

Leaf Dreams

Beth Galston, Artist

1997, Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery, West Newton, MA

Materials: Leaves, seed pods, beeswax, netting, vellum

Dimensions: 22' x 29' x 53'6"

Leaf Dreams was inspired by the falling leaves of the cucumber magnolia tree outside the gallery. I was drawn to their fragile beauty as they began a process of loss and transformation. I wanted to freeze the moment and look more closely at this event to find the meanings within it.

I began collecting the cucumber leaves, making many trips back and forth to my studio with garbage bags full of leaves, in a rush to gather them before the leaf shredder arrived. In my studio, I started sorting, piling and drying the leaves. There was a language of the leaves that I needed to listen to and I wanted the structure to evolve from this. Some dried naturally and curled, while others I stacked, pressed and dipped in beeswax. I became fascinated with the contrast between the orderly stacked leaves and the chaotic curled leaves. The piece evolved as my own process interacted with the qualities of the leaves, and I allowed my obsessiveness to show.

I added other types of leaves, as the ginkgo (golden yellow) and Japanese maples (red) fell. I found these at the DeCordova Museum, as well as the sycamores (lifting up to the ceiling), which curled into fishlike shapes as they dried. Seed pods from the cucumber and beechnut trees outside were incorporated, suggesting a cycle of growth and renewal, and adding a spicy smell. The vellum xeroxes on the walls and crumpled on the floor are from a pamphlet on identifying trees, given to me by my father, a professor of plant physiology. I liked the juxtaposition of natural leaves and leaves from a book.

While some of the sculpture was pre-planned, much of the installation took place through a process of improvisation over a two week period in the gallery. The space itself, with its soaring ceiling, suggested many possibilities. For me, making the piece was like a musical composition, with themes being stated, transformed, and restated. I have choreographed different events and energy fields in the gallery, so that they resonate with each other to create an environment. Repeating themes being explored are order and chaos, shadow and substance, loss and regeneration. As you move through the installation, there are fragments you may put together according to your own experiences, like words in a poem or moments in a dream.