

The Sculpture of Winifred Lutz:



"Correspondence/Congruence (Paradigm)", 1995. Wood, fabric, cast stone, and pigment, (central form) 10.5 ft. high x 30 ft. dia. Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati

Perception's Nature

by Tom Csaszar

Winifred Lutz's installations have established her work internationally in the last dozen years. The recent retrospective of her sculptures at Moore College of Art and Design's Levy Gallery in Philadelphia, titled "Place of Nature, Nature of Place," started with pieces dating from the late '70s and early '80s. This exhibition made it possible to discern the themes that underlie her diverse works.

Lutz's sculptures have a notably different emphasis than her installations. Her sculptures are earthy to the point of grit, algae, leaves, and mud, and yet intellectual and conceptual in their delicate contemplations of time, surface, and mortality. While these contending qualities are also present in her installations, they are brought together in her sculptures with more obvious contrasts and in greater depth.



"Once/Never", 1990-97. Flax paper, wood, plaster, metal lathe, and pigmented flax paper, 32 x 18 x 18 in. Greg Benson

Lutz creates floating leaf-like or skin-like canopies such as "Night Finder: Morning Mourning Cloak Moth's Wing Holds a Constellation" (1983) and "Pulled in Opposite Directions, The Skin Holds Light by Stretching Darkness" (1985); threatening, pointed shoots as in "Tropism" (1988);

and rock-like volumes such as "Once/Never" (1990). Lutz addresses, in these works, not just a vocabulary of forms or an exploration of a material's possibilities, but relationships between physical substance, perception, narrative presence, and the confluence of social, conceptual, and natural processes. In her sculptures, material earthiness and refined concepts butt against each other and reflect off of each other.

In some of her outdoor installations, such as those at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh or the Abington Art Center, just north of Philadelphia, Lutz works from a remarkable sensitivity to the site and creates works that underscore the vegetative and social processes that determine the discrete history of a place. Often in her indoor installations—for instance, "AGO/ANON" (1990) at the Brooklyn Museum, "Mending Room" (1991) at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, or "Serving Time" (1995) at the Eastern State Penitentiary—the salient conceptual and metaphysical narrative of the work coordinates the material concerns, organizing the sensual, emotional, and metaphorical qualities.



"Place of Nature, Nature of Place" (installation view), (right, foreground) "Epiphenomenon (Phase Transition)", 1987. Cast, handmade flax-hemp paper and paulownia log section. Moore College of Art and Design, Levy Gallery, Philadelphia. Greg Benson

While one might expect that installations would lend themselves more to developments of narrative elements, and discrete sculptures to characterization, in Lutz's work the reverse occurs. The plot and context, the narrative flow of her ideas, is more accessible in the sculptures, while the installations are more likely to typify a character or particular presence of a location. Person and place, identity and social order (and the order of things in nature), switch places throughout her work. However, identity is fundamental to many of the installations, while memory of place and context are strongly evoked in her sculptures. These same issues and qualities—perceptual identity and context, sensual presence, and conceptual presentation—are emerging as important boundaries and concerns of three-dimensional art in this decade. To explore these themes in Lutz's work is also to reveal important aspects of the condition of sculpture in the late '90s, especially in relation to its limits as it pushes and pulls itself forward to the next decades.

Objects of nature, the surrounding natural world, and discrete biological forms—as well as the various views of space and time implied by them—are the most salient features of Lutz's installations. She often unfolds these before us with a remote, cooled-down sense of reflection and contemplation which veers toward a sort of post-'80s Zen, erasing the distance between the viewer and the viewed through her considerations of surface, light, and object. If Lutz installs a column, an array of rocks, or a cubicle/monastic cell, she always includes materials and forms that comment on the way these things pertain to our perceptions of time and nature, and our

relation to the world of phenomenon and life. The idea behind the sensual is brought to the surface of the perceived in her work. A prickly intellectual curiosity about the perceived-curiosity by its very nature is unresolvable-forms the core of both her installations and sculptures. It also separates her outdoor installations from those of other landscape sculptors with whom Lutz shares some overt concerns, such as Athena Tacha and Elyn Zimmerman.



"Threshold/ Interface/Transition-(When)" (detail of Ailanthus Wound aperture), 1997. Ailanthus tree, mylar tube, daylight, 67 x 28 x 18 in.

Lutz addresses, more comprehensively than many recent sculptors, the conceptual and physical aspects of the human body and of animal and vegetable forms, as well as the nature of process, environment, and social drama. In particular, she does this by overlapping, blurring, or intertwining the process of conceptualization and the conceptualization of processes. Her titles, as do the works themselves, refer to biological and mental processes in a way that sometimes bifurcates them and sometimes allows them to switch places. The idea of tropism as a process that turns a plant toward light is presented, and the very nature of presenting it-turning it into an artwork-incorporates perception and concept formation, so that the resulting work literally turns the viewer toward the light, and physically thrusts itself toward the viewer only to draw in, both literally and metaphorically, the viewer's perception. In the final analysis, the process of growth and life splits apart from, and moves in tandem with, the process of perception. This in turn determines the form of the sculpture "Tropism" which, as in many of her other works, is bifurcated and hollowed-out.

Precisely because of her sculptures' crystallization as specific forms which tell more than one story, Lutz turns identity into narration. In "Tropism", form, mystery, and symbol play off each other in a complex story of light and dark, the vital and the inert. Flanked by a triton or pitchfork, the work seems possessed of both vital and symbolic power, and is equally controlled and threatening, contained and out of control.

Nature is evoked, depicted, and personified as both an entity and a process in this sculpture. But more precisely, it is the way in which nature is conceptualized that at once forms and shapes our perceptions. In the end, context and identity-the persona of the vegetable form and its life processes-are merged and turned inside out.



Threshold/Interface/Transition÷ (When) (detail), 1997. Mixed-media installation, 65 x 29 x 15 ft.

That this drama is both delicate and potentially threatening is underscored by the small representation of events in "Green Piece, Eye Piece" (1990). The light green color of the leaves reaches out from the piece's mirrored base on the wall to reflect and then capture the viewer's eye as he or she looks into it. It is a flip side to the wonderful array of "viewfinders" that Lutz places throughout her installations. Here, the process of perception, usually benign, is not without some attendant threat.

An earlier work, "Day Finder #10" (1981-82), consists of two open bowls of paper suspended on the wall by a small, delicate scaffolding of milled wood. In this work, Lutz contrasts the biological forms of convex, swelling cast paper with the rectilinear human-made structure that both supports it-places it-and allows for its metaphorical functioning. Even in more reticent and inert pieces, such as the small "Sill Stone" (1989), "Once/ Never" (1990), and "Solidity Is a Function of Distance" (1985), there is a certain subdued motion and shy exposure of motives that contrasts human yearning with biological or geological tensions.

Lutz's works are made partially or entirely of paper. Her interest in using cast paper dates from her earliest pieces, including her student works of the mid-'60s. She has, in fact, received international recognition for her development of techniques for producing handmade paper. Her use of paper as a material that is equally capable of delineating membrane, volume, and mass allows her to develop her depictions of biological and perceptual processes less in defiance of gravity than in response to biological and physical forces that inherently react to gravity. It allows her to be free of the hierarchical pull of "big," as equated with heavy. It also allows her to sculpt with a vegetable- rather than a mineral-derived substance for the purpose of describing ideas of direction, space, and hollowness in sculptural terms. Although Lutz stands apart from sculptors who look toward the manmade environment and materials to critique social processes, nevertheless, much of her work addresses a social level of significance. .

"Epiphenomenon (Phase Transition)" (1987) is typical of Lutz's pieces in that it is a hybrid of wood and paper. A long, tapering, hollow cast paper tube extends and molds the space of a ring formed by the slice of a log. The work addresses, first, the difference between weight and volume. Second, it deals with the difference between the arrested life of a log-a sectioned, dissected tree trunk-and the continuing growth and extension of its limb. Third, in part through the allusions of its title to philosophy and electronics (perhaps also medical science), it focuses on the difference between recognizable, repeatable, easily conceived objects, such as a log, and

objects that are unique and difficult to grasp conceptually, such as the irregular appendage of cast paper that spins itself into space over the floor.



"Ornament" (installation view), 1996. Wall with tree wounds, pine trunk door, viewfinder, and cast pigmented translucent flax paper, (wall) 10.5 x 21 x 4 ft. Greg Benson

"Hat on a Stick" (1988) incorporates three levels of drama and ambiguity which are united in many of Lutz's sculptures and installations. First, it is presented as a surreal scene encountered in the woods: a discarded crumpled hat stuck on the top of a pole or suspended on a string. The viewer completes the scene and his or her perceptions are the "center" of the work. Many other sculptor's works, from Gary Hill's or Bill Viola's video installations to Jeanne Silverthorne's cast rubber observations of the life and artifacts of a studio, address a related sense of phenomenological incompleteness which becomes a stage set for the viewer.

The second level of drama here is the sculptural presence of the crumpled form of cast paper on the vertical pole. Suspended by a string, the forms of hat and stick sway gently, giving them a kind of aquatic motion, and the viewer becomes observer of, rather than participant in, a gestural and symbolic presence. The spiral circulations of a vine embedded in the supporting pole are a solid diagram of its wavering motion, and give a particular sense of arrested process to this standing, swaying figure. In this barren landscape of wood and rock which serves as its base and ballast, it becomes a persona, a distant relative of Alberto Giacometti's figures-or even Joel Schapiro's or Alain Kirili's.

The third level of drama which presents itself in "Hat on a Stick" is that of fragmented views of the human body. The folded forms of the hat generate vaginal images, while the pole on which it sits is phallic, albeit more symbolically. In this and in other works, the presence of parts of botanical and biological bodies presented as symbolic and narrative elements is a persistent theme. Kiki Smith, Phoebe Adams, Jeanne Jaffe, and Michele Blondel all come to mind here, although the diversity of ideas presented by these artists is perhaps more pronounced than their underlying similarities.

Lutz's recent large installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, "Threshold/Interface/ Transition÷(When)" (1997) possessed similar levels of drama, but with a change in emphasis. Although slightly totemic, the floor-to-ceiling trunks of young trees yielded their individual stories to the overall character of the installation. The beauty of their placement on a field of gold leaf in natural lighting bypassed any narrative implications.

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While corresponding relationships to the human body could be read in the work, these aspects were secondary or tertiary. The viewer, as perceiver and completer of the work, produced the work's success, and the delight and curiosity of the viewer in these perceptions was essential.



The Mattress Factory Garden (detail), 1992-97. View of brick window wall and water element. Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh / John Charley

Other aspects of this installation stressed underlying forces in the perceptions of space and material in nature. In the first room of the installation, the paulownia trunk gripping a cracked paving stone, and the ailanthus bark which opened to give a view (although one which frustrates any vision of an object) both lent their considerable character to the setting. However, there was no narrative, no story to join them together-except for that provided by the perceptions of the viewer. Like certain types of landscape painting, there was no story in sight, except for the story told by sight. But it would be a mistake to think of this as a less powerful work because of its subtlety. On the contrary, spatial presence, light, and forces of growth were dramatically present throughout this installation because it characterized these qualities-it became a personification of these elements.

We clarify our perceptions sometimes at the price of our emotions. The price that Lutz sometimes pays to develop a sculptural vocabulary that holds dear phenomenon, nature, and the relationships of body and sensation, is to sacrifice, to drain, to strain through concepts, some of the emotional content latent in her works. Where the residue remains most evident, as in "Hat on a Stick" and "Tropism", the pieces have the greatest force and deepest resonance.

The most hopeful view of recent art depicts a trend away from the sharp dialectical tensions that have pitted a succession of opposing tendencies against one another: abstract versus representative, formal versus political, multicultural versus unicultural, biological versus geometrical, literal versus metaphorical. As Barry Schwabsky alludes to in his recent book, "The Widening Circle: The Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art", one way to resolve these oscillating tensions is through moving toward a view of articulation which opens up a space that places more value on the relation of statement to perceived truth, rather than on statement as repetition-statements which further a new perception and maybe change an old paradigm, rather than reinforce or critique outworn and crumbling paradigms. Lutz's work articulates the reciprocal nature of human perceptions and concepts with the world perceived and conceptualized. It describes where these interpenetrate and determine each other's boundaries, and also where people make things as an extension of their role in nature and thereby explore the tension between the geometries of nature and the projections of humanity -or maybe the projections of nature and the geometries of humanity.

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