

Beth Galston

Boston

Sculptors at

Chapel Gallery

by James Hull

*Still/Life:
Acts
of
Collection,
Preservation,
and
Transformation*

Beth Galston has exhibited vast collections of leaves, acorns and dried pods in elegant, and dramatically obsessive installations containing hundreds if not thousands of these forms dried and stacked in rows, circles and loose piles. Most recently she preserved leaves with a coating of wax and waxed over long rows and short stacks to exhibit them. Before that she was working with perforated screens and creating spaces and spatial experiences for the viewer, many of which were outdoor pieces, a few of which were large scale earthworks. Her initial artworks were light and shadow installations transforming space with scrims and architectural partitions as a student at M.I.T. The title of the solo exhibit at the Chapel Gallery: "Still/Life: Acts of Collection, Preservation, and Transformation" could have been the title of her last show or even of her ten year retrospective because Galston has been focused on these "acts" for most of her creative life. The exceptional turning point in this exhibit is a fresh exploration into a new material and a new process that has caused all of these past interests to intersect at one point. Galston uses and illuminates the space well, moves the viewer through the exhibit as she has in her architectural installations, collects obsessive amounts of acorns and leaves and uses an even more time consuming casting process to preserve them.

The exhibit can be divided into roughly three parts by medium with logical transitions between them: natural object arrangements, works cast in clear urethane resin, and a series of rubber molds used in casting. The strings of dried cones, pods and castings of paper- thin pods suspended from the ceiling connect directly to earlier exhibits by the artist. *Game Board* a suspended cast resin square with cast resin acorns as game pieces perched on top of it also acts as a transition between these new sculptures and earlier installations. Galston cleverly fills the square shadow below the suspended game board with neat rows of acorns standing on end. Of these three parts, the most amazing sculptures are the pieces cast in urethane resin which contain natural objects. The material transparency allows for the artist's wealth of experience with light and installations to be distilled into objects.

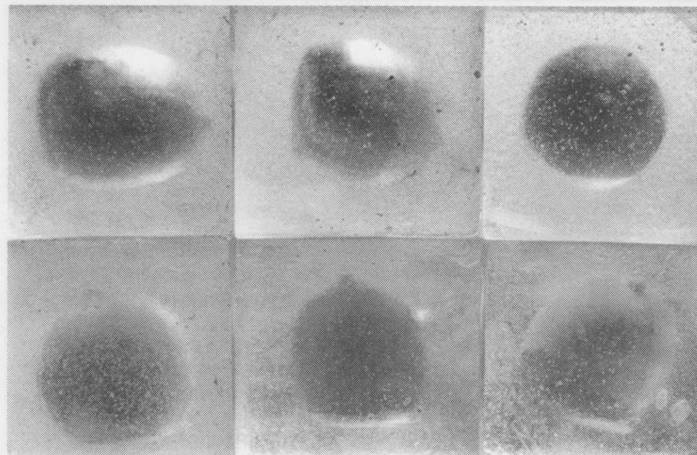
The first piece encountered in the exhibit is *Acorn Cubes* 1998, a 6" high cube comprised of 27 smaller cubes (a solid 3 by 3 by 3 unit arrangement) with each smaller cube containing a single acorn. Lit directly from above with a narrow spotlight the sculpture glows from within and each acorn and every tiny trapped air bubble is illuminated dramatically. The lighting here and throughout the exhibit is so important that it becomes a medium used by the artist instead of a curatorial decision. The corners of the cubes are not sharp, the surface is not too shiny - it really looks like an ice cube. And it freezes an acorn in place visibly (along with a little dirt). The artist even refers to "ice" when describing the color difference between the resin she chose (clear urethane vs. epoxy which is more yellow) and in doing so hits upon a perfect explanation for why these sculptures retain a "natural" feel even when cast in a man-made substance. The artist allows tiny air bubbles

and detritus to be trapped in the cubes or bricks that preserve ginkgo leaves and acorns and this renders them strangely organic - like a chunk of ice pulled from a pond.

The combination of the clear resin, the shape it is cast into, the natural "object" surrounded by the cast material and the way which light plays on the surface and within these individual units is brilliant. Subtle effects become apparent. A silvery bubble clings to some of the acorns obscuring the surface but still describing the shape. The air bubble partially envelopes the round acorns leaving a section of the nut visible as if it was dipped part way in mercury. The acorn cubes also contain the cookbook ingredients for a tree; a seed, light, specks of dirt, air and what appears to be frozen water. And it is all preserved together in an efficient stackable shape. Talk about potential. Elemental building blocks. These simple forms, perfectly scaled and illuminated, invite you look deep inside them and reward scrutinizing viewers with a tiny, poetic tableaux.

The *Sycamore Log* (all work is 1998), also cast in urethane resin, is humble, resting on its side directly on the floor with the unique peeling bark of the Sycamore and the annual rings clearly visible on the detailed glossy surface. The interior is striated with carefully separated leaves from the tree, each stacked about one half an inch from the next, the radiating points of the leaves fit perfectly inside the transparent cylinder of the log. The *Wall Fragment* (*the ginkgoes fell green last year*), built of "bricks" of cast urethane resin, is actually a corner fragment, and gains a sense of stability from its own arrangement. This structure is similar to the acorn cubes but the interior arrangement stirs it into a more dynamic realm. The "bricks" are filled with several ginkgo leaves that appear to have been stopped in midair as a breeze was twirling them along a sidewalk. This implied movement feels less restrained than the even, regimented, layering of the leaves inside the *Sycamore Log*, and the single, centrally located, acorns in *Acorn Cubes* which feel powerfully structural and still. The structure of *Wall Fragment* itself glows warmly in the light when viewed from the "inside" and reflects the light with glassy coolness from the "outside". The difference between the two points of view is dramatic. The simultaneous contrast of the organic, dynamically frozen internal structures with the "static" architectural exteriors and groupings of these blocks is exciting. Looking inside, through or across the surface of *Wall Fragment*, *Acorn Cube* or *Sycamore Log* can lead to very different reactions to the work. The arresting interior worlds that each of these cast resin pieces encase adds immeasurably to the visual interest and metaphorical power of Galston's work.

Galston's investigation of formal issues is apparent in the cast pieces and a new found fascination with positive / negative comparisons brought on by mold-making results in serial works that reveal much of the redundancy inherent to casting. All these pieces gain stability or intensity from the repetition and obsessive layering, arranging and



Acorn Cubes, 1998, acorns and urethane resin

casting processes. As evidence of the importance of these processes, sculptures like *Bone Birth*, *Acorn Birth*, *Acorn Boogie* and *Acorn Floor Piece* use the mold as part of (or all of) the sculpture. The positive / negative acorn shapes contained within square and rectangular silicone rubber molds are assembled into shapes that connect with other works in the exhibit, and while some are interesting, they reveal a less experienced editorial skill concerning casting - and a common pitfall; most artists new to the casting technique do not want to cut off gates or sprues (the "plumbing" Galston refers to in the wall text) or they want to exhibit the mold as well as the cast object. This usually reveals the infatuation with the steps in the process and can be a distraction disguised as innovation.

But there are exceptions to any rule. An example of repetition which also includes an exhibited mold can be found in the two related sculptures *Bone* and *Bone Birth*. *Bone Birth* includes the bottom half of the rubber mold and plaster mother mold which are cradling the original branch of a tree that the mold was taken from. *Bone* is two spindly chains of 29 and 13 individual branches cast in resin which curve and lay describing an arc on the floor. The inclusion of the mold draws attention to the process's ability to duplicate *and* to transform. Without a comparison to the original branch's color and a clue to how it was changed the contrast would have been weaker. These sculptures use a change in material and a presentation that exaggerates the complex shape of the branch by repeating it, which turns the branch into a bone and then into an articulating skeleton. The rough surface of these castings (made of the same material as the smooth, clear blocks) give an overall opaque, whitish coloration akin to frosted glass. This surface changes the emphasis from structures inside the casting (which are obscured) to the shape, texture and the organic larger whole that these identical castings interlock to create. The branches become linked ribs in a snaking skeleton. The color and porous texture, the knobs and protuberances of the wooden branch are convincingly ossified, the corkscrewing structure more interesting than its individual parts.

Transformation is the magic of casting and it is so intoxicating that only time and the realizing that every casting "student" goes through the "reveal the process - the mold is as interesting as the casting" phase will end it. The artist admits that, "For the first time, I have made discrete physical objects." She also directs us to view the sculptures together and refers to "...the richness of the casting process..." all of which points out how important these issues are for her. While this one area of inexperience leads to an exhibit that suffers a bit from having too many arrangements of pink, green and blue rubber molds that lack the metaphorical complexity and nuanced finish that the very successful cast resin sculptures display, it is refreshing to see such a bold departure and experimentation by a well established mid-career artist.