

Portrait of the artist: a local sculptor's creations stretch from Groton to Phoenix

by Nancy Shohet West

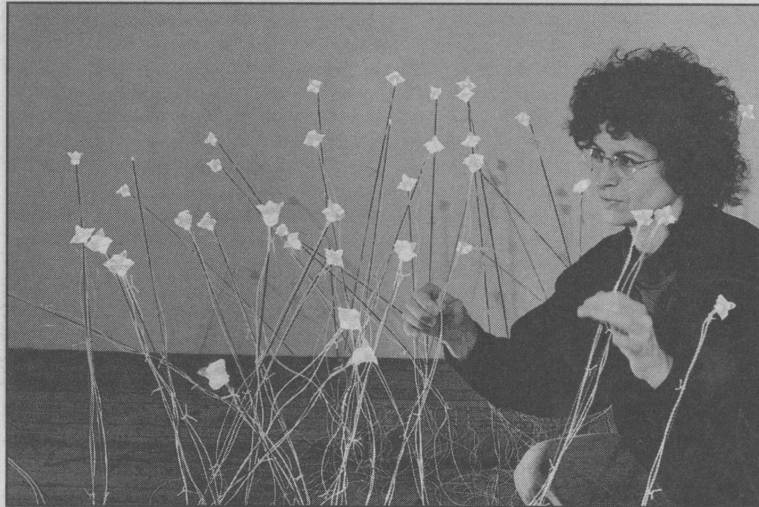
Beth Galston is a rare breed: an artist who for most of her adult life has made a full-time living through her studio work. And since she is living the impossible dream of many would-be professional artists, it might come as a surprise to learn that her enormous success as a sculptor began only after another career goal fell through. Briefly, the Stearns Street resident had hoped to be an ice cream vendor.

She explains that she came to Boston after graduating from Cornell University and became consumed with the idea of selling ice cream from a truck. "In order to sell ice cream, I had to get a vendor's license. I was living in Cambridge at the time and fell into a huge bureaucratic runaround because Cambridge City Hall told me I had to go to Boston City Hall. I went back and forth between the two city halls until my commitment to vending ice cream wavered." The path to a vocation in ice cream having melted away, Galston, an English literature major, instead pursued graduate studies in studio art, first at the Kansas City Art Institute and finally at MIT, where she earned an M.S. in visual studies.

Galston describes herself as an installation artist and an environmental sculptor, meaning that she "creates an environment, a whole space that you can enter and be part of, a world that you step into and walk through." She works in a broad range of materials, including organic materials such as leaves and pods as well as synthetics like resin, scrim, fabric and metal mesh. She has created sculptures as small as an acorn and as large as four birch trees.

Along with her husband, Jerry Lerman, Galston divides her time between two residences, one in Somerville and one in Carlisle. Although she does all the actual hands-on creating at her Somerville studio, Galston says that spending time in her woodsy Stearns Street home is an important influence on her work. "When I'm here in Carlisle, I can look at the stars, hear the tree frogs, glimpse cardinals at the feeder at dusk." In Somerville, she has studio space at the Vernon Street Studios, which she explains is located above a still-functioning factory, the Rogers Foam Corporation. "Walking up the stairs, you hear six different languages being spoken," she says. "The building is full of a certain kind of energy from the business it houses, and then there's a different kind of energy on the top floors, where about eighty artists have studios."

Galston's sculptures and installations



Sculptor Beth Galston with "Luminous Garden," which is currently on display at the Groton School. (Photo by Jerry Lerman)

have appeared all over the U.S. Some permanent and some temporary, her creations over the past twenty years include a sculpture made of trees that stood in Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City, several performance installations for professional dance troupes, a permanent piece in Cambridge's Sennott Park, many pieces for galleries, a window display at Goodwill Industries in Somerville, and an outdoor installation in Dallas. One of her more unusual projects was a bridge in Phoenix, Arizona.

"It's a highway bridge," she explains. "People drive across it to shop at Kmart." Unlike a studio piece, Galston says, "I couldn't control every square inch of it; instead, this was a team effort. My job was to work within the tight parameters dictated by the engineers to make this 24-foot-high concrete structure something that would blend in with the natural environment. I rounded the lines, created terrace walls with levels of plantings and serpentine railing, designed special night lighting. My biggest challenge was making it blend into the landscape."

Galston recently returned to Arizona to work on another public arts project called Color Walk, which is an 80-foot-long, two-level walkway within the new Mesa Arts and Entertainment Center. "I took photos of cloud patterns and the changes of light. Then I created a colored glass sculpture intended to reflect transformations in the sky. I'm excited about that because I've always liked working with light, and this will be outdoors using the strong southwestern sunlight."

glowing blue flowers. "There are pathways running through the garden, so you can walk or sit among the flowers. Some people lie down on the floor and look up as if they are underwater. Small children love it because it is right at their eye level."

Much of Galston's previous work included natural materials such as leaves, branches and trees, but she points out that Luminous Garden is entirely synthetic although it evokes the sense of being in a natural environment. "I still think of it as connected to nature, but in fact it's all plastic, lights and wires," she says.

Along with the Luminous Garden installation, Galston's responsibilities as artist-in-residence at the Groton School include doing a sculpture project with students at the school. She explains how the space available for the student work, a spiral staircase leading to the school's dining hall, inspired the theme of the installation. "When I found out we'd be working in the dining hall, I came up with the idea of using food packaging as our medium. So we put out a call for the entire school to save all their food packaging, from candy wrappers to cereal boxes. Food services brought us things like industrial-sized flour bags. The design evolved as we worked on it, but the general theme of it is transformation."

Luminous Garden will be on exhibit at the Groton School through April 29, and the public is welcome to visit. Hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5p.m. Galston will also be taking part in an open studio event at Vernon Street Studios on May 3 and 4. For more details on these events and to learn more about her work, visit www.bethgalston.com. Δ

Employing light as an element has long been one of Galston's focal points, whether it is the natural light of the Arizona sky or the artificial light found in a relatively new material called LED, which stands for light-emitting diodes. "Luminous Garden," an installation currently on exhibit at the Groton School, where Galston is serving as artist in residence for the month of April, showcases her interest in LEDs.

"An LED is a tiny colored light the size of a grain of rice," she explains. "For the Luminous Garden installation, I put LEDs inside of plastic casts of water chestnut pods to make tiny glowing flowers. Each pod is on a stem made of a thin, flexible piano wire. A fan in the gallery makes the stems wave," creating what looks like an undulating field of