum in Baltimore. "I was looking at some beautiful old doll houses behind glass. I thought to myself what a shame that they really can't be appreciated." So, in November 1983, he started the company Art Tanks. The chameleon that he is, Skaggs is owner, designer, architect, and a damn good salesman, if you believe him. The fish condos, still being built as individual prototypes, have been displayed in galleries around

French country furniture, a silver samovar, and butcher-block countertops.

A bathroom condo may be decorated with porcelain fixtures, a claw-footed bathtub, and even a bidet. All accessories are handcrafted by Skaggs, or else he simply shops around. "Shopping for the furniture and accessories is time-consuming," he says, "but one of the funniest parts of my work." An ironic personal touch is added to each and every interior. Dogs, cats, rubber duckies, and even fish are companions to the fancy-tailed guppies, gobies, and neons. Skaggs' theory is that the fish are the people and they must have their pets.

After looking at the glowing condos, you almost can't imagine not owning one. As for all real estate in Manhattan, these one-room dwellings are high-rent and start at \$2,500. Holy mackerel! Fish are not included. By next Christmas, Skaggs hopes to be mass-producing the condos



aliases bearing a close resemblance to his real name, yet despite an intentionally thin disguise, he's never detected. His point, and impetus for a new project, is that the American media will fall for just about any zany story, even if it isn't true.

Lately, Skaggs has been channeling his talent into a less ephemeral art form, fish condos. What do you expect from a man

New York, and this spring they're headed for a museum.

It's the miniature detailing, in proper scale with the finny residents, that makes the tanks so charming. "I got bored looking at the same ol' sunken ships, divers, and treasure chests," Skaggs explains. Kitchen models come equipped with all the luxuries of home: Top-of-the-line refrigerators, dishwashers,

at \$100 each, making them more accessible to the average guppy. Other future plans include a sushi bar, a church (filled with angelfish), and duplexes.

"I juxtapose realities," Skaggs explains. "The condos are satirical juxtapositions. They're cute and wonderful, but in reality they are condos for upwardly mobile guppies." Do we buy it? Yes, but not until next Christmas. 