



Susquehanna Art Museum
PRESENTS

RECASTING NATURE

Selected Sculptures
by Beth Galston, 1998-2016

on view in the main gallery
June 10 - September 18, 2016

AN ABRIDGED DISCUSSION WITH ARTIST BETH GALSTON, DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS LAUREN NYE, AND DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION TINA SELL

Beth, thank you for being here at the Susquehanna Art Museum! Artists are increasingly taking an interdisciplinary approach, and you have a unique background in both engineering and architecture as well as fine art. As we take this opportunity to look back at some of your most important pieces, do you think that you fit into the traditional categories of sculptor, engineer, installation artist, or a new classification altogether?

Like many contemporary artists, I combine ideas from multiple disciplines. I call myself a sculptor and installation artist but draw from many sources, including science, architecture, landscape architecture, engineering and nature, as well as art and literature. My father was a Professor of Biology. We took nature walks where he would identify plants and family conversations often involved science. One of my favorite weekend activities was visiting my father's laboratory where I would spend hours mixing colored chemicals in translucent glass flasks — so from the very beginning I connected science and art. When I went to graduate school at MIT, I ended up taking most of the courses required of a beginning architect, including structural engineering. Because I was interested in architectural issues such as light, space, and movement of people through a space, I considered becoming an architect. Choosing to be a sculptor gave me the freedom to think about these issues while inventing new ways of working. Even in some of my tiniest sculptures there's an aspect of structural engineering: How do things join to each other? How far can you push things before they collapse? When designing my large-scale public art works, it's handy to have an understanding of structures and material strengths, so I can have informed conversations with engineers.



Sycamore Circle, 2002, urethane resin and sycamore leaves



Ginkgo Wall detail, 1998, urethane resin and ginkgo leaves

Your process for developing and creating sculptural installations seems to start with some basic building blocks. Can you introduce us to some of the elemental materials that inspire you?

I collect natural elements common to New England that I find on my walks. These include oak, sycamore and ginkgo leaves; acorns and acorn caps; twigs and branches, including rose stems; and various seedpods. The things I gather have fallen to the ground, except for the rose stems, which were harvested from my husband's garden. These elements become building blocks, which I repeat to make the larger installation. As in nature, where things are made of cells which combine in various ways to grow an organism, I work with these modules to "grow" a piece. I don't know the final form when I start; it develops through a process of improvisation and trial and error. The notion of transformation is the basis for everything I make. How can one thing become something else? It's a kind of alchemy. How can I make materials speak?

...

Urethane resin, an inorganic material, is introduced in some of the sculptures on view. By choosing the translucent resin, are you attempting to suspend the natural process of decay that the materials will inevitably experience?

Translucent resin, an industrial material, reminds me of ice. Just as ice takes many forms depending on the weather, resin can appear crystal clear or frosty in different casting conditions. The image I started with was: What if I were to chainsaw a hunk of ice and remove it from a frozen pond? What would that look like? Except, rather than having the randomness of natural debris, I isolated and reordered the elements, using just leaves or seedpods, for example. I set these materials within blocks of resin, stacking the blocks to create architectural structures.

I was well into this process before realizing that what I was doing was stopping time, thwarting growth and decay. Even the process of bringing natural materials into my studio, without using resin, removed them from this natural process. This became very poignant. Set within resin, leaves and seedpods become frozen moments in time, like insects trapped in amber, immortalized. They can neither grow nor die. However, I have discovered that one cannot stop time, even in these sculptures. The leaves in *Ginkgo Wall*, green when I collected them, have slowly become yellow. So, nature wins!

Your work has been described as creating a “moment of magic and transformation” for the viewers. The transformation uses familiar materials to adapt the installation space and control the viewer’s spatial perceptions. What core design choices do you consider in the planning stages of an installation that create this transformative experience?

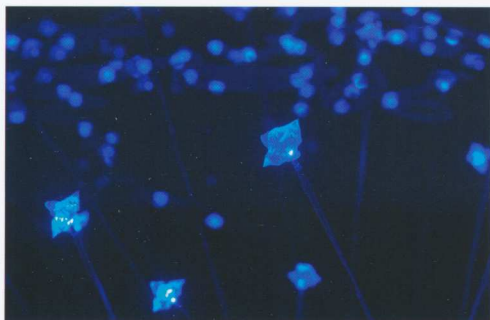
The process of assembling an installation is like music or choreography. How do the elements exist in a space and resonate with each other? What happens in the space between things? I think about rhythm, density, shifting layers, viewing things while moving and at rest.

In my process, I spend time at a site so I can get a feel for it and observe the details. How does a particular idea I have in my head bounce off my response to a particular site? I take photographs and sketches to bring back to my studio, where I make a scale model of the space. Through this process I get a sense of the site and scale of the installation, as well as how people might enter and move through the space.

...

Some of your works rely heavily on light as a key design component. For example, the lights in *Luminous Garden (Wave)* serve as an invitation to the viewer to explore the environment further. How does the manipulation of light play a role in creating the transformative viewing experience?

I have always been fascinated with the drama of changing light and shadow. In *Luminous Garden (Wave)*, the little LED lights can be thought of as the life force/energy system of the plant forms. This manmade environment evokes a landscape or garden, a growing system with roots, stalks, and elements that store light. Walking into the darkened room with the brilliant blue lights is enchanting. It involves suspending the habitual world and entering the world of the imagination. The effect of this particular color of blue LED lights is very calming and meditative. The programming of lights creates a slow cycle of changes like a wave or breath, so when you are in the space it slows you down and makes you aware of your own



Luminous Garden (Wave), 2016, urethane resin, LEDs, wire, wood, electronics

breath. The light has a profound effect on creating a mood, an ambience, and a feeling of immersion.

...

In many of your installations there is a relationship between external and internal space. In *Sycamore Circle* translucent bricks placed in a semi-closed circle invite the viewer to see the interior while being kept

from physically entering the space. Is that control of the viewer's immersion into the sculpture intentional, and if so does it have a symbolic purpose?

A circle or ring shape is often a symbol of infinity. Sycamore Circle's shape came about by serendipity. The sycamore bricks — which can be re-stacked in a number of different configurations — were originally arranged as a wall. One day, when preparing for an exhibit, I re-configured them and came up with a circle. I like that you can see the inside and outside of the circle simultaneously. I hadn't considered that I was keeping viewers out, so much as inviting them in through their imagination.

...

Are there fellow contemporary sculptors, female in particular, whose work you find influential?

Eva Hesse and her unique form of "organic minimalism" is perhaps the strongest influence for me. She invented a way of working that was quite different from her male minimalist contemporaries. Her use of materials was very hands on, experimental and process-oriented. She formed her works by a process that had its own internal logic but was also quite intuitive. I love one of her titles: Metronomic Irregularity. It's a good description of why I am drawn to working with natural materials. There is an abundance and repetition that exists in nature. Within this profusion of similar elements there is infinite variety of color, form and texture. In Tangle, the subtle differences from one cap to the next make the work come alive.

...

Your printmaking style is unique and process-oriented. Can you describe both the methods used to create these pieces and their thematic significance to the installations?

My prints are an extension of my work as a sculptor. Instead of drawing on a plate, I make marks with tools and materials I use in my studio. In the prints in this exhibition, I drilled holes into a copper plate to create round craters, which vary according to diameter of the drill bit, depth of the hole, and how close the marks are to each other. When I ink the plate during the printing process, the holes are white if they're very deep and don't receive ink, and black if they're shallow or have a lot of burr around the edges. With one simple process there's endless variation.

...

**The full transcript of this interview can be found at
www.SusquehannaArtMuseum.org/galleries/Beth-Galston**

As a non-collecting art museum, Susquehanna Art Museum offers frequent gallery transformations that allow visitors to experience a variety of artistic styles from a diverse group of artists. Beth Galston's *Recasting Nature*, a retrospective of the artist's major works from 1998 – 2016, is an innovation for the Museum's Main Gallery in several significant ways. Notably, it marks Susquehanna Art Museum's first solo exhibition that features a contemporary woman artist. Galston's installations explore the multidisciplinary language of sculpture, simultaneously immersing viewers in nature, light, and technology. This experiential approach to art making and exhibition design begins a dialogue that addresses the most prevalent themes in the world of contemporary art. *Recasting Nature* links technology to the natural world, gives the viewer an unexpected conceptual experience, and creates a conversation between individual materials and larger forms.

...

ARTIST STATEMENT

Twenty years ago, when preparing for an exhibition, I became fascinated with a large magnolia tree that had dropped its leaves in an abundant pile on the ground outside the gallery. I was struck by their beautiful shape and reminded of the yearly process of growth and decay they are part of. I began collecting the leaves, brought them indoors and laid them out on the floor of my studio, rescuing them from this natural process—in effect, stopping time. By collecting, preserving, and transforming them in various ways, I gave them new sculptural life. This moment was the beginning of a journey and was the catalyst for the sculptural works in *Recasting Nature: Selected Sculptures by Beth Galston, 1998-2016*.

I think of certain natural forms—leaf, acorn, acorn cap, seedpod, branch—as basic building blocks, like cells. Through repetition and improvisation, I build new structures with them that explore the relationship between natural and manmade. Although I also incorporate industrial materials, I strive to create a feeling of naturalness in my sculptures and installations, as if the pieces might have made themselves.

CONTINUE ON 3

The title Recasting Nature can be thought of in two ways. Literally, it refers to my process of casting using urethane resin, a translucent plastic. I embed natural materials within blocks of resin, like insects in amber, or transform their shapes into crystalline objects. Recently I have cast chains of acorn caps in bronze to make them permanent. The word recasting also means, "to cast again or anew." By taking something familiar, such as an acorn or rose stem, I can transform them, so that the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Within the parameters of using elements and principles found in nature I have discovered a lifetime of themes to explore. Ideas have circled around, and re-emerged in new forms and materials. My hope is to provide viewers with an experience that will allow them to see the world with fresh eyes.

- Beth Galston, April 2016

...

BIOGRAPHY

Beth Galston was born in Los Angeles, CA. She received M.S. in environmental art from MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, where she was also a Fellow and began to work with light. Beth lives in Carlisle, MA and creates large-scale installations and public artworks nationally. For more than a decade she has been creating a series of walk-through environments called Luminous Gardens. Exhibitions include: Peabody Essex Museum, McColl Center for Visual Art, Provincetown Art Museum, Cynthia-Reeves Gallery, DeCordova Museum, Rose Art Museum, Wave Hill, Socrates Sculpture Park, to name a few. Recent public artworks include: Sound Wave, at Music City Center in Nashville, TN; Prairie Grass, at Northwest Service Center in San Antonio, TX; and Serpentine Fence, in Jamaica Plain, MA. Awards include a 2013 Massachusetts Artists Fellowship in Sculpture/Installation; a two-year fellowship from the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe; an NEA InterArts award and residencies at Yaddo and The MacDowell Colony.



SUSQUEHANNA
ART MUSEUM

1401 North Third Street
Harrisburg, PA 17102

Alice Anne Schwab, Executive Director
Lauren Nye, Director of Exhibitions
Tina Sell, Director of Education

(717) 233-8668

www.SusquehannaArtMuseum.org

Beth Galston would like to thank the staff of the Susquehanna Art Museum for their professionalism and can-do spirit. Special thanks to friends and family from Boston, including my husband Jerry Lerman, Sherri Geldersma, Meg Alexander, Maggie Stark, Cecily Miller and Pat Shannon.

Recasting Nature is sponsored in part by a generous contribution from Harrisburg University.



Cover Image: Beth Galston, Ice Forest detail, urethane resin and monofilament, 2005.
Photo credit: Stewart Clements.