

Galleries

Branching Out From Child's Play

By Ferdinand Protzman
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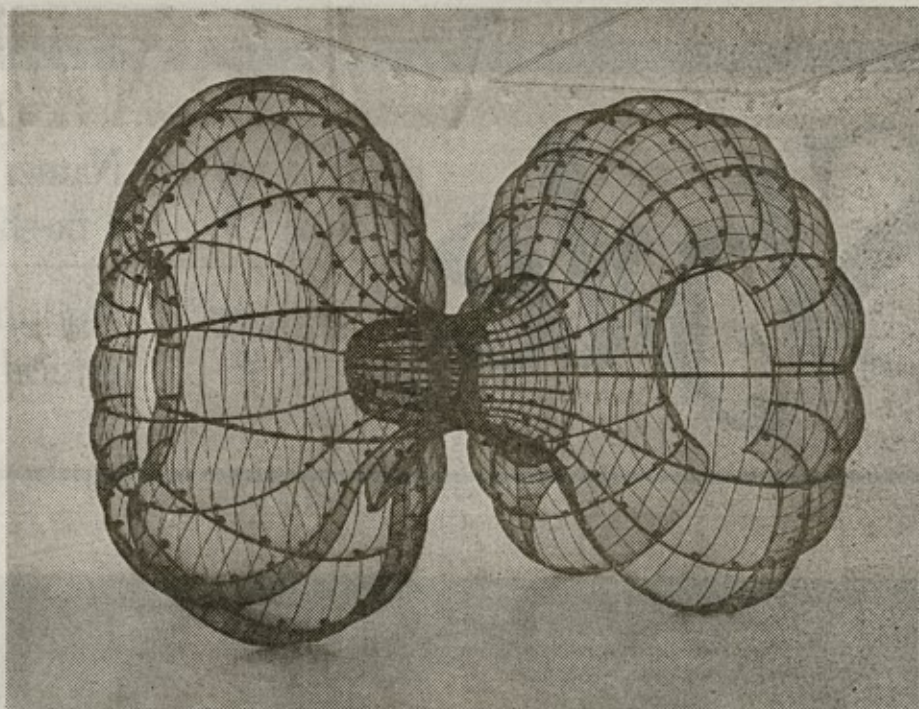
As an only child growing up in rural Alabama, Kendall Buster loved playing in the woods, exploring the mysteries of nature and hanging out in pint-size forts constructed from branches, rocks and whatever materials she could scrounge. It seemed like normal kid stuff at the time. In retrospect, however, those pastoral pursuits can be seen as the start of her remarkable career as a sculptor.

At 41, Buster now creates with steel, bronze and wax, rather than woodland debris. Her skills are those of an accomplished artist with a graduate degree in sculpture from Yale, and an undergraduate degree in fine arts from the Corcoran School of Art and microbiology from the University of Alabama. Her artworks are mature, complex explorations of form and space that have been shown in galleries and museums across the country and overseas.

But what sets them apart is something that cannot be learned in a classroom or studio. Buster's sculptures radiate a sense of pure wonder, that admixture of awe, angst and inspiration that a child feels the first time he ponders a fallen bird's nest or lays eyes on a whirling Ferris wheel. One comes away from an exhibition of Buster's works, such as "Calyces," currently on display at Baumgartner Galleries Inc. at 406 Seventh St. NW, with a sense that the artist has never stopped marveling at nature's workings or building ingenious, mysterious forts of fancy.

The title is the plural of calyx, which Webster's defines as the external, usually green or leafy part of a flower or a cuplike animal structure. In this case, it is a bit of both. There are only nine pieces in the exhibition, which runs until Feb. 29. They range in price from \$2,000 to \$8,000, and in size from bronzes no bigger than a baseball to a single, room-size work. Regardless of dimension, they have much in common, beginning with their basic forms.

"My sculptures resemble vessels or shells that have been abandoned after some kind of mysterious germination has taken place," says Buster, a short, energetic woman who also teaches sculpture at the Corcoran School and at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. "They are a hybrid between the biological and technological. I look at them as sites



BY MARK GULEZIAN—QUICK SILVER

"I want to show the complete connectedness of the spiritual and the scientific, of spirituality and sexuality," says Kendall Buster, who created "Double Chalice: Joined and Separated."

where something may have happened or is about to happen."

The works also share a strong tactile quality. Buster made the seven small, hollow bronzes titled "Works That Remain" on a recent trip to South Africa, using the lost-wax technique. They are hung on wire hooks along one wall and "represent cast-off coverings that mark the site of transformation for a thing now absent," she says. "They are small exoskeletons ultimately meant to be held." Holding them is allowed, as is putting them to the ear like seashells and listening to them.

The other pieces in the exhibition are much too big to be held but are almost irresistible to the touch. "Sweet Snare IV," which lies on the floor just inside the gallery's front door, is a frame made of steel rods, shaped like a giant lobster claw, that has been covered with steel wire and coated with cream-colored beeswax. It looks like a cocoon that has just split open and might still be warm. But it also possesses a bit of menace, as the title implies, as though it might snap shut if a viewer dared put his hand inside its jaws.

The star of the show is unquestionably "Double Chalice: Joined and Separated," an enormous sculpture that viewers can actually walk into. Buster, aided by several assistants, built a steel skeleton and covered it with transparent steel screen. It consists of two chalice-shaped forms, one inserted into the other at their narrowest points. At their broadest, the chalices are nine feet in diameter. Together they make a single form with two distinct chambers, each with an opening allowing viewers inside.

It is an astonishing piece. From the outside,

it seems a strictly technological marvel, like a three-dimensional diagrammatic drawing in space, or a giant interstellar fish trap that might go into orbit any moment. But stand inside the sculpture and it seems almost like a living organism, with powerful sensual and sexual elements. While the two forms were made by bolting together dozens of small panels, they are not bolted to each other, but united in a male and female sense.

The sensations evoked from within depend on which side of the sculptural sexual equation you are standing in. In the male chalice, one can't help feeling like the aggressor, albeit with a hefty dash of Woody Allenish "I don't know if I'm ready for this" anxiety. In the female side, there is a strong sense of penetrated space and an air of strangely ominous expectancy, as though you might mutate into a different life form if you stayed there long enough. On both sides, the viewer gets a close-up look at the thought and the detailed work that went into creating a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

"My big pieces are made up of lots of small pieces that have been carefully put together," Buster says. "I want them to keep delivering all the way down to the molecular level. I want to show the complete connectedness of the spiritual and the scientific, of spirituality and sexuality. But at the same time, I'm striving for beauty in the sense of the sublime. I guess it's kind of a romantic formalism, trying for a kind of beauty you know when you are in the wilderness or out on the water. It's a beauty you can only strive for but never really attain. And the stuff that you create is the residue of that striving."