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**The Materials
of Culture**





Top: June Ahrens, *Our Shrinking World*, 2009. Acrylic mirrors and metal, 39 x 28 x 34 in. Above: Brian Auwarter, *Emotional Atmosphere Stations* (detail), 2008. Galvanized hardware screen, paint, and wire, 3 x 3 x 3 ft. Both shown in Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood.

DNA breaking off from a cell exposed to uranyl acetate (uranium in solution), a visualization of how genetic material is damaged by exposure to radioisotopes.

Two dramatic sculptures inhabit a central position in *Halfway to Invisible*. The first consists of two laboratory animal cages stacked one on top of the other. The piece appears innocuous until you pass in front of a sensor and trigger a small fan, which causes the cages to shake and rattle as if someone or something were caught inside

and straining to get out. The second sculpture consists of an aluminum briefcase containing a Cold War-era Civil Defense Geiger counter. Statistics on uranium mine dates and production, as well as related health data, are set among the equipment on a small table. A stack of Xeroxed scientific texts documents the known dangers of working with uranium. Since these documents predate the government-initiated mining, they clearly insinuate the knowing contamination of U.S. citizens.

Laramée studiously avoids the personal by eschewing visual representation of particular miners or victims. A conflict arises in the final set of photographs, however: one assumes it is to help open a dialogue rather than raise the ire of those who want to avoid the conversation. Most of the black and white photographs show the now-closed mines, their presence marked by a mere mound of rubble in the distance or by hazard signs suspended from barbed-wire fences. One image, however, features a model of a uranium mine with a snapshot of its creator. This glimpse of a man, one who might have been affected, puts a face to the nameless individuals whose stories and cells fill the space, bringing a human element to Laramée's scientific representations and making them even more powerful.

—Rebecca Dimling Cochran

**STOCKBRIDGE,
MASSACHUSETTS**
**Contemporary Sculpture
at Chesterwood:**
“Space is the Place”
Chesterwood

Sculptors siting work outdoors can contradict nature or collaborate with it. When the nature is as dramatic and varied as it is at Chesterwood, the Berkshire summer home of the great turn-of-the-last-century sculptor Daniel Chester French, opportunities for success and failure are many, as demonstrated in this year's Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood. An annual exhibition that has displayed work by more than 500 artists since its inception in 1978, the show was organized this time by Denise Markonish, curator at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Her theme, “Space is the Place,” was so broad that it could have applied to any of its predecessors. She selected 20 artists, mostly regional and all with experience at Chesterwood, so they were familiar

with the terrain, which ranges from a broad swath of lawn to a densely wooded path, to a dramatic, steeply graded overlook.

That overlook is usually populated by something spectacular, but this year, it was left empty, becoming a telling backdrop for the winner of the Lillian Heller Curator's Award, Pat Brentano Bramnick's *Endangered Birds*. The birds, as carefully drawn as those of Audubon, are vacant, haunted silhouettes cut from rectangles of aluminum. They walk on the ground and fly in the trees but never make it into the overlook. Absence is the key to *Endangered Birds*.

Rick Brown's *Sprout* addresses loss as well. While the title speaks of youth and growth, the dead tree that serves as Brown's material isn't growing. He has sliced planks off the trunk and arranged them in a graceful fan shape that contrasts strikingly with the size and strength of the wood. This was Brown's third sculptural encounter with the same tree, artfully mining an already lost part of nature.

Ursula Clark's *Pyramid*, actually a stepped ziggurat, also uses nature in order to comment on it. Fashioned of hay, sticks, and seeds, it elevates those humble materials into architecture, as Monet did with his iconic grain stacks. A lone bale across the trail from the main construction acts as whimsical punctuation, looking as if it's lost.

Some of the works quietly echoed aspects of the environment. Tom Gottsleben's *Shoots*, for example, is a bouquet of steel rods topped by layers of bluestone and crystal that look as if they might light up in the dark. The rods bend obligingly, mimicking the lush ferns at their base. Lin Lisberger's *Tall Journeys* was set against a woodland backdrop, where the trees are verticals, pure and simple. The small wooden boat, a horizontal means of travel, was occupied only by an irregular wood- en ladder climbing toward the sky.

The most problematic piece was Richard Garrison's *House Shadows*, a large patch of lawn that seemed to be mown differently than its surroundings. On my visits, it was green on green. The weather had been rainy, and the earthwork was hard to make out. In the show's catalogue, it appears as an angular brown shape in stark contrast to the verdant lawn. It was impossible to decipher whether the brown lawn represented a nearby building, as the title suggests.

Of the works that seemed to defy nature, Brian Auwarter's *Emotional Atmosphere Stations*, winner of the Advisory Board Curator's Award, was the most puzzling. At the beginning of the exhibition, his trio of roughly geometric works made of hardware screening painted a brilliant blue were spread acres apart, with their labels announcing when they would be moved and ultimately united. Those dates spanned three months. Were viewers supposed to make multiple visits or just imagine the end result?

A couple of works in the show were so subtle that, even following the map, I couldn't find them. Is a pile of rocks sculpture or just a pile of rocks? Occasionally a work flirted with the barely there category and won. For example, Kaete Brittin Shaw's *Aerial Tendrils*, chains of small, discreetly hued, curving pieces of porcelain, wound around the limbs of a tree, like fungi. This quiet piece was unfortunately placed near the hustle and bustle of the parking lot.

Gene Montes Flores's *Housatonic River Meadow: a view across the river toward the sunrise, a view across the river toward the sunset* was located nearby. A pair of bronze tablets on two large easels were sited together, as if an artist's studio had moved outdoors. Each tablet was incised with the path of the river, the two views differing markedly.

A couple of other pieces bridged the contradictory/collaborative dialogue with nature, including June Ahrens's *Our Shrinking World*. This small rudimentary house shape made of broken, re-assembled mirrors reflected surrounding beds of pachysandra and canopies of foliage. Humanity, it seemed to say, is better off not trying to conquer nature.

—Christine Temin

NEW YORK

John Bjerklie Parker's Box Gallery

John Bjerklie's ongoing performance/sculpture project took a new twist with *When a River Changes its Course*. The low-tech video installation combined elements from a past iteration with a two-channel experiment that presented the artist with his alter ego. A chest of artifacts—discarded video monitors with painted faces on the screens—greeted visitors at the entrance. The pallets were left over from an exhibition centering on *Hothead/Coolhead*, a pair of sculptures shown at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro last year. Deconstructed, they lent their material to an enclosed perch from which Bjerklie addressed his audience via streaming video. The narrative marked the culmination of a project begun in 1999 with head drawings that Bjerklie describes as “visual puns based on the usually somewhat derogatory, self-effacing, or comical tags we give to people, such as egghead, knothead, pinhead, airhead, and the like.”

When the heads appeared in the swing state of North Carolina during the election, they appeared to sum up a nation divided into red and blue states. But their first pairing occurred in 2006 at the Savannah College of Art. When the project arrived in North Carolina, Bjerklie began to view the sculpture as an ever-changing structure

rather than a permanent form. “The established ‘currency’ of the commercial wooden pallets that I use—with inherent references to utilitarian service and...recycl[ing]—was becoming a very attractive element,” he says. “You can get pallets anywhere. They are not a commodity, and yet all commodities in our economy depend on the pallets as a platform for their value.”

Elsewhere Art Collective in Greensboro asked Bjerklie if the heads could be placed on the street in front of the gallery for an election night soiree. He recalls: “I thought it was a perfect end to the piece, so we wheeled it out of the gallery and had a procession to downtown Greensboro with the sculptures. After that night, they

went back to the UNCG foundry yard where they were dismantled. Some of the pallets went back into use...I transported the remainder...to build the new phase of the work where *Hothead/Coolhead* become embodied in flesh (namely me playing the role of each in the video confrontation).”

In its latest configuration, the interactive experiment winds through various mediums at will, including the painted monitors that go back a decade but are continually being replenished. Bjerklie put several in the entrance bin as bait to invite new donations. He received six, and the images that he painted on them extended the narrative into new performances.

John Bjerklie, *When a River Changes its Course*, 2009. View of mixed-media installation.

