

# Columbia Museum of Art hosts exploration of landscape, place

"Each of us must take a greater personal responsibility for this deteriorating global environment," wrote Al Gore in his influential 1992 volume entitled "Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit." The unprecedented phenomenon this past weekend of the Live Earth concert, a 24-hour music marathon spanning seven continents, bears witness to the fact that countless people around the globe finally appear to be heeding Gore's message about our planet's climate crisis and seeking ways to shape the future of our global environment in more positive ways.

It should come, therefore, as no surprise that the complex interplay between humankind and the natural environment has been the focus of concern for many contemporary artists. Take, for example, the provocative exhibition currently on view at the Columbia Museum of Art. On tour across the country for three years, from 2005 to 2008, "Material Terrain: A Sculptural Exploration of Landscape and Place" consists of 26 works by 11 sculptors, all focused on trying to help us appreciate our place in the natural world.

A visit to this exhibition begins outside the museum building in Boyd Plaza on the corner of Main and Hampton streets and continues inside, in the atrium lobby and the first-floor galleries. In general, the outdoor sculptures tend to magnify natural shapes to monumental levels. There is, for example, Kendall Buster's "Garden Snare," a steel and shade cloth construction large enough for people to enter. Because of the porous nature of the covering of this structure,

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that resembles two contiguous seedpods, the visitor, once inside, simultaneously confronts the world within and without. In

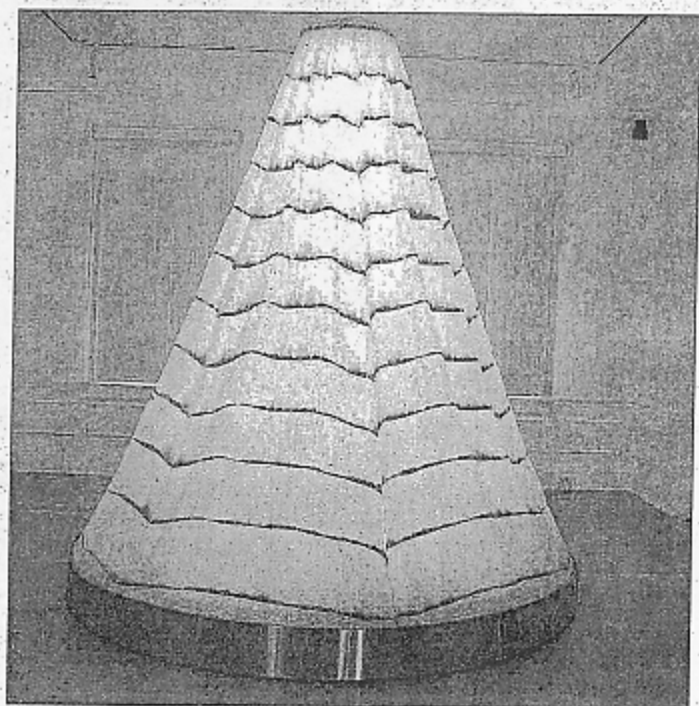


DR. TOM MACK

effect, this piece constructed by Buster, who studied microbiology at the University of Alabama before pursuing a career in sculpture, offers the participant deceptive shelter from the elements. Perhaps the object lesson here is that despite all of our contrivance, nature is an abiding presence in our lives.

Proceeding from the plaza into the lobby, the visitor confronts "Money Tree/Money Pods" by Shanghai native Ming Fay. Although the actual money plant, noted for its translucent, silver dollar-shaped seed pods, rarely grows more than three feet tall, Fay has fabricated from paper and wire a giant tree, part money plant and part monkey pod tree, whose overhanging branches transform the museum's lobby into a fantasy conservatory. Generally regarded as a talisman of financial success, the money plant becomes, in the hands of sculptor Ming Fay, a playful symbol of overabundance.

As the visitor moves into the first-floor galleries, other objects that combine artifice



Submitted photo

### "Grass Skirt X" by Michele Brody

and organic process meet the eye. Particularly compelling, in this regard, are the two "grass skirts" by New York sculptor Michelle Brody. Assuming the conical shape of an item of female apparel, these whimsical constructions serve as man-made environments for plant life. Each skirt is formed by metal rods or tubing covered by fabric that functions as a repository of grass seeds, which are nurtured by a recycling drop irrigation system. In effect, the "skirt" takes on a life of its own as the seeds germinate and grow in carefully manipulated tiers.

Everyday and everywhere we see evidence of what Al Gore refers to as the "disharmony in our relationship to the earth." A visit to this important exhibition serves to remind us of our

need to find a balance between the growth of human civilization and the preservation of the natural world. On view until Aug. 26, "Material Terrain" will leave Columbia for Miami, Fla., before it ends its three-year tour in Manhattan, Kan., in March of 2008. It is a show not to be missed. While in the museum, visitors can take a cell phone tour; by dialing a special number and following the prompts indicated on a handout available at the front desk, one can hear the artists talk about their work.

For more information, call (803) 799-2810 or visit the museum's website at [columbiamuseum.org](http://columbiamuseum.org). The Columbia Museum of Art is open from Wednesday to Sunday each week; admission is free every Saturday courtesy of BlueCross