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Bethel artist's concrete works explore migration

By Christina Hennessy



Photo: Christina Hennessy / Hearst Connecticut Media

Elizabeth White, an artist and sculptor from Bethel, is inspired by nature and found objects. She recently began working with cement to re-create the leaves she finds in her walks around her yard and elsewhere.

Bethel artist Elizabeth White leads the way to her studio. It's a short jog across a gravel path from her home to the detached garage that contains her work.

Small patches of snow are scattered about, reminders that two days into spring, winter has not loosened its grip. Still, the sun is strong and the soil has loosened, meaning it won't be long before White's forays become more common.

It is in the wild places where skunk cabbage pokes out of muddy bogs and burdock unfurls its leaves and casts off its seeds that White finds inspiration. She peers into her backyard gardens and follows the paths in the woods behind her home for the leaves, burrs and bones from which she makes her sculptures and assemblages.

“It is a seasonal thing, which draws me to it,” she says.

Upon entering the studio, the fruits of her labors are evident. Large, life-cast concrete leaves rest against plastic pails and cinder blocks. From their size, it appears as if she plucked them from primeval forests where dinosaurs still roam. The reality, however, is far less fantastic, but nonetheless marvelous.



Photo: Christina Hennessy
Hearst Connecticut Media

Bethel artist and sculptor Elizabeth White, creates cement leaves in her studio inspired by the real ones she finds in her travels.

“See that big one,” she says, pointing to an elegantly shaped sculpture in a corner. “It’s rhubarb. When they are curled on the plant, they don’t really reveal their full girth. You only discover it when they are flattened.”

She has come to the same realization with burdock, horseradish and skunk cabbage. “The skunk cabbage will curve this way and that and I’ll wonder, how can cabbage be this big? It’s what blows people’s minds when they see them. Where are you getting these leaves?”

For the past 15 years, the sandpit that occupies a prominent portion of her work area has served as the starting point for her creations. She lays the leaf down on a mound of sand, puts on some heavy-duty gloves and then, with small batches of white, gray or colored cement, covers the leaf.

“Concrete is not an instant gratification kind of thing,” she says, laughing. She takes care to wrap the leaf in moist rags and cover it in plastic. She then lets it cure, occasionally returning to it to add colored layers or bulk up areas that are weak. When it is done, she pulls off the organic matter, leaving behind the impressions of the blade, veins and midrib.

Leaves are not her only output, although cement plays prominently as a medium. An early effort to build her own concrete countertop led her to a course at the Brookfield Craft Center in cement casting. Encouragement from the instructor that she had a unique feel for the material led to more whimsical uses, such as decorative shells and concrete heads to top outdoor sculptures. As for those little brown burrs, which contain the seeds of the burdock plant, they are integral components for several mixed-media sculptures. The bones she finds poking out of the underbrush are saved in buckets and baskets and later unearthed for her other works.

In recent years, the leaves have gained greater power en masse, as part of her site-specific work known as “Migration,” which is a response to her concerns about the crossing of borders and collision of cultures.

“I’d be listening to the news ... with so many people displaced,” she says of those uprooted around the world because of political conflict and natural disasters. “It was really working on me.”

One day, while looking out at the mounds of leaves curing in her backyard, she began to see her casts as unique beings, each with its own fingerprint and personality, similar to the leaves that inspired them. “They were individuals, away from their roots and splitting and shifting just like so many populations are now doing.”

During the past two years, the installation of dozens of those leaves has occurred at Saunders Farm in Garrison, N.Y., and Flushing Town Hall in Queens, N.Y. The leaves are on view at the rooftop gardens at the Mattituck Museum in Waterbury until month’s end, and will then drift along to the Morris Arboretum at the University of Pennsylvania for about five months.

“I told them they better have some muscle on their end,” she says, laughing. Though she has never weighed them, she guesses some of the leaves weigh more than 35 pounds.

Sculpture is not her only thing. Throughout her more than 25-year career, she has done landscape and decorative painting. The sculptural work, however, has proven an apt way to get dialogue going about ideas that matter to her.

As a child, White spent time in the woods, though she was in the minority. There were more boys than girls exploring the nooks and vernal pools where nature came alive each spring. “I would go into them tentatively and spend a little bit of time there. If I wanted to make an installation, I would wreck it before I went home, so no one knew I was there.”

“Migration” might not be permanent at each site, but it carries a permanency those earlier works did not. By casting them in cement, the leaves are at once portable, but their imprint is heavy. Placed in nature, they seem out of place. It isn’t clear where they are headed.

“Who knows what’s next,” she says, alluding to future political upheavals, economic and environmental disasters and wars that may come to pass. “Migration could be the new normal.”

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