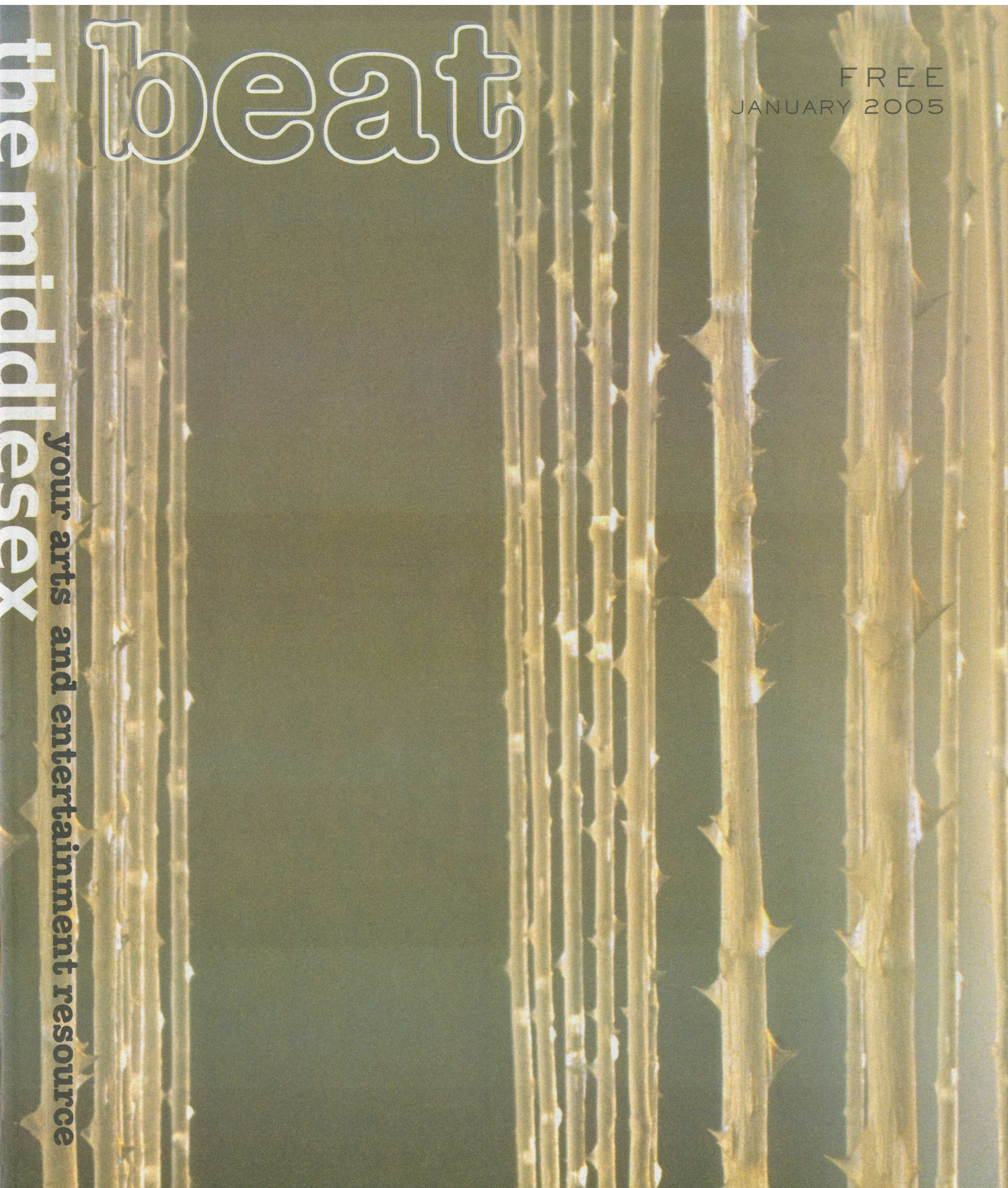


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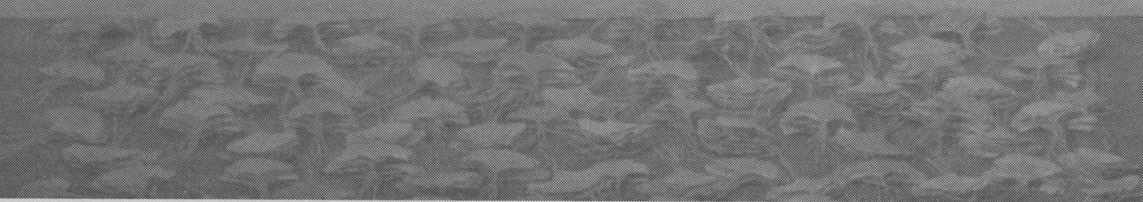




NATURALLY INCLINED

BY KATHERINE FRENCH

BETH GALSTON



Although it was late spring when I made my first visit to Beth Galston's studio, icicles hung down from the rafters. Not just one or two. Instead, a whole forest of glittering strands fell from the ceiling of an old industrial building on Vernon Street in Somerville. As I got closer, a path opened up and it was possible for me to step inside this frozen landscape to discover that the ice was in fact hard resin, cast to resemble the stems of a rose. Most hung straight in this piece entitled *Ice Forest*, but inside was a tangled vine, which impeded any further progress. Sharp thorns covered both the straight and twisted stems. I was caught inside an environment that was both fragile and dangerous, forced to consider the light filled growth which surrounded me.

Beth Galston's early reading of fairy tales obviously left its mark. Much of her art is concerned with a door opening up or path leading into her imagined world, a fantastical world that engages the viewer. Instead of pausing to look at Galston's work, we are invited to physically enter and then consider the experience. "My pieces create a sense of place," the artist states, "a moment of magic or transformation." They also explore the scale of the human body in relationship to the space she creates, spaces which can be strictly defined—or go on forever.

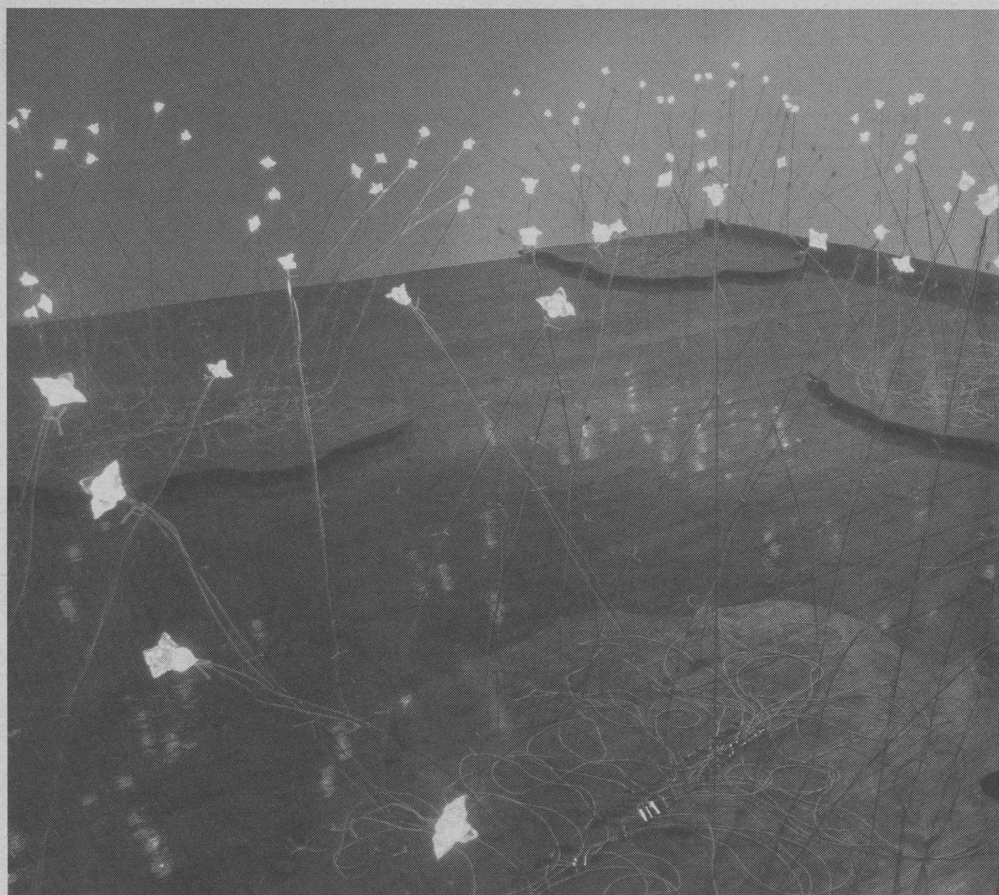
When she first began making sculpture in the 1970's, Galston hung ten window frames in a row, each one smaller than the one before, which she then backlit to focus the viewer on a vanishing perspective. During that same year, she mounted two window frames on stilts in an open field. The first window served as a frame for the sky, the second, was mirrored to reflect an image of the first. These conceptual pieces grew out of Galston's childhood experience of growing up in southern California with the expanse of Pacific Ocean on one side and the great wilderness parks on the other. On numerous camping trips she took with her family, she would look up at the night sky and feel "surrounded by a vast landscape." Beth Galston seeks to create an environment that can immerse the viewer. Yet, like the night sky, these environments are infinite.

Gradually, she began using translucent materials to build installations which were used as sets for dance performances in many different venues, including MIT, Mobius and most recently at the Emerson Majestic Theatre where five thirty-foot fabric scrims rose from the stage to form columns through which dancers moved under the changing colors of theatrical lighting. Yet, Galston is not a set designer. Instead, she is a sculptor who uses light and shadow as a tool to define space. In one gallery installation, suspended screen panels cast shadows on the walls, while layered carpets of screens shifted underfoot as visitors walked on what appeared to be water. In another installation, fabric was stretched over aluminum frames to create tepee-like structures, which were lit with a shimmering blue light. Viewers could choose to walk around or enter this light filled village.

In the past fifteen years, Galston's work has turned increasingly toward recognizable objects found in nature, her eye focused on minute twigs, thorns, and seed pods—the small details which are often missed while walking in the woods. While artist in residence at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, NH, during the summer of 1995, she deliberately left traditional sculpture materials at home, choosing instead to create work from the leaves and branches she collected walking between her studio and the artists' dining hall. While it's ironic that her home and stu-

dio are in a city, Galston is dismissive of the idea that her study of nature might be a reaction to urban environment. She protests that Somerville has tree-lined streets and small plots of garden in front of the houses. If she is now less concerned with architecture, it is because she wants to direct our attention to the natural world and those small, almost invisible clues which explain our place in the universe.

seedpods have been used to cast hundreds of flowers in clear resin. Within each, she has implanted a blue LED, a display technology that uses a semiconductor diode to emit light when charged. These blue lights give an ethereal glow to a darkened space where fans cause the flowers to gently bend and sway on wire stalks. A tangle of electrical cord serves to remind us of the plant's root system, which supplies energy for growth.



In recent installations, she uses branches and twigs to create form, strings thousands of acorn caps to make a tangled rope, imbeds ginkgo leaves in clear resin. Her 1997 installation *Leaf Dreams* filled the inside space of the Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery in Newton with fallen leaves to contrast against the bare winter trees outside. Galston's growing interest with natural forms reflects her consideration of mortality. Some leaves were preserved with a coating of beeswax, others were painted white, still others were allowed to dry and crumble with natural decay. "It wasn't just leaves and shapes, but my fascination with this ephemeral process happening every year." As an artist, she wants to participate in this process, preserving the leaves so that "we could take a close look and think."

Galston wants us to think not only where we are going, but also where we have been. In *Luminous Garden*, she transforms the gallery into a place of enchantment where

"There is a point of experience that all of my work comes out of," says Galston, considering the piece. Growing up in suburban Los Angeles, she vividly remembers the one untended piece of landscape available, a field at the end of the street where Queen Anne's Lace and other spiky wildflowers grew on tall stalks. "As a child, you are more aware of a sense of scale. Everything is built out of scale. Counter tops are higher. You see things from a different vantage point." Standing inside a luminous field of blue flowers, we are invited to view her garden with the innocent vision of a child. "I want to recapture that sense of being immersed," says Galston. "And make art which allows other to have the same experience."

BETH GALSTON IS A SCULPTOR AND ENVIRONMENTAL ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN SOMERVILLE, MA. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST AND HER WORK, PLEASE VISIT HER WEB SITE AT WWW.BETHGALSTON.COM.