

# RECASTING NATURE:

SELECTED SCULPTURES BY BETH GALSTON, 1998 – 2016

ON VIEW AT THE SUSQUEHANNA ART MUSEUM JUNE 10 – SEPTEMBER 18, 2016



Unabridged Interview of featured artist Beth Galston with Director of Exhibitions Lauren Nye and Director of Education Tina Sell May 2016.

***Beth, thank you for being here at the Susquehanna Art Museum with us! We are proud to be exhibiting this retrospective of your work, and believe that it touches on some important themes in the world of contemporary art. 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.

***Do you find that there is a significant difference between a sculptor and an installation artist?***

There's certainly an overlap between the two, but the approach is different. Generally, a sculptor creates three-dimensional objects that can stand alone and are not dependent on their relationship to the surrounding space. An installation artist configures a series of elements in relation to each other in a particular space. Installations are site-specific, and are often influenced by the particularities of the space, such as scale, materials, quality of light, etc. Because of their scale, installations are often immersive — viewers move through, are surrounded by, and interact with the piece. The total artwork includes the built elements, the space, the ambience, and the changing perceptions of viewers.

***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.



Beth Galston, *Rose Cubes*, 2001, urethane resin, rose petals, leaves & stems

Here are some things that have caught my interest:

Ginkgo leaves are shaped like little fans on slender stems. They are delicate and elegant. I like their color, green in the summer and yellow when they fall — often dramatically in a big pile all in one day! Sycamore leaves are large and hand-shaped. I like stacking them into piles, with bigger ones on the bottom and smaller ones on top. If allowed to dry without stacking, they crumple into fist-like forms.

Acorn caps are shaped like tiny bowls that nestle inside each other. Their forms suggested ways to join them together into a larger structure, ultimately resulting in *Tangle*, an acorn cap rope made of tens of thousands of caps drilled and strung together on monofilament. The first autumn I began to collect acorns and caps was a special year when oak trees produce many nuts. I literally went rolling across the lawn because of acorns under foot!

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. I spend a long time getting comfortable with materials before I know what I want to do with them. A cast resin rose stem was suspended in my studio for almost a year, until I finally envisioned how to use it to create *Ice Forest*. 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?

***Often artists are formally or informally influenced by art historical figures, processes, or movements as they are in the planning stages of a new piece or series. Are there any art historical influences that inform your sculptural practice?***

Over the years, the main movements that have influenced me are Minimalism, Environmental art and the California Light and Space Movement. Associated with these, two of my heroes are: Eva Hesse for her unique style of organic Minimalism and pioneering involvement with materials and processes; and Robert Irwin who defined the principles of site-specific art and work that is "conditional," that is, dependent on the surrounding space and viewers' changing perceptions.

I'd like to mention two other artists, in particular, who look to nature and have inspired me: Matisse, for his joyful approach and choreography of abstract natural forms; and Paul Klee, who in his notebooks formulated basic elements and rules derived from nature, which he explored in his painting.

***Some found natural materials you use in their unaltered form, like the acorn tops. Others are transformed by the addition of other materials, or by creating a mold of the original to yield multiples. How do the physical properties of a material influence your design of an installation?***

Here are some notes I made that seem like a poem:

*Acorn caps nestle together  
Leaves stack  
Rose stems are thorny, slender, vertical  
Resin is like ice.*

I like playing with contrasts between natural and manmade worlds. Sometimes I'm intrigued by the natural material itself, which suggests ways I can combine and build with it. Sometimes, as with the rose stems, a transformation needs to occur. Casting in resin alters the stem and makes it magical. Mold making and casting are manmade ways of making multiples. Nature's way of replicating is to make many seeds to grow new organisms.

***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.



Beth Galston, *Ginkgo Wall* detail, urethane resin and ginkgo leaves, 1998

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!

My most recent sculptures — it's not clear whether they will be completed for this exhibit — are chains of acorn caps stacked into vertical "totems" or tied into knots, then cast in bronze. It's exciting to me that as part of my journey in preserving ephemeral elements from nature, I am now working in bronze, an ancient tradition, which historically has been connected with timelessness. My art has come full circle — from the ephemeral to the permanent.

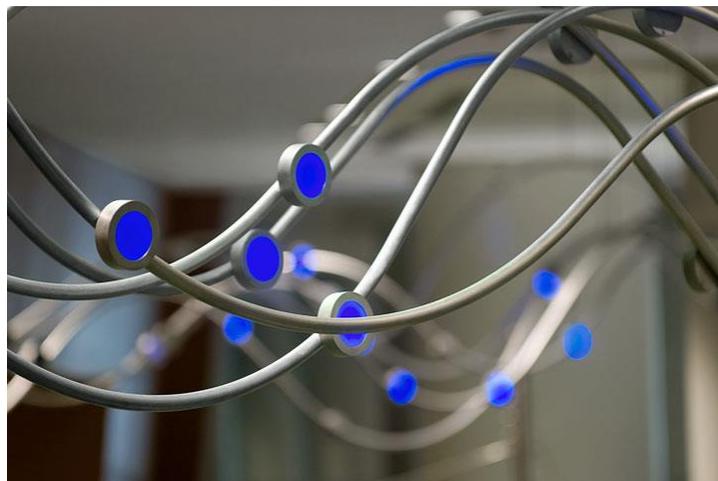
***Your work has been described as creating a “moment of magic and transformation” for the viewers. The viewer’s spatial perceptions, the familiar materials used, and the way you adapt an installation space are all key elements in this transformation. What core design choices do you consider in the planning 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. What is the quality of light, the ambience? What is the first view that people encounter and the changing vantage points as they enter and move through the space? In my installations, I suggest routes and possibilities for interacting, but viewers can use their imagination and invent the piece for themselves as they move through it. The pieces transform with every step you take. How can I slow people down, make them pause and linger, so they can have an experience of leaving the everyday world and entering a world of enchantment?

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 siting and scale of the installation, as well as how people might enter and move through the space. But the piece can't be worked out in model form. I work on it full scale, and as it grows, I continue to refer to the model and often revisit the space. I strive to create a relationship between the space and the environment that is seamless, harmonious.

***Alongside the sculptural installations for gallery and museum exhibitions, you have also completed some impressive large-scale public artwork in Texas, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Arizona and New York. Does the broad audience for public art influence your design choices differently?***

As a public artist, I feel a responsibility to work with themes that relate to a particular site and community so that a broad audience will feel connected to the piece. There's a particularity to public art, which is different from one's studio practice, which is more open-ended. For example, *Sound Wave*, for Music City Center in Nashville, is based on the shape of a sound wave and 5 bar musical staff. *Color Walk*, two 80-foot long hand-painted glass railings at the Mesa Arts Center, AZ, was based on images I took of the sky at dusk during a sandstorm in Mesa, and was designed to interact with the intense afternoon



Beth Galston, *Sound Wave*, 2013 Music City Center, Nashville, TN

light to project colored patterns of light on a walkway. And *Serpentine Fence* was designed in conjunction with a park renovation. In addition to its billowing shape, it had a functional aspect of separating a park sitting area from basketball and tennis courts.

That said, it's important to note that these public works are playing with the same themes I explore in my studio practice — they are inspired by nature, utilize light, create an environment, and engage viewers as active participants as they 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 one of my first art pieces as an undergraduate at the Kansas City Art Institute, I cleared my apartment of furniture and filmed the dance of changing light and shadow patterns as they moved through the empty rooms at different times of day. I liked how things were always shifting. The quality of light can totally transform one's perception of a space.

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 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?***



Beth Galston, *Sycamore Circle*, urethane resin and sycamore leaves, 2002

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. In this particular piece there is also a functional issue to consider — the fragility of the leaves. So, depending upon the exhibition venue, I sometimes stack the bricks with leaves facing inward, so their fragile stems are not at risk.

***Are there fellow contemporary sculptors, female in particular, whose work you are influenced by?***

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.

There are many other female sculptors I greatly admire: Doris Salcedo and Lee Bontecou - for the simplicity of their means and the powerful emotions they pack into their work. Yoko Ono - for the poetry of her work and her expansion of what an artwork can be — it can be a mind experiment, a thought. Yayoi Kusama - in her light piece based on fireflies, she creates a magical world the viewer can enter. Christiane Lohr - who makes delicate sculptures using clusters of natural materials such as dandelion seeds and horsehair.

My early work was more inspired by architecture, and I was influenced by a group of female architectural sculptors: Mary Miss, Jackie Ferrara, Jackie Winsor, Alice Aycock. They had a large impact on the way I think about space, structure, and environment.

Louise Nevelson - I'll never forget visiting a show of hers, *Atmospheres and Environments*, at the Whitney Museum in NYC in the 80's. She created such dramatic and powerfully immersive spaces: massive black sculptures in rooms painted black, white sculptures in white rooms, and golden sculptures in golden rooms.

***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.

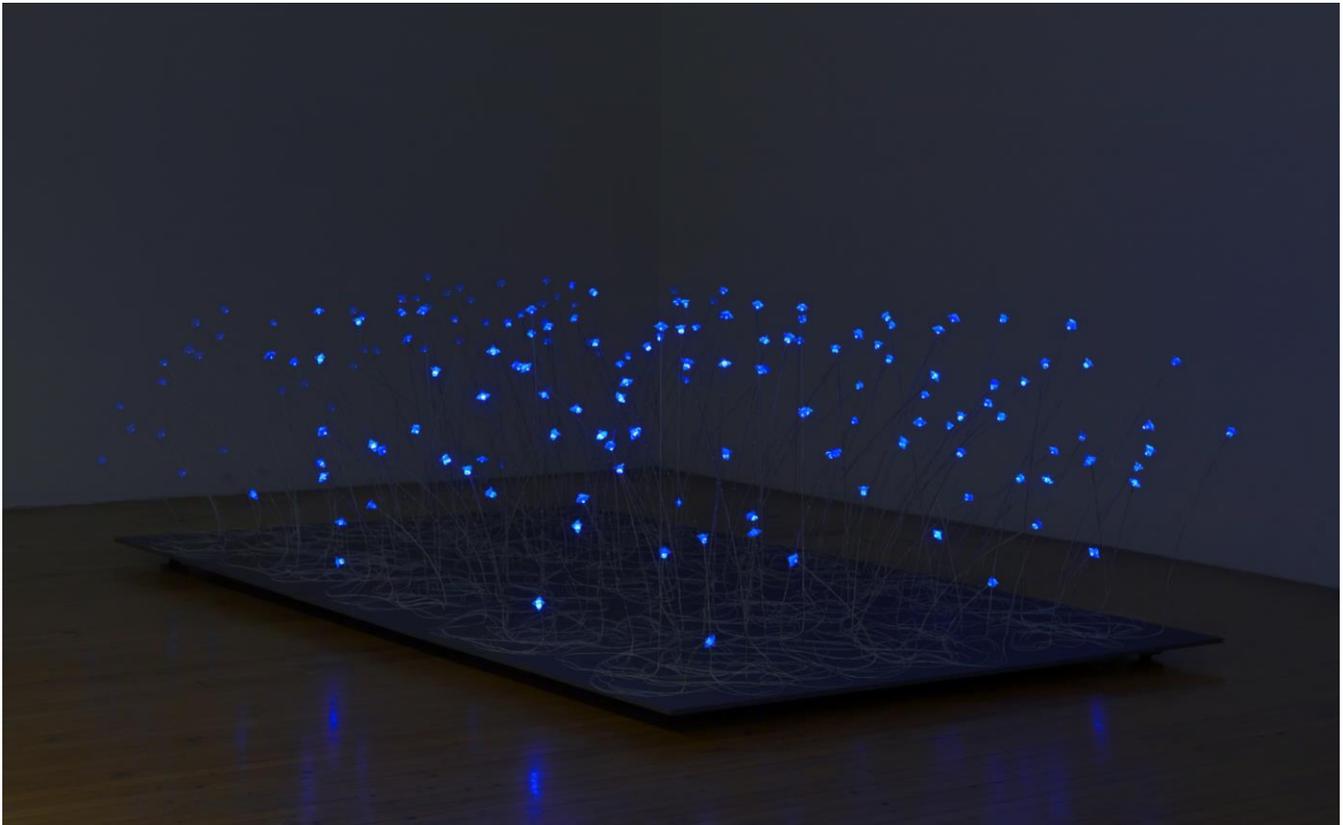
The copper plates themselves are beautiful — I love the way the surface reflects light and casts shadows. Some of the patterns remind me of the little lights in the *Luminous Garden* installation.



Beth Galston, *Drilled #3*, 2015, intaglio print.

As in my sculpture process, the marks become modules that accumulate and grow. The prints are a way for me to explore ideas related to my installations — how multiple elements can be organized in various ways according to natural principles — except they are organized on the space of a page rather than a room. While an installation takes many months, a plate can be completed in a few days or weeks. I find the immediacy of the process exciting.

The prints may appear abstract, but they're often inspired by natural forms and phenomena. My first *Drilled* print grew out of thinking about the Big Bang. Other references include: looking at cellular structures under the microscope, natural growth, underwater life, the Milky Way, the night sky.



Beth Galston, *Luminous Garden (Wave)*, 2016, Urethane resin, LED lights, wire, wood, electronics

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