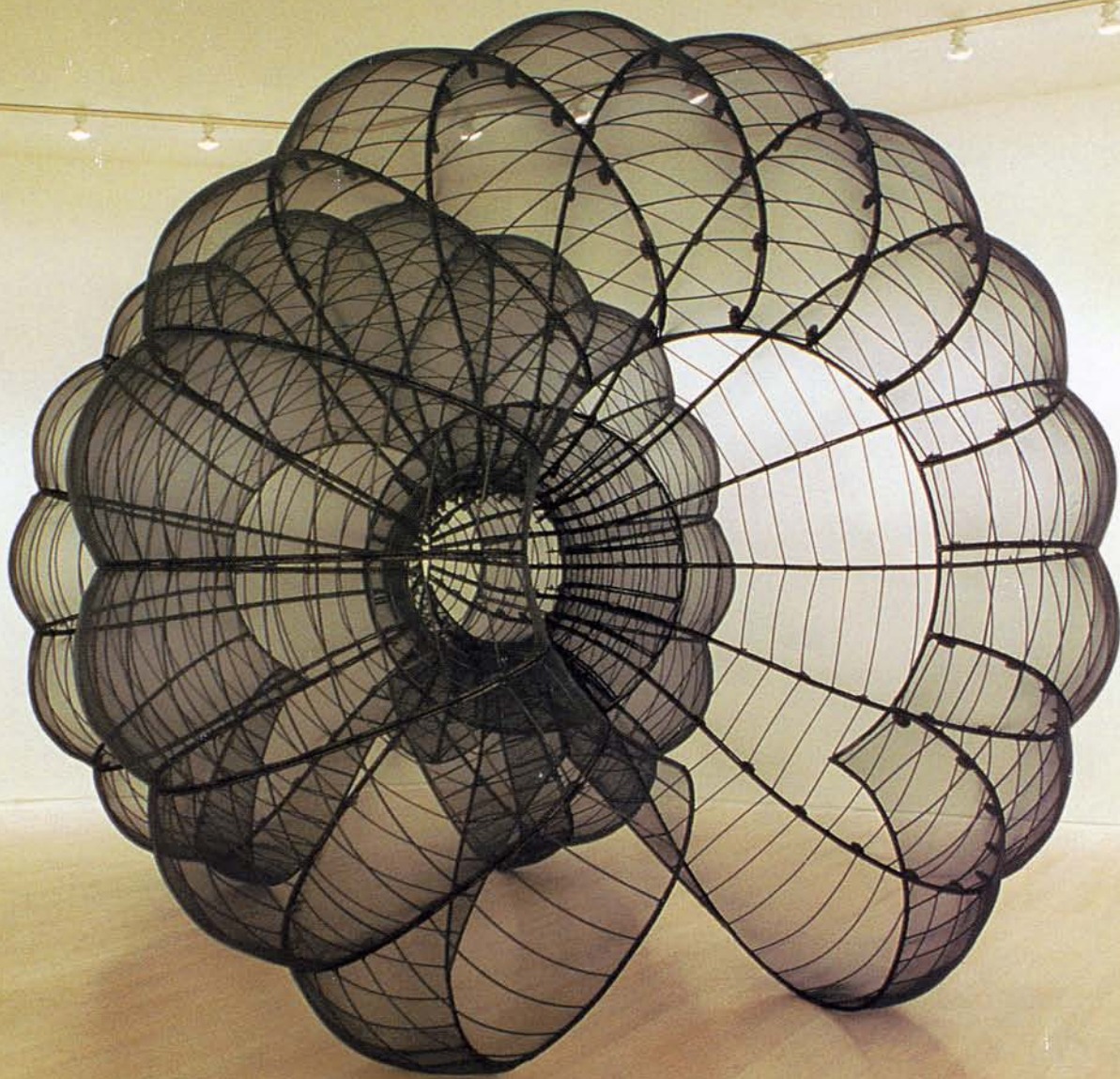


Sculpture

May/June 1996

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Rauschenberg and Sculpture

Dave Hickey

Kendall Buster

Installation Art in the '90s

Putting Sculpture On-line



Emerging Sculptor

Kendall
Buster

by Sarah Tanguy

Upon entering Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, the intoxicating smell of beeswax awakens the senses. Two bulging egg shapes, each approximating a seven-foot sphere and joined down the middle, are the source of this scent. As though witnessing the cellular division of an unknown organism, one wonders whether these two entities are coming together or apart. Ducking into the semicircular opening of *The Shell That Remains* (1996), one enters into an intimate yet cavernous beehive space. One's body gradually merges with these surroundings, losing itself in synesthetic

process. With the inquisitive eye of a Victorian naturalist, she sees her challenge as decoding the underlying order of the universe, understanding the handiwork of the divine and re-presenting it in material form. All the while, Buster appreciates and is humbled by the realization that humans are not the center of the universe.

Her work could be considered romantic by today's sensibility. Or it could be attributed to her upbringing as an only child in the rural South, where she constructed branch forts and played in the woods. Although she knew she wanted to be an artist, Buster first got a degree in microbiology from the University of Alabama in 1976. Later, when she switched to art making, this background in science created a dynamic tension in her work: her primary visual reference was technical, scientific and encyclopedia illustrations, not reproductions of artworks. Deductive reasoning and a sense of order and experiment inform her organic abstractions.

In 1978, Buster enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art. After receiving a BFA in 1981, Buster began making large-scale architectural installations. Showing the influence of De Stijl and Constructivism, the painted walls and windows of her minimalist rooms counterpointed real space with illusory space and explored ideas of enclosure and framing. In 1983, after only a few student shows and one at the Washington Project for the Arts, Buster was the single local artist picked by Phyllis Rosenzweig for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's biennial exhibition "Directions: 83."

The Hirshhorn later bought one of Buster's works for its permanent holdings, the first of a growing number of collections to recognize her work. In the next three years, after moving to New York to participate in the The Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Studio Program, she landed a write-up in *ARTnews* and had solo shows at Franklin Furnace and the Diane Brown Gallery. Her exhibition history now includes galleries and museums across the United States and abroad.



experience and a wealth of details: voices are amplified, lustrous light filters through the opaque shell, congealed globules of golden beeswax interact with the random pattern of lashing that binds the chamber's steel ribs. It took two weeks for artist Kendall Buster and a small group of assistants to lay the 600-pound skin of *The Shell That Remains*.

Since the early '90s, the artist has focused on a singular vision with ever-growing passion: an overall form, suggestive of shells, plant life, physiology, traps or lairs; and an opening that invites the body, or with smaller pieces, the eye, to discover the multi-layered accumulation of tiny parts and gestures inside that make up the whole.

The viewer's sense of discovery and awe parallels Buster's own creative

Above: Kendall Buster applies beeswax to the steel armature of *The Shell That Remains*, 1996.

Buster obtained a master's degree in sculpture from Yale in 1987. As she turned to object making, she adapted her interest in interior space, reductive systems, bilateral symmetry and the module. While keeping construction as her method, she began to acquire, for the first time, a fascination with design and the language of materials. For her, geometry is not only an intellectual exercise, but also a way to partake in the underlying order of the universe. Her hybrids are sensual entities that define space—the antithesis of the autonomous self-referents of Minimalist abstraction. Meticulous crafting and prolonged labor give her sculpture an undeniable materiality that resonates with the viewer's body as well as psyche.

After accepting a full-time teaching position at the Corcoran in 1990, she initially she made brooding exoskeletons, at once machine-, weapon-, and plant-like. The three full-scale works shown in "Uncertain Embraces," a 1993 exhibition at the McLean Project for the Arts in Virginia, mark a turning point. Hard lines give way to complex curves. Frames have been split open like dissected fruits. Whether sheathed in enamel-coated steel, rice paper or papier mâché, mud and clay, the works explore the relationship of skin to armature. By varying the shell, the works become metaphors for different stages and states of human contact.

"Chalyces," Buster's winter show at Baumgartner Galleries in Washington, D.C., represents a culmination of these efforts and a blueprint for future endeavors. Ranging in size from the colossal to the handheld, she notes that the 11 sculptures reflect "a construction that is resonant with the idea of growth in successive stages, and that the residue of that process is still visible in the final form." Each represents the "demarcation of empty space, a site of germination where an event has happened or is about to occur."

A series of seven small bronzes, titled "Works That Remain," were inspired by the armor-like shell of a



pangolin, an animal native to Zimbabwe. Constructed out of wax sheets to form unique sensual shapes, they invite the eye inside and the hand to cradle. By contrast, the partially open, clam-like form of *Sweet Snare IV*, plays the allure of its beeswax shell against the female's power to entrap.

The highlight of the show is the monumental *Double Chalice: Joined and Separated*. Visions of a colossal corset or aviary flood the imagination. Two steel

Left: *Sweet Snare II*, 1995. Steel, steel wire and wax, 30 x 24 x 13 in.
Below: *Double Chalice: Joined and Separated*, 1996. Steel, 9½ x 9½ x 15 ft.
Courtesy Mark Gulezian-Quicksilver.

skeletons, each covered with netting screen and allowing entry, interlock at their narrowest points. Transparent yet solid, the androgynous composition appears to be a delicate gesture that gets tougher as you approach, an experience which Buster describes as "going from sexy black stockings to a torpedo." Standing inside the female side, one is overwhelmed by the large male probe. One realizes that the two forms penetrate and receive each other, but never actually touch. They become human surrogates, enacting a desire for contact.

Like Martin Puryear and other contemporaries, Buster champions the authenticity resulting from craft. Her primary shapes demonstrate an ever-deepening interest with interiors and an obsession with details in nature. She says that she seeks to "deliver on a cellular level." At the same time, her works offer a connection with the body and a glimpse at the divine. **S**

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