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SECT

HE'S GOT concrete plans

LOCAL ARTIST USES
HARD MATERIAL AND
PLASTER TO CREATE
HOME FURNISHINGS

BY CRISTINA BOLLING
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If this were Eric Cockrell's dream world, he'd be spending his days in an art studio, creating sculpture and painting canvases in brilliant colors. His real-life occupation is a little more utilitarian.

Cockrell fashions showers, tubs, countertops, walls and even furniture pieces out of concrete and plaster. It's not what he had in mind in art school, but he says it feeds his soul as an artist, allowing him to morph his mastery of color and art into a trade that is getting more popular by the minute.

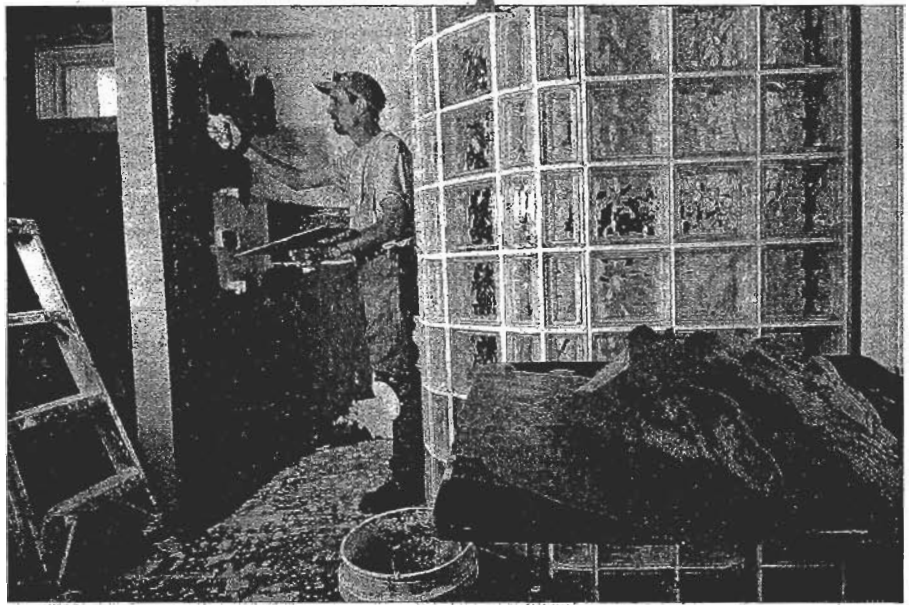
Concrete used to be favored mainly by businesses wanting an industrial look. But now, as some homeowners tire of granite and tile and want more options when it comes to shape, color and pattern, they're turning to concrete and plaster.

That's where Cockrell comes in. A Rock Hill native schooled at the prestigious Pratt Institute in New York, he spent about a decade working for a New York company, doing concrete and plaster projects in homes and workplaces of the rich and famous worldwide.

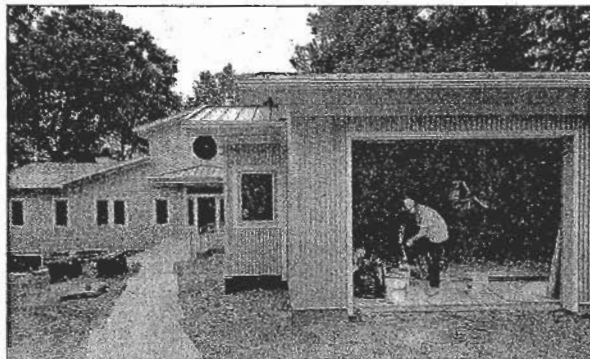
He built a concrete sofa and coffee table for the late Liz Claiborne's home in St. Barts, in the French West Indies. He did the plaster walls in Keanu Reeves' apartment off Central Park in New York and created a bright blue men's bathroom and vibrant yellow steam room for Robert De Niro's upstate New York residence. For Mary Tyler Moore, he said, he covered a hallway in red plaster.

Cockrell, a 44-year-old who lives in Charlotte's Plaza-Midwood neighborhood with his wife and three young children, still works occasionally for the company that scored those A-list accounts. But he now spends most of his time in the Charlotte region working for his own company, Mudwerk: "I think I'm pretty lucky because it's like every kid's dream. I get to play with different colors of mud every day," Cockrell says.

In a corner of his shop off North Davidson Street in NoDa, white barrels labeled with job names are stacked high. They contain the specially blended pigments, or color formulas, for every job he's done in the area. That way, if one of his clients needs to expand or touch up an area he's done, he'll



▲ Eric Cockrell, owner of Mudwerk, finishes a walk-in shower at a home on Lake Norman near Mooresville. Cockrell began as an artist, with a master's degree in painting and sculpture from a prestigious art institute in New York. He morphed his skills into a trade that blends art with construction.



Tim Jones, Cockrell's assistant, mixes a cement-based plaster that is being used to finish a walk-in shower at this Lake Norman home.

Eric Cockrell
Fine artist and concrete and plaster specialist



Age: 44.
Family: Wife, Rebecca Bowman and three children: Annabella, 10; Joseph, 8; Paul, 4.
Hometown: Rock Hill.
Now lives in:

Plaza-Midwood.

Education: Graduated from College of Charleston; earned a master's degree in painting and sculpture from Pratt Institute in New York City.

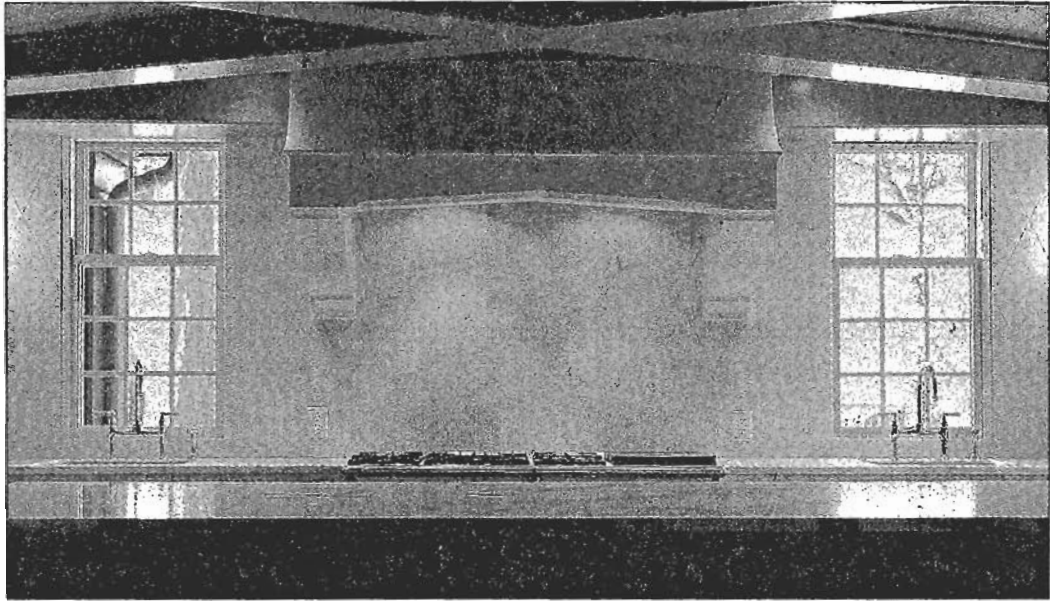
To view or purchase his paintings: Hair Kloud Salon/Gallery, 1318 Central Ave., Charlotte.

Contact: eric@mudwerk.com; 704-533-2790.

PHOTOS BY L. MUEZZER - @moeffer@charlotteobserver.com

Local artist has concrete plans

Here are Mudwerk walls and hood by Eric Cockrell in a home in Myers Park. Cockrell says concrete and plaster have virtually no limits. Any shape is possible; any color can be created. By building a mold on the job, he can create a gigantic, seamless, U-shaped countertop or 3-foot-deep soaking tub.



LMUELLER - lmueller@charlotteobserver.com

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have the formula at his fingertips.

Cockrell is modest and quiet-spoken, but don't ask him to divulge what makes his concrete projects so waterproof or how his custom finishes perfectly replicate a designer's whim.

"It's like the formula for Coke," he quips.

The beauty of concrete and plaster, Cockrell says, is that there are virtually no limits. Any shape is possible; any color can be created.

Using an artist's touch, he can make plaster or concrete replicate nearly any medium. And many clients like the fact that the ingredients are "green," or environmentally friendly. The ingredients for concrete are simple: Portland cement, gravel and sand. Plaster, used for centuries all over the world, is made up of gypsums and

aggregates and marble dust.

To create the look of terrazzo tile in NASCAR driver Joe Nemechek's Lake Norman house, he smashed empty beer bottles, polished the glass fragments and mixed them into concrete.

When a Lake Norman client wanted to replicate Morocco's brilliant colors in his home, Cockrell spread vibrant yellow plaster on the kitchen walls and polished it with a special stone - he won't divulge what kind - to make it shine.

Advances that made concrete and plaster more waterproof have caused their popularity to surge, industry experts say.

"In the early part of 2000, granite seemed to be the standard for kitchen countertops. The better-quality concrete is starting to make inroads there," said Stephen Melman of the National Association of Homebuilders.

Local designer Kenny Campbell says his clients are increasingly choosing concrete.

"It's a very hip, urban look, but the nice thing about it is that you can customize it into any application you're doing in the design," Campbell says. Cockrell "can inlay any material into that concrete - glass beads or barn wood.

"I'd rather do concrete or wood (than granite) these days, because everybody's got granite or marble."

Campbell says concrete tends to be 20 to 25 percent cheaper than granite, and he believes it is easier to fix if chipped.

Pricing varies from job to job, but Cockrell said he might charge \$2,500 for a concrete shower and perhaps \$5,000 for a deep, 6-foot-long soaking tub. Specialty finishes are about \$5 a square foot, he said.

Every night after Cockrell and his wife, Rebecca Bowman, put their three school-age children to bed, Cockrell retreats to a small home studio to work on his paintings.

"It's the one place I can unwind," Cockrell says. "I don't have to follow any plans."