

Fragilities

2006, Boston Sculptors Gallery, Boston, MA

Materials: Toothpicks, shadows

Dimensions: variable

In 2005, while working on a public art project in Arizona, I hiked in the mountains near Phoenix and saw a delicate desert plant that fascinated me. It had a fragile web of thin branches, creating an airy, filigree structure. Although it was a plant, the right-angled branching pattern gave it the look of a manmade object. This relationship of natural and manmade and its embodiment in the garden is a theme I have explored throughout my sculpture.

When I returned to the studio, I explored various ways to build this structure and found that toothpicks were perfect for the task. They are a very affordable sculpture material — \$0.79 for a box of 750! I invented a way to join them together which captured the spirit of the plant. And, in keeping with the theme, toothpicks are both natural (made of wood from a tree) and man-made (sliced into tiny “planks”).

All of the sculptures in this installation were generated using a simple set of rules. I drilled either one or two holes in the wide end of the toothpicks, whittled the narrow ends so they fit in the holes, added a drop of glue, and attached them together on alternating sides. Much like DNA, whose simple building blocks recombine to create a variety of organisms, I have used the rules to create a family of related forms. One-holed toothpicks create chainlike forms, while two-holed structures have more volume. They can be either dense or open, depending upon how many holes I fill with toothpicks. In the exhibit, you will see a variety of structures: one-holed, two-holed, and combination.

For the most part, the forms were not preconceived. Allowing the rules to govern my explorations, I just let the forms grow. I wanted them to appear as if they had grown themselves in the space. As the piece evolved, I gave thought to the space between things — leaving open space, letting the forms breathe.

There is a ritual to the repetitive act of drilling, whittling, and gluing that I find satisfying. People have commented: "You must be very patient." Well, yes and no. I find comfort in using my hands and focusing on the craft of making these objects — it keeps my mind from making mischief!

Various categories of forms emerged, which I informally titled: big bang, little bang, fuzzies, fluffies, crawlers, loops, chains, caterpillars, animals, clouds, nests, and baskets. I was also thinking about nerve cells and how they interconnect. As you look at this

exhibit, you may make some of these associations, or invent others, or view the pieces abstractly. There is no fixed reading, and you are invited to use your imagination.

People have asked: "Should I view this as one installation, or groupings of forms, or are all the pieces separate?" My answer to all three is: yes. As an installation artist, I choreograph the relationship of objects within a space so that they work together in concert. I want the space as a whole to create a sense of magic and transformation. However, each piece in this exhibit has its own gesture and personality, and can exist on its own.

This installation was conceived specifically for the light-filled front space of the gallery. If you return at different times of day, you will find that the quality of light and the delicate shadows have subtly altered. For those of you familiar with my work, I usually create installations for darkened rooms, such as Luminous Garden at the DeCordova Museum. So this was a departure, a relinquishing of control.

The installation is a moment in time, a little piece of a larger universe that has no boundaries. On a future visit, the sculptures may have grown, or migrated, or disappeared from view. Only their shadows will remain, their solidity de-materialized, their presence becoming absence.