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And the Oscar for Best Background Art Goes to...

By [DANIEL GRANT](#)

A host of artists have discovered there's a way to profit from their work without actually selling it. They can rent it out.

Los Angeles sculptor Bruce Gray, for instance, found that he could get around \$1,000 at a time—sometimes as much as \$10,000—by renting his work for set decoration in movies and TV shows.

His pieces have shown up in the background of all three "Austin Powers" movies, "Meet the Fockers" and "Batman Forever," to name a few, as well as over 100 commercials and television shows, including "CSI" and "Six Feet Under."

The money doesn't add up to a livelihood, he says, but it's a nice secondary revenue stream and provides an anecdote he can offer to prospective collectors of his work.

Finding a Fit

The demand for background art is so great, in fact, that middleman firms have sprung up to help connect artists with filmmakers.



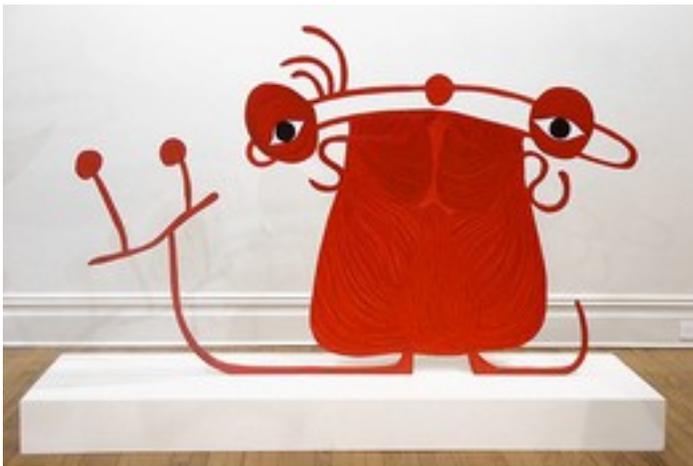
New Line Cinema

THE SPY WHO RENTED ME Bruce Gray's sculpture with Austin Powers

"It never would have occurred to me that I could lease my work," says New York sculptor Charley Friedman. Then he was contacted by Jessica Heyman, founder and director of Art for Film LLC, which helps film and TV production companies in New York City find background art. She ended up placing his work on the shows "Ugly Betty" and "White Collar."

The hunger for rentals isn't confined to the film and TV industry. Real-estate developers looking to entice tenants with eye-popping lobbies are also big rental customers, as are corporations that want to decorate their offices but are reluctant to invest in a permanent collection.

These deals can run for months or longer and let artists "earn thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of dollars," says Barbara Koz Paley, founder and chief executive officer of Art Assets LLC, which leases artwork to corporations.



Daniel Grant

SEEING RED Charley Friedman's work has appeared on TV shows

Homeowners often plunge into renting, too. They "don't necessarily know what they like and want to try out various styles" before deciding to buy a piece, says Skip Henderson, owner of Mona Lease, an art gallery in Greenbrae, Calif., that specializes in short- and long-term art leasing.

Not Much Recognition

But there are drawbacks to renting out art. For one thing, it's not going to bring the artist any recognition to speak of.

In the film and television world, artists need to accept that their work "is background, that's the whole thing," says Ms. Heyman of Art for Film.

"You may barely be able to see it or it may not appear on screen at all. If you are lucky, you might see it for a full minute behind an actor's head," she says. "And there are no credits for your work."

That's not the only problem that artists have to prepare for. Mr. Gray had one of his sculptures stolen off a movie set and another was scratched (although the film crew fixed it up); yet a third sculpture was repainted in different colors to match the colors on the set.

"If you can't bear to see something happen to your work," Mr. Gray says, "you shouldn't rent it out."

Mr. Grant is a writer in Amherst, Mass. He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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