

# ARTPULSE

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Kendall Buster

Enrique Marty

Craig Drennen

Jorge Perianes

Angel Abreu on  
Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

**Artists as Educators:  
The Legacy of 1950's  
Bay Area Figurative Painters**

**Art Fairs and  
Thought-Space**

**arte\_FIST FOUNDATION**

**Building:  
Misbehaving the City**

**The Critic As Artist:  
Peter Schjeldahl on Oscar Wilde**



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Kendall Buster, *Resonance*, 2010, steel, shadecloth, Chemistry Lab Atrium, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Photo courtesy Bruce M. White.

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# MODELING THE INTERFACE OF SCIENCE AND ART

## A Conversation with Kendall Buster

BY STEPHEN KNUDSEN

Kendall Buster first studied microbiology and received a BS degree in Medical Technology before pursuing an education in art. She earned a BFA from the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC, and an MFA in Sculpture from Yale University as well as participating in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Studio Program in New York City.

Her large-scale "biological architecture" projects have been exhibited in numerous venues nationally and internationally including The Hirshhorn Museum and the Kreeger Museum in Washington, DC, Artist's Space and The American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, The Haggerty Museum in Milwaukee, The Boise Art Museum in Boise, Idaho, Suyama Space in Seattle, Washington, The Indiana Museum of Art, Indianapolis, the Bahnhof Westend in Berlin, and the KZNSA Gallery in Durban, South Africa.

Kendall has also created large-scale permanent commissions for The Frick Chemistry Building at Princeton University, Gilman Hall at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, The Health and Biosciences Center at The University of Houston, and the US Embassy in Rabat, Morocco.

Buster has been interviewed by Neda Ulaby on NPR's *Morning Edition* as part of a series on art and science and in 2005 was the recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in the Arts. She lives and works in Richmond, Virginia, and teaches in the Department of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

*Stephen Knudsen - Thank you, Kendall, for this interview. I feel a kinship to you and your story because, like you, I too had my start in microbiology, with a B.S. in that field and a career in a lab only to eventually find my way into the fine arts. Do you recall the moment in the lab when you realized that you were meant to dedicate your love of science within the artist studio and university art classroom?*

**Kendall Buster** - From the beginning I never really separated the two fields in my mind. I was drawn to microbiology out of the same interests that led me to make sculptures. My attraction to microbiology was in large part a totally visual experience. Microscopic work was especially compelling in that things invisible to the unaided eye, when viewed through magnifying lenses, became monumental. I had the odd sensation of looking into another world from afar while at the same time imagining I could project myself bodily into that world. I liked the fact that the term *cell* in biology can refer to the smallest structural unit of an organism or an enclosed cavity, but is also how we name a small room or chamber. This resonated with my thinking that single cell organisms were in some sense ar-

chitectural. My studies in microbiology made me very conscious of scale and marked what would become a growing awareness of the architectural character of the biological.

*S.K. - Do you still pick up a scientific journal now and then?*

**K.B.** - I confess that I do not. Scientific journals are so specialized that I am more likely to read art journals, theory and philosophy, or what I would call cultural magazines. In reading those publications I find myself often going first to articles that address issues in medicine. A recent piece in the *New Yorker* on Ebola was heartbreaking in its descriptions of the human suffering caused by the current outbreak. But I was also deeply interested in the detailed reporting on the efforts to identify the genetic codes and the use of terminology that likened the behavior of the virus to that of a 'swarm'—not a singular discrete thing, but a multiplicity. Viruses are so fascinating and frightening in the ways they challenge the certainty of what is a whole organism and what is a fragment of an organism. This stretches us to reconsider definitions of what we call living and where we as humans stake our corporeal boundaries.

*S.K. - Speaking of hostile microcosms, one of your older pieces, Garden Snare, 1998, allows spectators to trap themselves inside a kind of dual structure somewhat like a cell body undergoing division.*

**K.B.** - *Garden Snare* was one of my first sculptures designed and built for an outdoor site. It was a shade house sited in a sunny clearing built with a skeletal steel frame and a transparent membrane of agricultural shade-cloth forming two accessible chambers. I was at first hesitant about the project, certain I did not want to intrude into what was an intimate garden space on the grounds of the museum. So from the beginning I was clear that I wanted views of the trees and plantings to be minimally obstructed by the work, for it to be visually pourous. The sculpture had to function in a way that went beyond its being an object in the landscape. I regarded *Garden Snare* from the start as an architectural structure creating a kind of counterpoint to the rigorous horizontality and verticality of the museum as Phillip Johnson designed it.

The notion of its being a snare as well as a shadehouse come out of my thoughts around how enclosure implies the contradictory promises of embrace and threat. Am I protected or trapped? Am I the empowered inhabitant of an architectural space or am I controlled and imprisoned by it?

*S.K. - I read something once, that as a child, you saw the beautifully quirky 1966 Sci Fi film The Fantastic Voyage, and it planted something critical into your imagination. What is your favorite scene in that film and do you mind if I bring this to the*



Kendall Buster, *Resonance*, 2010, steel, shadecloth, Chemistry Lab Atrium, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Photo courtesy Bruce M. White.

*table in talking about Resonance, 2010, the site-specific work at the Frick Chemistry Lab at Princeton University?*

K.B. - Yes, I mentioned the film *Fantastic Voyage* in an interview as an example of an early experience that later informed my work. The film's premise is that a group of scientists are miniaturized and injected into the body of an acclaimed researcher in order to perform micro-surgery. It delighted me when I first saw it and continues to interest me on a number of levels. I can't recall a specific scene, but the idea of becoming small in a magical, *Alice in Wonderland* sense, by way of a technological apparatus intrigued me then and still intrigues me. The film really captured the reality of the human/animal body as a complex assembling of chambers and passageways. Its main action was a journey, a progression through what I saw as distinct architectural spaces.

This ties into my interest in scale and how architectural models operate. A kind of miniaturization occurs, where the eye leads one to move (with an imagined body) through a space. A number of my works operate in this way. *Miniature Monumental* is an ongoing project that suggests a model for some imagined, ever-growing cityscape. The *Highrise Vessels* all have accessible interiors, and upon entering, one's scale shifts in two opposing directions, at once growing to stand within the center of an atrium of a multi-level highrise or shrinking to enter an urn. So it is both

object and site of enclosure.

With *Resonance*, created for the Frick Chemistry Lab at Princeton, I did see the sculptural components dispersed and aggregated in the huge, five-hundred-foot open atrium as molecules. The fact that molecules are so small they are not visible, but rather understood through models that approximate their structure and behavior, made the potential for play in scale all the more engaging for me.

S.K. - *I was hoping we could open up some space for discussing beauty, primarily because your work is beautiful, but also because the great challenges of talking about the topic today often engender silence. David Humphrey's essay "Describable Beauty" talks about those "rhetorical demands" in trying to define beauty: "For critics more to the left, beauty is a word deemed wet with the salesman's saliva." One could also invoke here Roger Scruton's lamentations on the contemporary turn away from beauty as he sees it. Shall we tread on beauty's precarious territory?*

K.B. - If I were to define beauty as a superficial dressing, only skin deep, and as being complicit in some objectionable ideological position, or as an easy seductive strategy meant to distract from more serious heavy lifting, then I might squirm at the idea of discussing beauty as it might apply to my work! I accept the suspicion of 'mere' beauty and any claim to universality in how one might de-



Kendall Buster, *Garden Snare*, 1998, steel, shadecloth. Kreeger Museum, Washington, DC.

fine a thing as beautiful. But beauty is a complex concept not easily dismissed. Never set, it is constantly being renegotiated.

Beauty is too changeable a thing for me to try and lay absolute claim on how it operates in any work of art, including my own. But I am attracted to precision and to forms suggesting that an underlying pattern or internal logic has driven the process of design. I appreciate what I would call “the generous” in a work of art and am a true believer in the notion of the indescribable. I also think a great deal about the notion that visual pleasure is not necessarily a superficial experience but can be the source of a deeper connection to our environment and to each other. I am also interested in how what we might term as beautiful can evoke unease.

Resistance to using the term beauty to describe a work of art makes me think about how the word is employed so unselfconsciously in other fields to pair what sounds like subjective delight with objective observation. For example, one can say without irony that a certain formula is a beautifully elegant solution to a given mathematics problem or that a honeycomb is a beautifully economic construction to achieve multi-cell chambers.

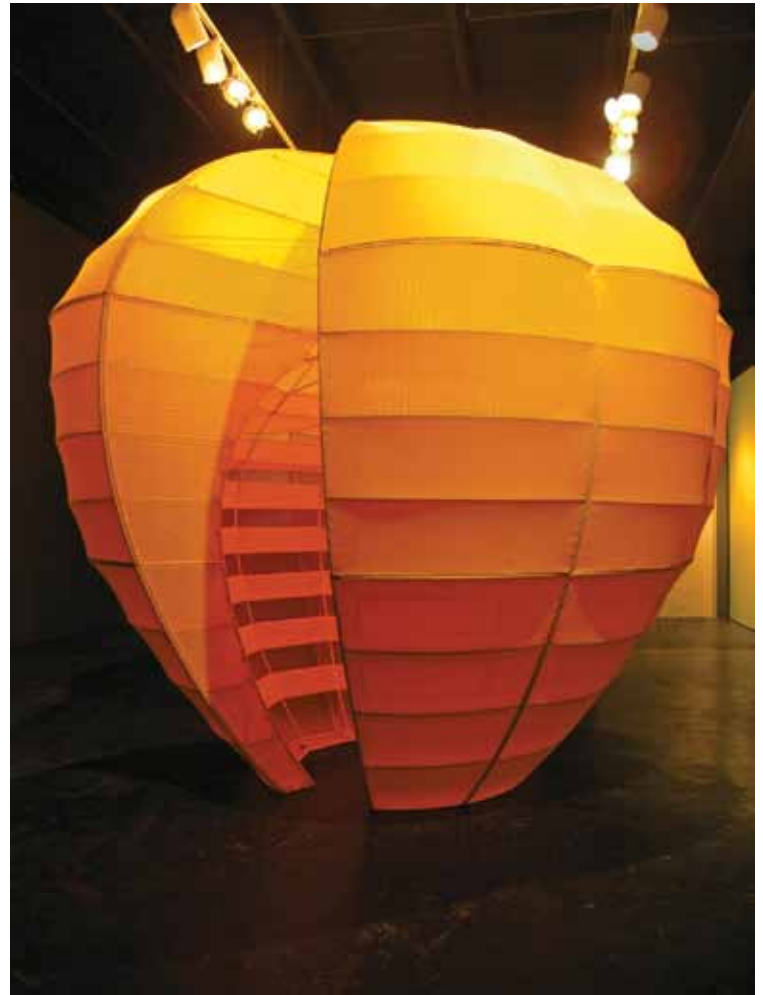
*S.K. - I think I unselfconsciously said, “beautifully quirky film” earlier! So glad you brought up the notion of the indescribable as a form of intensity. Though Kant’s ideas of beauty do not hold up for everyone, I think his ideas about the crashes of imagination as we cross the limits of the knowable are practically bullet proof. Beauty is a good place for art and science to meet, I think. At times I do see some of your works, and especially Resonance, as regarding the sublime. Your thoughts?*

**K.B.** - If we define the sublime as an experience that evokes wonder and awe, something that takes us to the threshold of what we know, then I agree this is a place where artistic production and reception might meet scientific inquiry. The emphasis in both for me is still on subjective experience, and threshold is a good term because it defines the sublime as the marking of a limit. That may sound pessimistic, but on the contrary I embrace the notion of an independent natural world that acts upon me as much as I act upon it, a material reality that is beyond my perception and total comprehension. And the threshold is an unstable boundary. Other concepts that we associate with the sublime such as grandeur, unimaginable complexity, and the transformative are for me critical to a sense of infinite renewal.

**S.K.** - *Would you unpack the meaning of the title Resonance?*

**K.B.** - I liked that resonance is a word with related, but distinctly varied, meanings. In chemistry the term, as I understand it, describes what is called a “delocalized” electron. I loved the word “delocalized,” referring to molecules where “contributing” rather than single structures are necessary to model how the electron behaves. Contributing structures are not singular but always in relation. In physics, resonance is commonly defined as an oscillation, a reinforcement of sound reflecting from a surface. And also, if I want to describe a fluid connection of ideas in visual terms, I might say that something resonates with my own thoughts on a given subject.

I wanted the forms in *Resonance* to operate as discrete, but not modular units that resonated, figuratively speaking, one with another. But at the same time, the ways they aggregated and dispersed in the space as the viewer moved around them, and the way they



Kendall Buster, *Yellow Highrise*, 2005, steel, shaded cloth, 12' x 12' x 12.' Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, TX.

multiplied through reflection to prolong and intensify the visual effect, was to my mind an example of literal resonance.

*S.K. - Many of your pieces are open to sky light. They shift perceptually through light cycles. Would you talk about one of your favorite examples of perceptual shifting and its meaning in one of your sculptures?*

*K.B. -* The shade cloth I use as a skin over the skeletal frames is a knitted material that appears either transparent or opaque depending upon the direction of the light. I frequently use white, which reflects light and takes on subtle shifts in hue as the day changes from dawn to dusk. *Vessel Field*, at Johns Hopkins University, is a configuration of nine large vessels suspended from a skylight in the atrium. These forms were meant to operate as an inventory of vessel types and to refer to the University's collection of artifacts displayed on the floor below the atrium. The vessels were large-scale models of ancient clay vessels downstairs but made apparition-like, weightless, and transparent.

By day, you can almost see through the forms. When you look up from the atrium, the mouth of each vessel creates a kind of oculus that frames the changing sky. When you look down from the upper floors, the vessels appear more opaque and solid, their interiors less pronounced. Throughout the day, the color of the forms shifts from cool to warm.

Perceptual shifts also occur in the work and are enhanced by the physical properties of this semi-transparent skin. With this material I am able to realize sculptures that have forms within forms and play interior space against exterior shape.

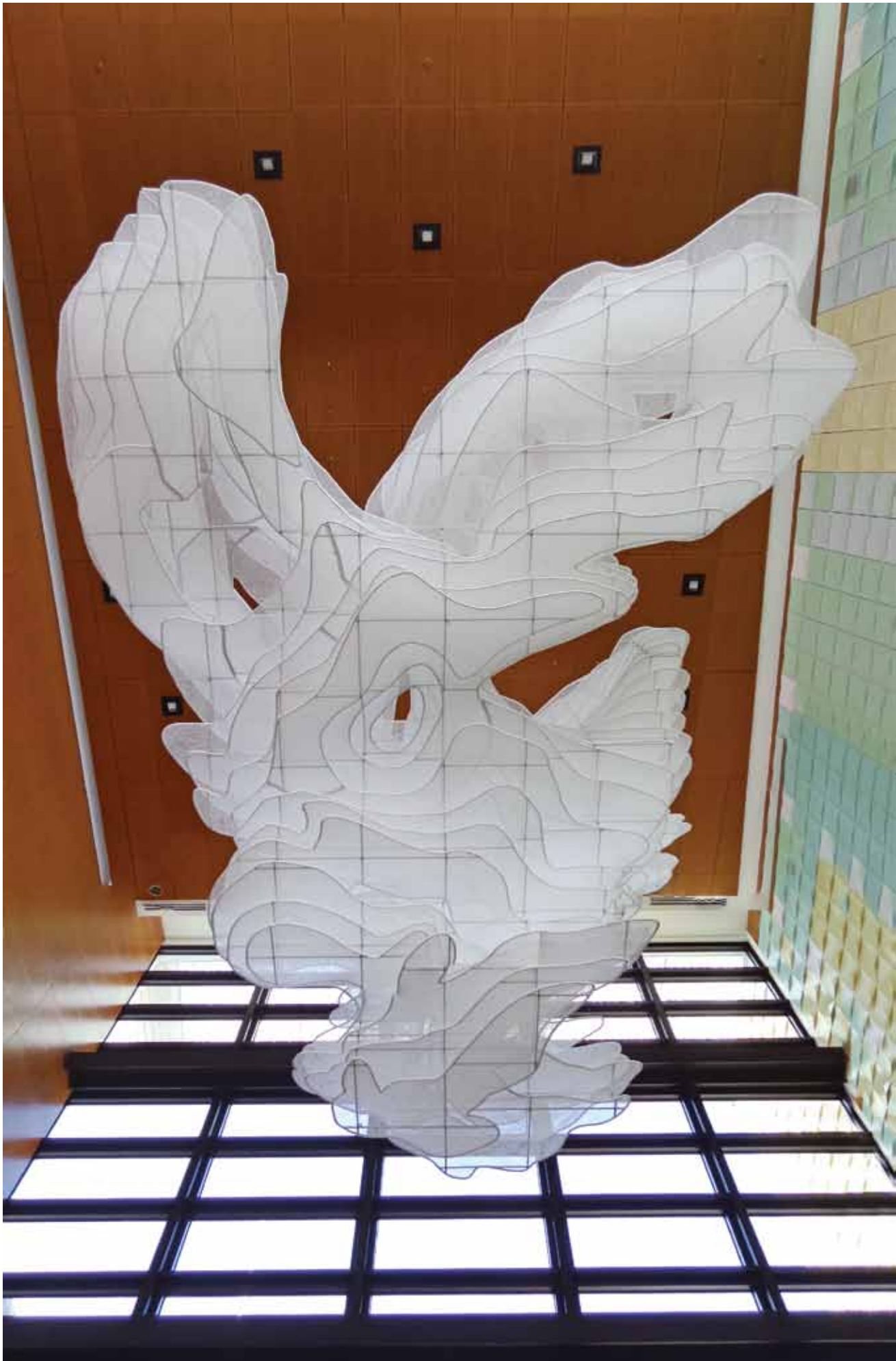
Another example of perceptual shifting is found in the *Stratum* series of works. Constructed with stacked planes, when viewed from above the works resemble topography maps. Viewed from eye level these horizontal levels decompress and expand to suggest accessible spaces. From below they compress again and seem to flatten into a schematic gridded drawing.

*S.K. - Vessel Field can flatten out as well but into circles. Looking directly up under Vessel Field's largest vessel reminds me of the Roman Pantheon's concentric circles enclosing the oculus. But in Vessel Field, I get an added note of transcendence because light passes both through space—the oculus—and through matter—the penetrable material forming the oculus.*

*Viewed in this way, something modeling the celestial plays out on that background grid. Is there a kind of miniature/monumental shift going on here as well, perhaps within a more grand, celestial scope?*

*K.B. -* One of the reasons I use transparent skins so consistently is the way this allows light to pass not only through the cut-out openings in the forms but also through the forms themselves. I like that you talk about the work in terms of empty space vs. matter. Vessels, like architectural structures, are matter shaping empty space. And a container or building, if solid, would be something other than a container or a building.

The eye, or the body, navigates interior and exterior spaces by way of openings piercing the membrane that comprise the material form. In *Vessel Field* or *Dual Apparitions*, those openings in the forms that frame the sky (or skylight grid shell) do perhaps evoke a built dome within the celestial dome.



Kendall Buster, *Pattern Flow*, 2014. U.S. Embassy, Rabat, Morocco.



Kendall Buster, *Dual Apparitions*, 2014. *Solari Bridge*, Scottsdale, Arizona.

In *Dual Apparitions* there is an oculus, but also a section is removed to allow entry into the inner chamber's empty space. The knitted shade-cloth is also full of empty space, but on a tiny grid. So these sculptures are porous at vastly different scales.

*S.K. - I cannot let you get away before talking about the popular text that you and Paula Crawford authored: The Critique Hand Book/ The Art Student's Sourcebook and Survival Guide. I revisited it for this interview and noticed how you debunk the myth that artists cannot write. History, as you state, "is full of artists who have thought deeply and written beautifully" (there is that "b" word again). How do you instill in students—perhaps through assignments—how important good writing might be in their careers as artists? You certainly do it by example... but any other thoughts?*

*K.B. - As part of my teaching in visual arts, I have always used writing. My emphasis is less about producing artists who are better writers—though I think this happens in the process—than it is about encouraging writing as a conceptualizing tool. I typically begin critiques with writing. It slows everyone down to really look at the work and get in touch with their responses before beginning the very different dynamic of verbal discussion. I sometimes suggest free writing. It enables an artist to better access words to describe concepts that are in operation but not necessarily articu-*



lated. Studio journaling is a way to take inventory but also to look back upon and review the journey. At times I use an interview format, much as what we are doing now, between participants in the class to open a space for dialogue.

*S.K. - I am told that you just finished a project for the US Embassy in Rabat, Morocco. In closing, would you summarize your thoughts on that project?*

*K.B. - I designed *Pattern Flow*, like all my large-scale commissioned works, to converse with the particulars of the architectural space both formally and conceptually. The project was part of a larger program through Art in Embassies, which seeks, through art, to humanize the experience for those who visit and work in high security buildings. The sculpture was built with a configuration of topographical planes to suggest a shifting, dynamic landscape. In this context, the shade-cloth echoed the effects of stucco and tent structures while also offering a geometric grid pattern that changes with viewing perspectives. *Pattern Flow* is a sculpture operating not only as a complex, three-dimensional landscape model floating within the building's tall, expansive main entrance, but also as a portal into an infinite open space beyond.*

*S.K. - And that takes us full circle back into the sublime. Thank you. ■*