

Damian Priour, noted sculptor, dies at 61

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

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Damian Priour, the most successful Austin sculptor of his generation, died Wednesday night after a years-long struggle with cancer. He was 61.

Born in 1949 on Padre Island during the Texas drought of 1948 to 1957, Priour, a fifth-generation Texan, said he first experienced rain when he was 3 years old. That magical presence of water profoundly affected his impressions of nature and later his artwork. His signature materials — fossil-laced Texas limestone and green-blue glass — represented his deep attachment to the water and landscape of the Texas Gulf Coast region of his youth.

"Water sparks my imagination, my memories," Priour wrote in an introduction to "Around the Water," an exhibit of his sculpture on view through Dec. 4 at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. "Water sparks my ability to go places that only exist in my imagination."

From his hilltop studio on his 50-acre ranch down the road from Hamilton Pool in western Travis County, Priour maintained a prolific and celebrated artistic practice.

Large in scale and symbolically abstract, his sculptures were commissioned for public, private and corporate art collections in Corpus Christi, Dallas, Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities. His work is in the permanent collections of the Blanton Museum of Art, the Art Museum of South Texas and the Museo Del Arte in Monterrey, Nuevo León.

In Austin, Priour's sculptures adorn the Austin Convention Center and the grounds of Laguna Gloria, the Austin Museum of Art's historic location in West Austin. In 2008, he was named Texas State

3-Dimensional Artist by the Texas Commission on the Arts .

Priour is remembered as much for his colossally sized art as he is for his support of other artists and the arts community.

"He had a huge impact because he was so generous with other people," said Judith Sims, director of the art school at the Austin Museum of Art and a friend of Priour's for more than 30 years. "He put himself out there, made the connections, did the groundwork. He set very high standards for artists. He protected them."

A longtime board member of the Umlauf Sculpture Garden & Museum, Priour created the Umlauf Prize for an outstanding University of Texas sculpture student, a venture he personally funded. Priour received a bachelor's degree from UT in 1972.

He also served on the boards of the Austin Museum of Art, the Hamilton Pool Road Scenic Corridor Coalition, the Hill Country Alliance and Ballet Austin.

A frequent presence at local exhibit openings and arts events, Priour engaged a much wider community of his artistic peers in 2008 when he started his Texas Chair Project, making 100 small limestone and glass chairs that he sent, unannounced, to 100 Texas artists he admired, inviting them to make a small chair of their own design. After exhibiting the project, the chairs were sold, with all proceeds going toward art and environmental causes.

Priour is survived by his wife, Paula, and his children Chloe, Stuart and J.J. Memorial arrangements are pending.

jvanryzin@statesman.com; 445-3699