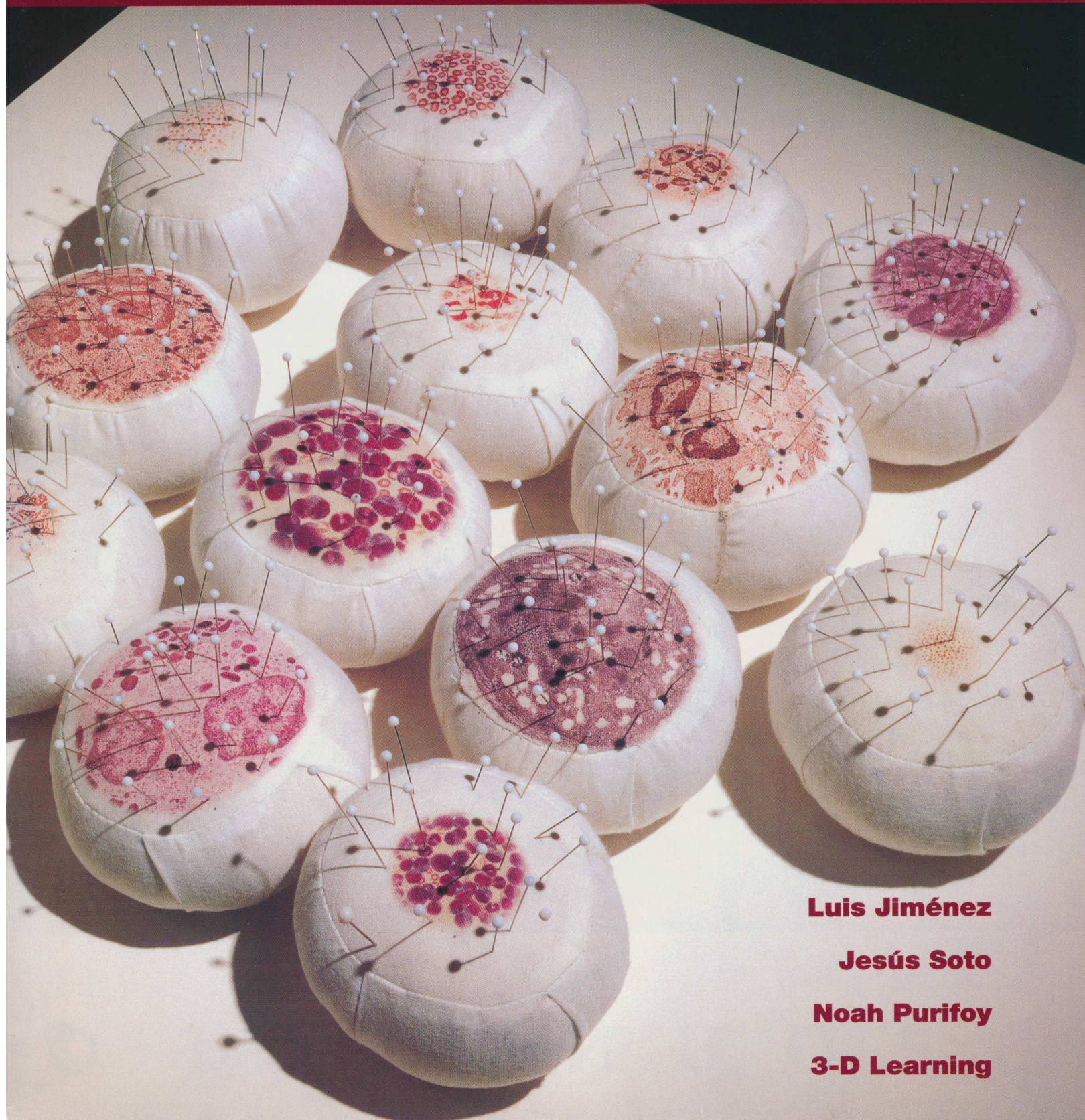


# Sculpture

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## Focus

by Marty Carlock

# From Light To Leaf: The Installation Art of Beth Galston



Above: "Leaf Dreams," installation view, 1997. Ginkgo leaves, beeswax, and plywood, 6 x 4 x 4 ft.

Beth Galston's work has always possessed a romantic quality—accessible, even sensual, yet paradoxically structured and coolly intellectual. Her most recent installations, evincing less control, more emotion, and very little technology, might surprise a viewer who has not followed her odyssey from techno-art into nature.

Galston went to M.I.T. almost 20 years ago to work with that most elusive of aesthetic media, light, and its counterpart, shadow. Over time, the high-tech materials she utilized to manipulate light have faded from her work, replaced by found items from nature. At the Kansas City Art Institute in the late '70s, Galston had done some site works with skeletal aspects. "There was something about walls and windows," she recalls. "The shadows started to become important." From structured, architectonic early works, she moved to flashy manipulation of strobes, dimmers, and light reflections. But the mirrors, she says, "were too seductive, too easy. I wanted something opposite."

Gauzy, romantic light-and-scrim installations in very large spaces followed, often conceived as performance pieces with dancers. In related but more recent installations, she created columns from heavy steel mesh, lighted so they threw architectonic shadows on suspended tracing paper.

A Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe (1990–92) led Galston into experiments with industrial materials, the delicacy of her early work disappearing as she sought more permanence. She exhibited outdoor pieces made of perforated metal, clunky steel grating with round holes in it, and was not dismayed when weeds obscured them. She saw that vegetation could knit industrial materials with nature.

Galston next turned her concepts inside out: instead of placing structures in an indoor environment, she

created her own boundaries by building a transparent enclosure outside. A screen room on stilts, 18 feet square, was her 1994 contribution to Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York. In designing *Tree/House*, she carefully chose birch trees whose trunks related to the size of the verticals and planted them where they could grow up in a central opening. Thoughtfully, she provided a ladder so people could climb into the sculpture, and they did.

"At Socrates," she says, "architectural, industrial, and natural materials started to have equal weight. Socrates is a park—but in the city. *Tree/House* was a culmination of that thought."

Going to the MacDowell Colony the following summer, she had determined that "I wasn't going to bring anything but string and wire. Everything else, I was going to find." Walking the grounds, she collected branches, then pinned bits of them to the wall as a "twig hieroglyphic."

For a site-specific group show at the Duxbury Art Complex Museum in Massachusetts, her technology became close to imperceptible. Many viewers never found *Leaf Boats* at all; others did so with sudden, double-take awareness that the leaves floating on a tiny pond were the wrong colors, iridescent blue, red, and green. Totally invisible was the cork glued to each leaf and tethered to the bottom so the leaves would not all clump up on the shoreline. Galston saw the pond as a contained space, like a room, and used light shimmering on leaf and water as a sculptural element.

In her installation, *Leaf Dreams*, at Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery last winter, wonderful things happened with leaves and the shadows of leaves. (A smaller-scale adaptation of *Leaf Dreams* is currently at the Brattleboro, Vermont, Museum and Art Center through November 2.) At Chapel Gallery she was awestruck by a huge

cucumber magnolia on the lawn outside. To find out what it was, she consulted a 1937 booklet, *Trees of New York*, left her by her plant physiologist father. Not really knowing what she would do with them, Galston collected great trash bags full of fallen foliage from that tree, as well as smaller bags from Japanese maples, ginkgos, and sycamores whose colors and leaf forms she had admired. She let some leaves dry and curl, and pressed others more or less flat. She coated thousands of leaves with brushed-on matte beeswax.

The centerpieces of the installation were long, low platforms covered with white microcrystalline wax and stacks of magnolia leaves. Near the entrance the leaves stood in regimented order, 25 to a stack, 5 rows across, and 40 ranks deep. As they receded into the room, they became more unruly, the stacks messy, the platforms set at angles. At the end, the leaves, unwaxed, clustered in their own natural chaos form a parable, perhaps, about humanity's attempts to control and discipline nature.

Intrinsically very beautiful, fan-shaped, sun-colored ginkgo leaves were similarly stacked and arranged in a neat 30-inch square on the floor. On a shelf above, a pile of ginkgo leaves sat in disorderly contrast.

Though she provided some structure, Galston wanted the installation to look like something the leaves might do themselves. She strung invisible garden netting from the floor up into the rafters and hung sycamore leaves on it, as if swirled upward by the wind, fewer and fewer as the leaves became higher and farther away.

Unpressed leaves dry into fist shapes; Galston pinned some of these to the wall and illuminated them, creating abstract shadows evocative of her early work. She made neat, circular piles of the strangely shaped seed pods of the magnolia, the velcro-barbed hulls of beechnuts, and the three-sided seeds. Two other small piles, of different-hued red maple leaves, punctuated the space with persistent color.

Into the installation the sculptor incorporated pages from her father's

booklet, multiplied and vastly enlarged: huge images of the entry for the cucumber magnolia on the walls, smaller crumpled vellum copies incorporated into leaf piles on the floor, and cut-out leaves mixed in with real ones. In a mind-eye game, she painted some sycamore leaves white, letting real white leaves and false white photocopies swirl, collect, and masquerade for each other.

Balancing technology and nature, Galston deals in dichotomies: macro and micro, order and disorder, real versus fake, structure versus chaos. *Leaf Dreams* made gestures toward obsessive control; the leaves "marched" in orderly rows up the gallery floor, humorous, slightly ominous, all lined up. Yet near the wall another force lifted, released, flew off. Playful and thoughtful, Galston improvises first and then stands back to consider what it means. Within her visually hypnotic imagery, she provides fodder for pondering. ■

*Marty Carlock is the author of A Guide to Public Art in Greater Boston.*

**Below: Beth Galston with "Light and Shadow Environment," 1994. Tracing paper, perforated metal, and shadows, 12 x 16 x 16 ft. Bottom: "Leaf Dreams," installation view, 1997. (Platform with leaf stacks) cucumber leaves, beeswax, and plywood, 3 x 4 x 36 ft.**

