

Artist turns to nature to create fragrant indoor wildscapes

By [Molly Glentzer](#) | October 20, 2017



A gardener could view Meg Webster's "Stick Structure" at Hiram Butler Gallery as a well-organized pile of yard trimmings.

She would be right.

"Stick Structure" is composed of bamboo, huisache (sweet acacia tree), magnolia grandiflora and yaupon branches cut from Butler's own lush, but minimalist garden. Gallery director Josh Pazda and assistant Danny Russell wove and layered the materials, following Webster's design, into a laurel wreath-shaped mass.

Large enough for a few humans to mill around in, the sculpture beckons like a secret garden. But the slightly sweet aroma captivates first.

"It smells like Christmas, doesn't it?" Butler said.

Closer up, visitors - participants, really - can view the varied colors, textures and contours of the leaves, which range from the velvety brown undersides of sturdy and still-shiny, dark-green magnolia leaves to the feathery, already-faded-to-sage wisps of a bamboo that is a light, vivid green when it's growing.

Webster, a prominent conceptual land artist, tended a large roof garden when she lived in Brooklyn, "before the crazy landlady cut it down," she said. Now she has a little more land in upstate New York, and she's most interested in plants that support insects - especially flying insects, whose populations have dropped precipitously.

"We are in such dire straits ecologically," she said.

A San Francisco native, Webster gravitated to sculpture as a graduate student at Yale in the early 1980s, influenced by land art pioneers Michael Heizer (with whom she briefly worked) and Robert Smithson, known for their massive projects in the deserts of the American Southwest.

"Stick Structure" and "Volume for Lying Flat," the show's title piece, might be seen as formal responses to the testosterone-fueled minimalism of Richard Serra's arcs and Donald Judd's boxes; rendered in organic, ephemeral materials instead of industrial steel.

"The work is about trying to make natural materials immediate to the body and using minimal form to create something that relates to how we should treat the Earth," Webster said. Even the most elaborate of her site-specific artworks are usually temporary, meant to evolve as they decay.

"Volume for Lying Flat," however, requires care - like the earth. About the size of a human bed, it's a peat-moss garden within a wire-grid frame. If it were a mattress, it would be quite the pillow top; filled with peat moss and topped with a miniature landscape of vibrant green mosses from a Pennsylvania moss farm.

"Volume for Lying Flat" must be watered twice daily and covered at night, to retain its moisture. That's high-maintenance art, but cheaper than buying cut flowers if someone wanted to have such a piece at home, Butler figures.

The show also includes a few of Webster's monochromatic, aromatic beeswax drawings, which have no discernible imagery. Infused with fragrant materials, such as hibiscus powder and turmeric, they are meant to be sniffed. Who knew art could be aromatherapy?

Butler, who has shown Webster's work several times since 1996, hopes to place another of her concepts - "Concave Room for Bees" - at Houston parks in the near future. Conceived last year for the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York, the first "room" was a 5-foot-high, 80-foot-diameter earthen mound with an observation path sliced into its center. Plants that serve bees grew on the mound until it was dismantled, its soil raked across the park, back into the earth.

"It's public sculpture that addresses a great environmental concern that's so topical right now, the loss of bees," Butler said.

Webster's gallery show brings dualities to mind: The whole green versus brown/life versus death thing, of course, but also large versus small. "Stick Structure" and "Volume for Lying Flat" suggest panoramic landscapes but encourage extreme close-up views.

Gardeners might be tempted to try making similar sculptures at home. They wouldn't be that difficult to replicate.

Although, if space is limited, or if the idea of that much labor is daunting, one might simply pluck a few of nature's ready-mades from outside instead: A single clump of ball moss, a perfect pine cone or a huge burr oak acorn need no tending, and they can last for years.

