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Art Goes Green in Houston

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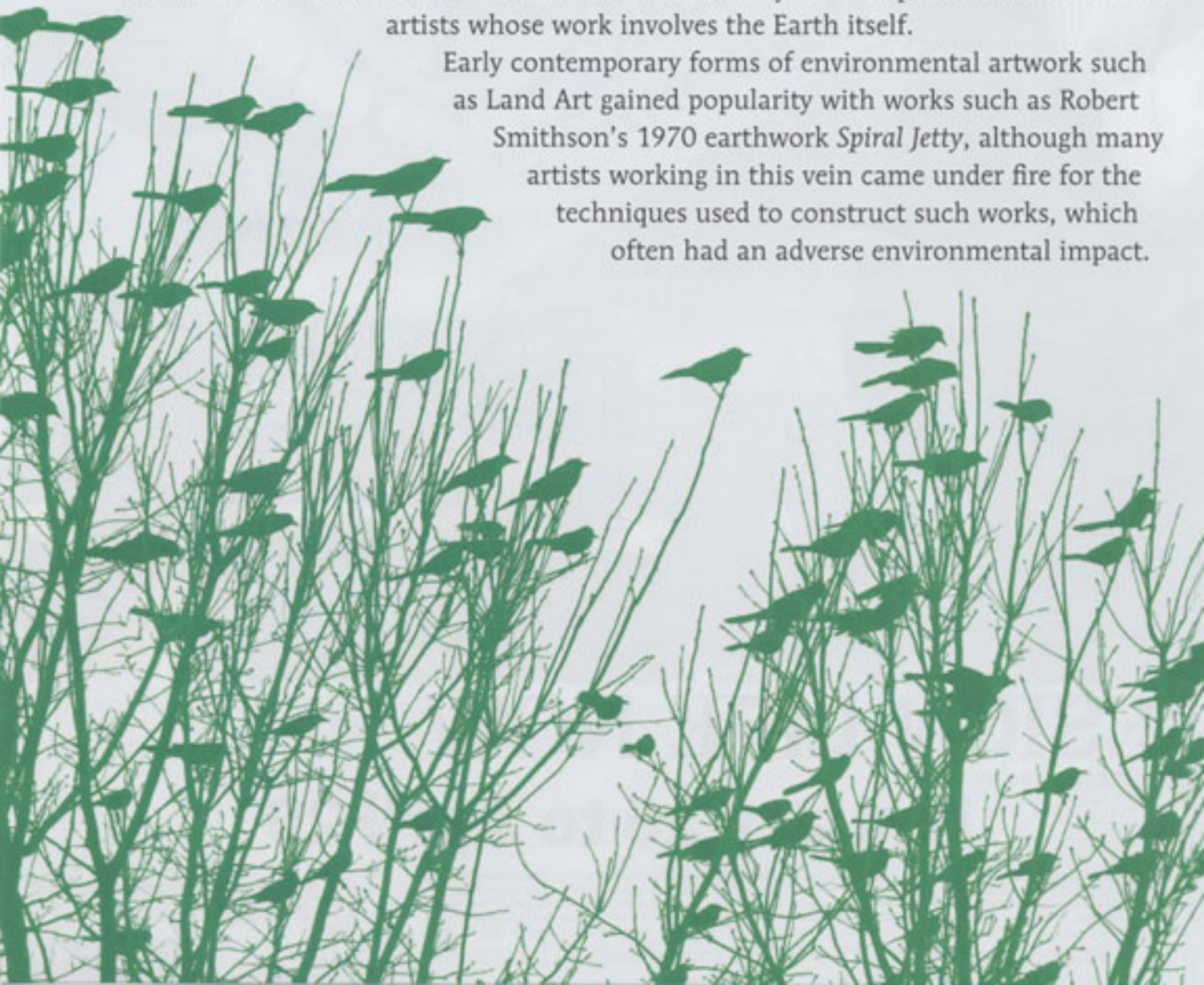
Art Goes Green in Houston

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With all the hype surrounding everything “green,” from groceries and travel to cosmetics and architecture, environmentalism has lately become the height of fashion. Far from being a passing trend (though its hype may fade as the next big thing grabs our attention), “going green” is a concern that has grabbed the focus of artists and art lovers alike for the past few decades.

Environmental art is generally thought to have sprung from the larger environmental awareness movement of the late 1960s, although ancient works such as the Serpent Mound in Ohio and the Nazca Lines in Peru certainly serve as predecessors for those artists whose work involves the Earth itself.

Early contemporary forms of environmental artwork such as Land Art gained popularity with works such as Robert Smithson’s 1970 earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, although many artists working in this vein came under fire for the techniques used to construct such works, which often had an adverse environmental impact.



Ripping ^{into the existing landscape with bulldozers, say}

Smithson's critics, is hardly a way to express environmental concerns. As our collective environmental consciousness has grown, however, so have the styles, techniques and media used by environmental artists. With such varied materials as plants, litter, recyclables, and time itself, these artists construct whole new ways of making art that defies commodification, using the land itself as an artspace. Focused less on restructuring the land, contemporary artists working in this vein look for ways to reveal the intertwining ways in which Earth and its creatures, including us, interact. Their more complex concerns are enacted in works that explore temporality, community and sustainability.

Houston artists have played and continue to play a role in the world of environmental art; famously, Houstonian Mel Chin has enacted such works as *Revival Field* and *SWING*, each of which explored issues of land reclamation. The sculptural planting of *Revival Field* explores a technique called "green remediation" in which a special variety of plants known as hyperaccumulators are used to remove heavy metal pollution from a St. Paul, Minnesota landfill. *SWING*, (an acronym for "Sustainable Works Involving Neighborhood Groups") deals with a more urban situation, reclaiming abandoned houses in Detroit in order to create agricultural and community involvement opportunities for their neighborhoods through growing worms, gourmet mushrooms, and the like. Through these works, Chin posits artwork as an act of creativity with effects that far outstrip the possibilities imposed by gallery walls, working in time and real-world impact as well as in the aesthetic realm.

Closer to home, Buffalo Bayou Art Park (BBAP) is preeminent in its support for environmental artists in Houston, offering generous display spaces in public grounds along the bayous. "The arts are much more approachable when there aren't the walls of the museums or galleries to get in the way of community involvement. And since our projects are situated in the outdoor environment, they will hopefully begin to make the audience aware of the spaces surrounding the sculptures, and help to bring an appreciation of the nature, and in turn an ecological awareness," says BBAP Executive Director Elaine Bradford. 2002 and 2003 BBAP projects involved artists working with local high school students to produce environmentally themed works of public art. Bradford recalls that in 2002, artist Teresa O'Connor and a

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group of students from Natural Legacy's Student Environmental Art Club "created a sculpture out of trash collected from the bayou that spelled out 'recycle' in large letters," which was then installed on Berry Bayou. Similarly, 2003 BBAP Artist-in-Residence Steven Siegel guided students through the creation of another trash-based sculpture of crushed post-consumer plastic. "It was on display in Sesquicentennial Park behind the Wortham Theater," says Bradford; "This project brought ideas of consumer waste and recycling to a very public space downtown. The gigantic ball of trash, I believe, was a way to open people's eyes to personal environmental impact." More recently, Spacetaker's former gallery space featured the work of Buffalo Bayou Art Park's 2005-2006 Artist-in-Residence Mara Adamitz Scrupe. Her project *Garden for the Third Coast*, began with a gallery component in which organically grown seedlings of now-scarce plants native to Buffalo Bayou were displayed in hand-thrown clay pots in the glow of solar-powered illuminated illustrations of these same plants in full bloom. At

the conclusion of the gallery display, the seedlings were distributed to local gardeners and environmental aficionados for transplanting that would help boost the biodiversity that was once natural to the area.

BBAP's latest installa-



Kathy Kelley and Kara Duval go tromping around in Kelley's studio

"This is what I do because this is what feeds my soul"



tion is in partnership with the Green Valentine Project. Green Valentine began in 2003 in the mind of Jeff Shell, who had moved to the Woodland Heights wanting to make a difference in his own life and in his community. Establishing his own garden and flock of chickens on his back yard, he decided that he wanted to plant trees as well. He started in Stude Park, organizing mass planting ventures with a group of volunteers and the support of the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department and the Heights Beautification Project. For his 2008 event, Shell, who is also an art collector, wanted to incorporate art into his planting ventures. Thinking of the administrative issues involved in requesting and sorting out proposals, he discussed his ideas with Art Guy Jack Massing, who suggested that Shell partner with Elaine Bradford and BBAP. Fortuitously, BBAP was looking to expand its reach, and was enthusiastic about Shell's idea. BBAP submitted four proposals with concept sketches to Shell, who was entranced with Kathy Kelley's submission *Suckling is Continuous but No Longer Functional*. Shell raised the \$6000 needed to fund the installation, and before he knew it, the project was placed in Freed Park. Shell's excitement has been contagious; the reaction to Green Valentine has been overwhelmingly positive. Although many have urged him to make this a nonprofit effort, Shell prefers to keep the program as it stands, at least for now: "This is what I do because this is what feeds my soul," he says.

Kelley's installation, which consists of three spherical structures made of reclaimed tires, reflects the artist's fascination with issues of consumerism. Far from evangelical in her environmental stance, Kelley hastens to admit that her work is "a response to [her] own consumer gluttony" as much as to the cycles of consumption and waste around us, though she fervently hopes that we can find ways to balance capitalism and sustainability. Her recent work involves tires and other found objects, which she sees herself as "rescuing from the waste

stream" as she incorporates them into her work. Although she was especially drawn to the sort of bulky waste that one often sees on the freeway shoulder, she says, "It took me a while to get up the guts to pull over and pick something up from the side of the road." Around the same time, her research on Mother Teresa made her consider the idea of redemption—not just of people, but of objects. "I feel that I'm redeeming these objects by giving them value," she explains; in creating artwork from discards, she imparts the materials with a new life and a new purpose.

As she began to conceive of *Suckling is Continuous but No Longer Functional*, Kelley referred to psychoanalytic Object Theory, especially Melanie Klein's notions of breastfeeding as intertwined with the development of gratitude and envy. As Kelley designed the sculptures, one of which is covered in giant innertube "nipples," she was thinking about our culture as "resorting to the boob of consumerism," she says, our obsession with non-functional products that leave us empty, "the continuous nature of our taking" from the planet's resources. Reflecting this, the nipples of her sculpture offer no sustenance; instead, she notes, the Houston Parks Department was a bit concerned that people might reach into them to dispose of their trash—an ironic notion that Kelley is happy to incorporate into the work's purpose. "I want this work to ask how we can move forward from here," she says, again expressing hope that the free market can incorporate environmentally sustainable practices.

BBAP is hoping to continue yearly projects with Green Valentine, says Bradford, and of course it has more plans for the future: "Right now we are working on getting approval for a sculpture by Houston Artist Michelle O'Michael for April of this year. She will be producing an ecological sculpture at the Sabine Street ArtPark that will be flowers and grasses growing from coir installed on a steel framework. The sculpture will grow and change through the season." Of this new project, O'Michael says, "The sculpture movement from installation through seed growth cycles is a physical expression of the content of an organism's or the planet's life and natural factors that are involved and influence life." In the coming fall, BBAP plans for installing art along the MetroRail lines, hoping to continue its public arts reach throughout the Houston area. "We want to be able to help artists produce interesting public projects regardless of location," says Bradford.

Through environmental art projects like those supported by BBAP, Green Valentine, and other Houston arts organizations, Houstonians have a great opportunity to experience groundbreaking—and groundmending—artworks with a very real impact on our world. These works help us realize our interconnectedness with the environment, and the potential we have to make a positive impact through everyday actions and awareness.

