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Sculpture Exhibition Challenging Yet Accessible

A review of **Material Terrain: A Sculptural Exploration of Landscape and Place** — Now at the **Columbia Museum of Art**

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James Surls, Me the Flower and the Pistil (2000)

When the Columbia Museum of Art opened its new facility on Main Street nine years ago, it featured a groundbreaking contemporary exhibition, Heroic Painting. The exhibit was the first exposure for many area viewers to the national contemporary art scene. *Material Terrain: A Sculptural Exploration of Landscape and Place* does the same thing in respect to contemporary sculpture.

Material Terrain is a traveling exhibition featuring 26 monumental works by nationally and internationally known artists such as Dennis Oppenheim and Ursula van Rydingsvard. The exhibit also includes Michele Brody, Kendall Buster, Ming Fay, Donald Lipski, Roxy Paine, Wendy Ross, John Ruppert, James Surls and Valeska Soares. Sculptures by the 11 artists spill over from the museum's main first-floor gallery out onto Boyd Plaza.

Carla M. Hanzal of the Mint Museum in Charlotte curated the show for organizers International Arts & Artists. Her focus was on the relationship of sculpture to landscape and place both in physical and conceptual terms.

The artists she selected use a whole spectrum of subjects ranging from twisted and contorted tree trunks and multicolored deer to abstracted molecular structures to address issues surrounding the relationship of human to environment.

In Oppenheim's *Digestion*, Sculpture he has transformed the bodies of two deer through the application of poured fiberglass. Their natural forms have become fabrications. There is an element of Frankenstein's monster about this piece. The heads of the deer have been severed and reattached with large metal bolts. Copper tubes lead from the heart center of their chests to a propane tank. The gas fuels flames that ignite from their antlers. In Oppenheim's model culture consumes nature, which then in turn consumes culture.

Nature is not exactly all nurturing in Ming Fay's *Money Tree Monkey Pots*, either. Fay's whimsical botanical forms are suspended from the ceiling in the atrium of the museum. As playful as the piece is, it references the seductive traps that nature uses to lure potential food to consumers.

Brody also addresses the cyclical processes of life and death, growth and decay in her work. Her two *Grass Skirt*

pieces are hydroponic environments that incorporate growing grass seeds into fabric skirt forms. The scent of wet mildewing fabric contrasts with the delicate sound of dripping water.



Dennis Oppenheim, Digestion, Sculpture (1988)

Scent plays an extremely effective role in Soares' Fainting Couch. The simple structure of her metal bench becomes less a seat and more a coffin as the cloying odor of lilies wafts out.

Buster's Garden Snare (Shade House) straddles the line between the natural (biological) and constructed as well. She takes a biological form on the molecular level and transforms it through her use of scale and materials.

Van Rydingsvard creates large, carved-wood structures that teeter a delicate balance between the natural and the constructed. Her material appears roughly carved, as if it were barely touched by the human hand. This gives pieces like p's & q's a primal, ritualistic quality.

The truncated trees that Lipski has twisted into impossible and unnatural positions may appear natural but are actually the product of a master fabricator. Exquisite Corpse (big triangle) reads almost as some sort of crucifix. Three large trunks meet at the intersection of their spreading limbs to form a crude central triangle. The symbolic and visual connection of tree to human form gives these pieces a tension that amounts to physical pain.



Kendall Buster, Garden Snare (Shade House) (1998)

The only real issue with the exhibit is its installation. Most of these pieces would have a stronger visual impact if they were brought out more into the space of the room. While dealing with the installation of sculpture is more challenging than painting, there still needs to be a bit more sensitivity to the placement of the objects, to their position in space and the space around them. It simply doesn't work to line sculptures up in a row against a wall.

That being said, the museum should be applauded for bringing in challenging contemporary work and making the exhibit as accessible as possible. This is an exhibit that art lovers and those wanting to learn more about contemporary art should visit several times before the show closes on Aug. 26.

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