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Jose R. Lopez/The New York Times

Jared Bark, left, of Bark Frameworks, directs Yizhak Marvin as he prepares to mount a signature Bark frame (always understated) at the company's SoHo office.

The Art Around the Art

The Aim of Jared Bark's Work Is to 'Preserve' a Picture (Not That He Wants You to Notice)

By ENID NEMY

THE building, on a cast-iron SoHo street, is anonymous, undistinguished. The sign is so discreet it's often missed. The door is solid, locked and stubbornly resistant to jiggles and shoves. Only a symphony of knuckles does the trick.

This is Bark Frameworks, the Tiffany of the frame business, an appropriately unobtrusive, and somewhat exclusive, atelier for an art that is seen by all but rarely noticed. Which is precisely the point.

Inside the door is an expanse of architecturally planned open space with a glass staircase leading down to workrooms. To one side, at the bottom of the steps, there is an alcove set up to look like an outdoor cafe. Jared Bark seats the visitor, walks across to the little kitchen area and returns with two coffees, fortunately stronger than the containers, which leak slightly.

No matter. The private collectors, architects and museum curators don't come to 85 Grand Street for coffee. Richard Avedon came recently with ideas for framing his show, "Richard Avedon: Evidence, 1944-1994," at the Whitney. Last year, the people who know about such things at the Metropolitan Museum of Art came to order more than 200 different frames for its "Waking Dream" exhibition on photography's first 100 years. The Museum of Modern Art is also a client.

A Bark frame is not distinguished by the extravagant use of gilt, by elaborate curlicues or massive scale. Its signature is an absence of decorative effect.

Some reflections on what Mr. Bark calls the art of "preserving the art":

"We are not involved in framing as decor. The frame has to play a service role. It can be a compelling design in itself, but in no circumstances should it dominate the painting." A modest landscape, for instance, could be "killed" by a frame that tried to make it a great presence, but the right frame would

bring out the work's full potential.

The period of the painting, the subject, the color and the form: all must be taken into consideration. A 17th-century Dutch landscape might get a "bourgeois" frame — dark, somber and ebonized, simple — rather than carved and decorative, to fit the character of the picture. A contemporary painting by Jasper Johns would probably be done in the way Johns himself prefers — straightforward, simple blond ramin wood with a deep off-white mat.

"The basic reason he is so good is that he is an artist at heart with a sensitivity, especially to works on paper, that is as fine as it gets," said Maria Hambourg, curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "In his development of matting and framing solutions, he has an open-minded approach — he has no fear of playing with a variety of solutions until he comes up with the optimum one."

Bark Frameworks is one of the few companies still in the business of framing fine art. Among the prestigious survivors, some of which also deal in period-reproduction frames (Bark does not) are Julius Lowy Frame & Restoring Company (223 East 80th Street) and Eli Wilner & Company (1525 York Avenue at 80th Street).

Galleries and artists are major Bark clients, and museums can account for 5 to 10 percent of a year's business. In the last few years, however, individual collectors have become increasingly important, particularly as many corporate collections were put on hold. There is little difference in framing for a museum and a collector, he said, other than that museum curators are often more explicit about what they want.

"Generally, we hear what the client wants and come up with prototypes," Mr. Bark said. In some cases — Mr. Avedon was one — the client basically designs his own frames and the company executes them. In others, Mr. Bark or one of his partners suggests what seems most suitable.



With the Avedon exhibition, the objective was to present the photographs with as little encumbrance as possible, "to achieve a direct encounter between the viewer and the photograph."

"We used frames without Plexiglas, as Avedon had requested, so that the nature of the paper was clear — the photograph was presented as an object," he said. "For some of the pictures, we did a special deep-set aluminum frame that looks a little like a photographic darkroom tray."

Mr. Bark grew up in California and came to New York after graduating from Stanford University in 1966. He became interested in the profession when he earned extra money working in a frame shop in Palo Alto during high school and college.

Mr. Bark founded the business in 1970 and now has three partners. James Barth and Jamie Dearing build most of the designs, Anne Grant looks after administration and Mr. Bark does a bit of everything, handles special projects and is involved in technical areas. He is also the resident expert on

framing's history.

The original 3,000 square feet on West Broadway has expanded to more than three times that size. Matting, handwork and assembly are done there; metal and woodworking shops are in an even larger rented space in Brooklyn.

At the time Mr. Bark entered the business, wood frames were at the low end of the market ("four sticks of wood banged together," he said). The popular and innovative frames were done by Kulicke, a framing company (now specializing in antique reproductions) that had developed the metal section frame, the welded aluminum frame and the Plexiglas box frame.

Bark began using a wide range of woods, ramin from Borneo, blond, nondescript and characterless but providing a particularly good foil for art, as well as hard maple and ash. The stock also expanded to cherry, curly maple, rosewood and several African and South American woods. Finishes were washed for more variation.

Hardwood frames never completely disappeared but in the Bark frame design, these materials were given a new prominence, exploiting the character of the wood in a way that had not been done before.

"Until well into the 1980's, 90 percent of our work was simple modernist frames in wood or welded metal," Mr. Bark said. The percentage isn't as high today, but it is still substantial.

"We have developed a modernist esthetic, a range of species of wood so that the frames can be both interesting and subtle," Mr. Bark said. "None of this was unheard of but we've focused on having a wide and rich range."

The Bark client is rarely of the walk-in variety, though once in a while, someone who has heard about the company "stumbles in with sort of a glazed look," he said. The glazed look is likely to solidify when the walk-in discovers the cost of a Bark frame: \$125 to several thousand dollars. Posters and reproductions need not apply.