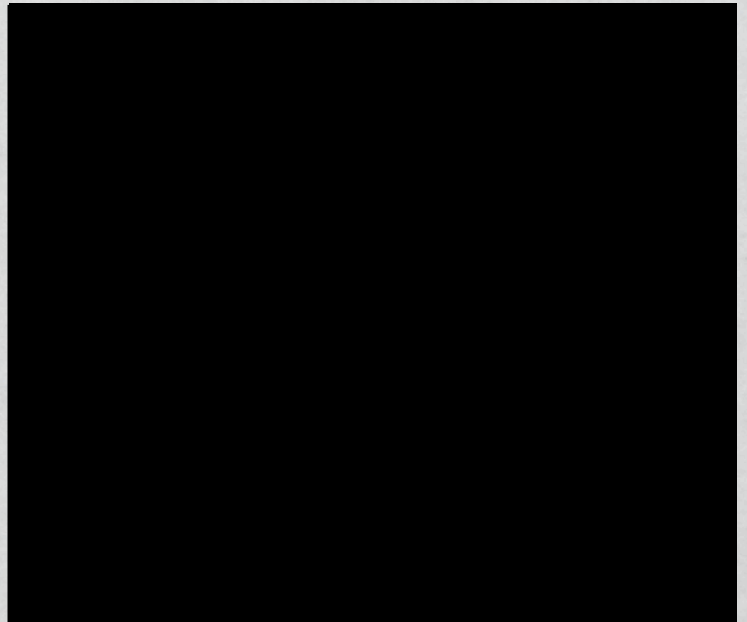


INITIATING A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE
THROUGH SCULPTURE

by
val hamilton helm martinez

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the
Department of Art.

Chapel Hill
2003



© 2003
val hamilton helm martinez
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

To my wife, Laura K. Guinan, for her encouragement, support, and love.
To my daughter, Francesca Lucia Guinan Martinez for her laughter and joy for life that kept me balanced as I got to the point at which I could say, in her words, "I did it!"

My Relationship to the Land, Nature

My approach to making sculpture has come to be strongly influenced by my personal history of home and the search for connectedness to place. Throughout my life, I have moved to different places many times both as a child and as an adult. This is not uncommon in American (United States of) society. Because of this regular change of place, especially during my childhood years, I have learned to be adaptable to whatever setting is presented to me. I can always find the positive in a new place, get excited about discovering new aspects of a place, and make friends easily. As an adult, I have enjoyed, even sought out moving to new places and discovering all that they had to offer. I very rarely feel uncomfortable or paralyzed by being in a new place. As an example, when I graduated from college, I moved to a place to which I had never been – New York City. After a year there, I lived a year in central Italy, a year back in Houston, a year in Raleigh, North Carolina, two years in central Pennsylvania, three months in Tucson, Arizona, eight years in central Wyoming, and now two years in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

This adaptability has made me acutely sensitive to the differences between places and the particularities that make a place unique. In a society that is becoming ever more homogenous, both nationally and internationally, I feel the need to become connected to the place in which I am living even though I may not be there long. I may not be able to achieve the same rootedness that is defined by time and history in a place, but I find it critical to discover the distinctive qualities and characteristics of a place. As environmental educator David Orr has written, “I do not know whether it is possible to love the planet or not, but I do know that it is possible to love the places we can see, touch, smell, and experience. And I believe, along with Simone Weil (1971), that rootedness in a place is ‘the most important and least recognized need of the human soul’ (p. 43).”¹ I have found that the best way to experience a place and begin to understand it is to explore the natural environment. As I wander through the woods in the North Carolina Piedmont, I can begin to acquire a very real relationship to the place. I find the basic elements that influenced cultural development here. I am also learning what is unique about this place, because no matter how many Starbucks and Gaps, it is still hot and humid in central North Carolina and cold and dry in central

¹ David Orr, “Lose It or Love It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution,” from Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect, Island Press, 1994, P. 147

Wyoming. When I go out into the places that have even small bits of the “wild” left in them, I am drawn to the details that reveal the natural processes that are affecting them. This may mean something as simple as noticing the ribbed formations of the pine needles in the gutters along the street edges after a summer rain or something more directed like hiking along the tidal marshes of the Atlantic coast. Nature writer and conservationist Sigurd F. Olson noted that the observation of these simple details is crucial to developing a stronger sense of place and meaning. He remarked, “Only through receptiveness, contemplation, and awareness does anyone open himself to the great intuitions and consciousness of what life and the universe really mean.”² These examinations of the natural environment in a particular place inspire a way of making art that is related to and respectful of these particularities of a place. For me it means living in such a way that collaborates with the existing attributes and processes in a place instead of continually trying to impose some external framework. I feel the need to become more conscious of the cyclical quality that exists in natural processes. As Rebecca Solnit has indicated, “Shift from the new to the renewed; recognize that the world has no lack of things, only of attending to things; shift then from production to maintenance.”³

As I look back upon my personal history, I realize that I learned the excitement of exploring the natural environment as a child. I spent my childhood years in a neighborhood at the edge of the very urban, automobile-centered setting of Houston, Texas. Our subdivision looked out to the “country” – cattle pastures, cultivated fields, pine forests, and vast open coastal plain. I spent countless hours exploring and wandering this transitional zone on the border between civilization and the “wild”. I adventured into grassy fields and piney woods, along the bayous and culverts, and through partially built housing developments. In this quintessential American landscape where there are often sharp divisions between wilderness and civilization, I inadvertently learned to “see” what nature had to offer including the rain, darkness, bugs, and humidity. Olson suggests that this typical childhood curiosity about the “wild” is a core aspect of our value system and takes humans beyond the physical. He wrote, “Wonder becomes then a spiritual value, the basic source of

² Sigurd F. Olson, “The Spiritual Need,” from The Meaning of Wilderness: Essential Articles and Speeches, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, P. 140

³ Rebecca Solnit, As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art, University of Georgia Press, 2001, P. 175

energy and inspiration in the evolution of the mind of man.”⁴ This basic childhood wonder remains fundamental to my sense of connection to a place and what I value in this world. This “wonder” breeds a strong sense of astonishment for and the mystery within the beauty of the natural environment. It is from this deeply “rooted” foundation that I am motivated to make art that focuses awareness on understanding these intangible aspects of place.

My Recent History of Making Sculpture

My sculptural works began as various constructions (treasure-box type objects, relief wall pieces, free standing objects, and installations – see illustration this page) based on observations of and collections from the Wyoming landscape in which I lived. I was inspired by the amazing and unique landscape of the high plains desert. These sculptural constructions, using small bits and pieces of detritus and scraps from this landscape (rusted metal, maps, branches & sticks, soil, snapshots, etc.), were an attempt to reconcile and understand the interaction between the land and myself. I would place the actual objects from the land in juxtaposition to the images of the land. This re-integration of the objects back into the imagined landscape was an attempt to create beauty out of the relationship between human-made scraps and the landscape of which they were an integral part. Although this landscape slowly became more and more familiar and integrated into my existence, it was still somewhat alien to my art making. The connection these constructions had to the actual landscape was remote and only representationally delineated – they were objects that were about looking at the landscape from a distance, both physically and emotionally.



When I came to study in central North Carolina, I encountered a landscape that is in complete opposition to the central Wyoming landscape in almost every aspect – from arid to humid, desert to woodlands, sparsely populated (by both people, fauna, and flora) to densely populated, vast and open to dense and enclosed, and most notable at first, horizontal to vertical. Despite these vast differences, there was an intuitive familiarity that pulled me out into the woods. I was excited to get out into the landscape and understand how it worked in a

⁴ Sigurd F. Olson, “The Spiritual Need,” from The Meaning of Wilderness: Essential Articles and Speeches, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, P. 141

physical as well as cultural sense. Unlike the arid, sunny, evergreen forests of the west that periodically open to expansive vistas, the eastern piedmont woods near my studio are dense, damp, muggy places. Even in the middle of the summer, they can be dark and dank and they abound with creepy crawlies. The tight spaces and the low rolling hills rarely offer much of a distant view.

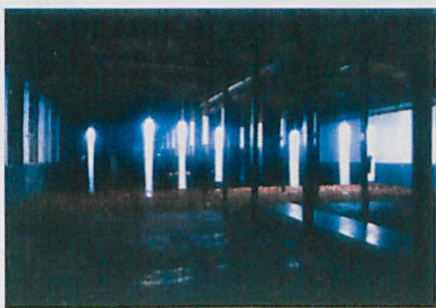
I realized that if I was to truly respond to, comment on, and understand the relationship that humans have with the landscape, I had better get out into it and start a conversation with what has culturally become estranged. I was fighting the cultural separation to which geographer Gary Paul Nabhan refers, “Both nature and culture are being rapidly redefined, not so much by what we learn from our immediate surroundings as by what we learn through the airwaves.”⁵ In addition to the airwaves, I also see this learning occurring through the visual representations of the landscape instead of actually being in these landscapes. The grand images of Half Dome in Yosemite and Old Faithful in Yellowstone allow us to dismiss the importance of discovering and understanding the nature in our own backyards. I wanted to raise my personal awareness and figure out what this local place is. So, I went out into the woods and spent time looking, touching, listening, and smelling. I was determined to grasp some understanding of how humans fit into and affect the synthetic/natural continuum. I created objects that juxtaposed synthetic elements (Plexiglas, plywood, paper, fabric, etc.) with natural elements (mud, sticks, pine needles, etc.). I dragged these studio pieces out into the woods – they began to say some things, but only through the basic juxtaposition of the cultural and the natural. However, the most significant revelation to come from these works related to the way I, like much of American society, have a distorted view of the natural world. Similar to the way that an architect might clear and level a site before “plopping” a generic building into the landscape, I too was just “plopping” only vaguely related sculpture into the woods. This one-sided relationship made me feel the need to become much better acquainted with my host, so I created different types of interventions that were intended to begin a conversation with the place in which they existed. I temporarily marked, mapped, banded, covered, suspended, and wrapped the trees,

⁵ Gary Paul Nabhan, “Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats,” from Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction, Island Press, 1995, P. 97

rocks, and the space within. Like the artist Andy Goldsworthy, I was looking for ways to interact with the present conditions and materials.

I was also incorporating more human-made materials in an attempt to better comprehend the natural-synthetic continuum along which people operate. As I worked out in the woods behind my studio, the strong sense of vertical space began to emerge within me. I started paying close attention to the trees from within the forest. I realized the power that they had, visually as well as metaphorically. They connected the far removed sky with the very present ground. They became the pillars and walls of these vast and often cavernous spaces. The feelings of mystery, beauty, and wonder began to well up in me despite the fact that these woods near my studio are very human-mediated and not very “wild” in the grand, backcountry of Yellowstone sense. These insights laid the groundwork for what would become the concentration of my thesis work.

In response to the subtle shift in awareness of the vertical spaces, I began to create a series of works based on the tree form as the basis for the layout and formation of the forest. These columns of nature held everything together for me. I became fascinated by the sense



of patterning that has evolved in nature. For example, all birch trees are the same pattern of growth, but every leaf and every tree is unique. In a tight wooded situation, they are the physical and visual connection between the sky and the ground. They are rooted and they reach. They created the boundaries between woods and open areas and

between natural spaces and human-built environments. I explored these various ideas through pieces that mimicked the woods indoors with fabric tree forms hung over a bed of real leaves (see illustration above), abstracted and distorted a single tree form made of burlap and cheese cloth in an enclosed atrium type space, re-presented photographic images looking out from a single tree in an interior gallery installation, marked the drip lines of enormous historic trees with various synthetic-to-natural materials, and even enlarged the columnar form in a fabric installation in the woods. These formal experimentations that concentrated on the variations of a single object type were also an attempt to question the relationships between interior and exterior space, the creation of space around a single object, and the delineation of space amongst similar objects.

Through all of these works, I became fascinated with the meanings and forms in the materials themselves. Fabric is a delicate balance between the synthetic and the natural. It is human-constructed (synthetic) in a fairly ordered grid structure. These rectilinear elements can then take on a myriad of very fluid (natural) forms and shapes as the fabric responds to gravity and other natural processes. For me, the fabric is like the trees mentioned earlier – there is a specific patterning and repetition, but randomness and uniqueness are still allowed to play out. What I also discovered through these works was that I was still trying to imprint some external meaning and intent on the materials and this felt uncomfortable. I had become removed again from the source of my original interest – the woods, the landscape itself. As Rebecca Solnit points out, “Using substance to convey meaning replaces representation with presentation, and much as representation is about what is absent, about lack (the genesis of narrative), substance is about what is present, about presence.”⁶ Without losing sight of the peripheral ideas that I had been developing, I began to simplify the work. Just as I want to be present in a particular place, I want the work to be present in its consequence and meaning and not “about” something else. I was at the point of needing to address the specific uses and intents of the materials themselves – fabric as covering, enclosure, boundary, etc. and the woods as natural space, mystery, beauty, etc. As I began to look at the materials for what they are - as opposed to what they could be about - I began to see my work as a more collaborative relationship with the natural settings, which consequently initiated a conversation.

Awareness – the Work as it is Now

Imagine or recall a very dynamic and exciting conversation. Now continue to develop this image to the point that it becomes a very intimate and full relationship. In having the conversation, and by extension maintaining the relationship, think of all the efforts that you must put forth to cultivate a meaningful and symbiotic interaction. These works are about the starting places for a thorough and intent conversation with the natural world. It is my hope that this dialogue originates from a philosophically healthier perception of nature and therefore a more symbiotic relationship with the landscape. Rebecca Solnit

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, University of Georgia Press, 2001, P.59

articulates a preference for this more relational approach as she points out that, “The nuclear physicist Werner Heisenberg commented that Descartes differed from the ancients in that they endeavored to understand things through connections and affinities, Descartes through isolation and divisions.”⁷ Currently, I am working at relating to nature with greater understanding and sympathy, turning around the pattern of neglect that has come to define our society’s interactions with the landscape. Through my sculptural work, I want to develop connections and discover affinities between nature and myself. This re-connecting and thoughtfulness has taken on the form of paying attention – overcoming the distance that has been created by our culturally constructed gap between humans and nature. Solnit has commented on this idea, “Tending, a word that means to care for, is after all, connected to the word attending, which means to pay attention to, and to wait.”⁸

I have come to realize that my own childhood play in the natural world has developed into my fascination with the interaction between natural and human-made environments. This same sense of play now energizes both my personal search for a way of being in this world and the sculpture that I make. I have been working recently with the way various elements (both natural and human-made) create the entirety of a particular place – a spot amongst a stand of trees, a road hedged by buildings on one side and trees on the other. In trying to draw a more balanced or sympathetic relationship between often disparate elements, my thesis work brings natural elements into the completely human-constructed space of the Ackland Art Museum and human-made elements into the natural setting of the Bolin Creek Trail Greenway. As in a conversation, the elements speak with each other and are in turn influenced by the other. A relationship develops that also includes the viewer, time, and natural processes as active and effective participants. The resulting spaces call for a receptive awareness and attentiveness to all the possibilities and often-subtle variations.

The installation at the Ackland consists of three hundred twenty-four branches hanging on waxed linen thread in an eleven-inch grid from a steel structure that spans the width of the lobby (see top illustration on the following page). In the pathways between the left and right doors and the door to the rear, the branches hang overhead. In the remainder of

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, University of Georgia Press, 2001, P. 21

⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art*, University of Georgia Press, 2001, P. 165

the sixteen by sixteen foot area, the branches hang a foot from the floor. The steel structure mimics the subtle curve of the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the museum lobby. The branches have been trimmed down to one main branch and are cleanly cut at top and bottom. Titled



simply, “Hanging Branches”, it is designed to reveal the uniqueness of all the individual branches as well as the interactions that can occur within an evenly spaced geometric system. The human component causes movement in the branches that causes a dynamic interaction between the branches themselves and between the person and the branches. This is picking up the slight

changes in air movement. An additional layer of interaction then occurs as the shadows begin to shift and move. Within the very rigid and geometric, this piece offers an opportunity to observe the mystery and beauty of each of these individually selected objects that have come together in a community.

Along the Bolin Creek Trail, three pieces have been installed – a triptych of rectilinear-topped catenary shaped muslin vessels suspended within three stands of trees, a sequence of four muslin panels that are stretched between four pairs of trees, and a densely wooded stand enclosed by burlap panels suspended between five trees. These human-made constructions become part of the existing environment while simultaneously altering the

view of the place. They are designed to provide a marker for observing and interacting with the spaces over changing time, weather, and daylight. The vessels (see illustration at right) hang along the western end of the trail adjacent to a bridge that leads down from street level to the creek bottom. The tops of these vessels are consistently just above eye level while hanging the same distance from



the ground. As one descends the bridge, the vessels, which are the same size at the top, become progressively shorter and stockier. They are geometrically related to the specific tree stands. The dyeing with the red earth mud will allow for a record of the change due to weather conditions. The vessels are indicators of the space amongst the stands of trees and will respond to the subtle shifts in the air movement. The muslin panels (see top illustration

on this page) are designed to create a background for the woods themselves. The most significant impact will be to collect the shadows cast by the trees. This will bring the shadows into a clearer view and onto a vertical, up from the horizontal forest floor. These panels will also detect and manifest the slight variations in air circulation. They will also provide divisions in a normally continual space. The burlap enclosure (see illustration below left) will create a visual barrier between the viewer and the normal view. The overall piece will



draw into question the meanings of interior and exterior space. The panels will have openings at their edges that are the same size as the trees that support them. These openings will offer glimpses into the interior space. The four-foot wide panels will hang so that the bottoms are just above eye level. This will allow adventuresome and curious viewers to enter inside the enclosure. The panels will begin on a line facing the trail and wend through the woods. This movement will draw the viewer's eye deeper into the woods beyond the usual glance at the "wall" of the woods.

As I look at the pieces that comprise my graduate thesis, I feel I have just begun to explore the idea of greater attention to and deeper awareness of the wonder and mystery that the natural landscape has to offer. I intend to continue to use sculptural installations to develop a presence in the landscapes that remain somehow intact within our heavily acculturated and over-built existence. I believe that I am just beginning to tap into the spirituality and beauty that a particular place can offer. I will continue to use the works to question how we as humans perceive the landscape and then create solutions to develop a more attentive and symbiotic relationship.