



Art

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Sensory Smorgasbord

Internationally renowned sculptors explore the tensions between natural and man-made worlds

by **David Maddox**

We go to gardens such as Cheekwood for an outdoor experience, but it's not exactly nature. There could hardly be anything less natural than the mansion's manicured lawns and carefully staged vistas. This horticultural artificiality makes it the perfect place to exhibit art that explores the tensions between natural and man-made environments.

"Material Terrain," currently at Cheekwood, is a traveling show of works by 11 internationally renowned sculptors who imitate and appropriate images from the natural world. In addition to offering different takes on the nature-artifice dichotomy, the pieces show the subtle complexity and multiple layers of interpretation that distinguish artists of this level. They also work remarkably well as a group, expressing fundamental aspects of our relationship with the environment.

Ursula von Rydingsvard is represented by two pieces that show the craft typical at this artistic level. One piece, "Hej-Duk," looks from the front like a massive set of steps or bleachers made from roughhewn strips of cedar, about 10 feet tall at the highest point. A sequence of notches in the boards creates a diagonal line across the horizontal lines of the steps, forming a simple abstract pattern. From the sides, the piece takes on a different character—it's constructed from nearly square boards stacked together and looks like a grid. The ends are cut against the grain, exposing a more complex texture, and the surface is uneven, with a gently waving topography.

Von Rydingsvard's "P's & Q's" looks like an oversized vase that dominates one small gallery. She employs her usual technique of stacking small sections of wood, creating a maze of grids and lines. She coated the wood with graphite, adding color and shading and drawing attention to the detail. The piece is big enough to inspect from a distance, but you want to stand close and see the patterns of the graphite lying in the wood grain.

Surface qualities are also important in John Ruppert's large cast metal gourds (indoors) and pumpkins (outdoors). His three "Moon Gourds" are made from contrasting metals—iron, aluminum and copper. The aluminum and copper pieces have cracks, and the copper one in particular invites you to look closely at its complicated, almost infinitely small fault lines. Their edges provide a different kind of glint than the iridescence on the surface. The three pumpkins outdoors, rugged with metal sticking out from the seams, all sag a little, as if they were left in the field too long after Halloween.

Cycles of growth and decay play out in works by Michele Brody and Dennis Oppenheim. Brody's

pieces literally go to seed. She hangs fabric over frames made from copper tubing, which deliver water to grass seeds deposited in the fabric seams. The shapes are conical and reminiscent of a woman's dress. The water may ruin the fabric, but over the weeks of the exhibit blades of grass will sprout. (As one of the Cheekwood security folks pointed out, it becomes a big Chia Pet.) Associating women with seeds and fruit is common and, to some extent, unavoidable. Brody creates a mechanism to make that association even more literal.

Oppenheim concerns himself with another body process in "Digestion Sculpture." It consists of two deer sculptures covered with goopy layers of green, orange, black and white fiberglass, which in turn are hooked by tubes to a gas tank. The stomach-churning colors of the fiberglass call to mind the breakdown of food in the gut, and in this case you can imagine the animals' bodies being eaten from within by the substance in the gas canister. (By the way, the piece is designed to shoot flames from the antlers—you can see the scorch marks—but the critters won't be firing up during this exhibit.)

Some of the surfaces and materials in this show produce an irresistible desire to touch. In his "Exquisite Corpse" series (a reference to the surrealists' collaborative poetry-making game), Donald Lipski twists cast-resin trees into surrealistic loops and knots. Still, the surface of the trees seems so lifelike that gallery visitors tap their surfaces to see if they were real.

Those pieces imitate wood, but take imitation one step further. "Exquisite Corpse (big triangle)" is shaped like a woman's pubic area, which makes it easy to associate creases in wood with folds of skin. Wood in nature can recall flesh, and in these details Lipski's multidimensional art looks like wood looking like flesh. Ming Fay plays a similar double substitution game with his "Money Tree," a mobile made from oversized, translucent paper, leaves and seedpods. It's based on Han Dynasty sculptures that were placed in tombs to provide cash for the dead in the afterlife. Ming Fay's mobile imitates the traditional sculptures, which imitated trees.

Like nature, Brazilian artist Valeska Soares' "Fainting Couch" engages multiple senses. The surface of the work's stainless steel bed is perforated, and if you get close enough you can smell Stargazer lilies entombed inside. Art has smells—the smell of paint and plaster, for instance. But visual art usually stays visual, since scratch-and-sniff would be just a gimmick. Soares, however, has created art that successfully integrates odor.

It's nice for Nashville to get a look at work from artists such as Soares, who regularly receive international attention. One small complaint is that the show's wall text, which was prepared by the Washington, D.C., curatorial group International Arts & Artists, offers scant information about individual works. Background on the origin of the phrase "Exquisite Corpse," the historical precedents for "Money Tree" and related details would bolster the public's appreciation of this art. Still, the exhibit engages the full range of our senses, and it sparks a rich discourse between art and the natural environment.

Several of the artists in the show will give lectures in Nashville during the run: Wendy Ross on Thursday, April 5, at 6:30 p.m. at Cheekwood; Ming Fay on Thursday, April 12, at 6:30 p.m. at the Watkins College of Art and Design; and John Ruppert on Monday, April 16, at 7 p.m. at Lipscomb University.

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