

Arts

Galleries

At the Kreeger, an Enigma in the Grass

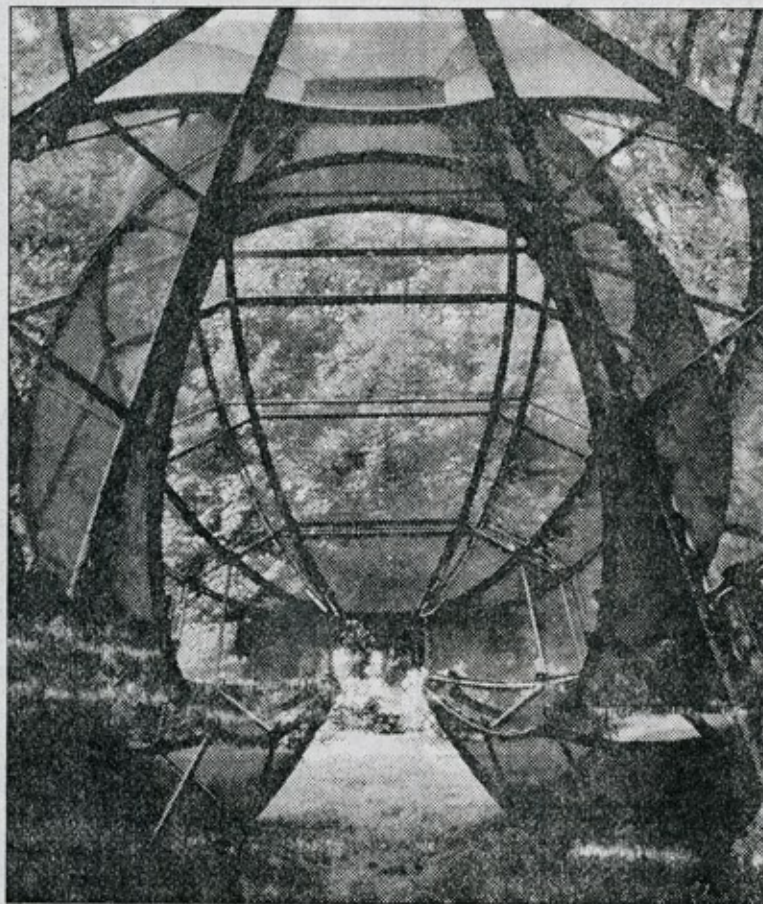
By FERDINAND PROTZMAN
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The Kreeger Museum's first attempt at educational outreach since it opened four years ago has produced an intriguing sculpture by Kendall Buster. Her work, which incorporates ideas developed with a group of local high school students, sits on the institution's lawn like some giant green life form that sprouted in the leafy reaches of upper Foxhall Road in Northwest Washington.

The sculpture, titled "Garden Snare," is made from a steel framework covered with transparent green nylon mesh normally used as a shade in greenhouses. Shaped a bit like two giant, rounded spores growing out of each other, the piece is 11 feet high and 19 feet wide, and features a form within a form—its external framework is mirrored by an interior frame covered with the same material. There are also two hidden entrances, so visitors can literally walk through it and peer at the heavens through two skylight-like openings.

The piece is a fine example of Buster's uncanny talent for turning mass-produced materials into vibrant, abstract forms that she describes as "both object and architecture." In her artist's statement, Buster says that in all of her sculptures, she tries to mark "the place where biology and technology meet and confront the viewer with a sense of both invitation and threat."

Those elements are powerfully present in "Garden Snare," which can seem like a strange but marvelous version of a child's summer tepee, set up for backyard campouts



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Kendall Buster's sculpture "Garden Snare," on view at the Kreeger Museum, was a collaboration with local high school students.

and hanging out on long afternoons. But the double-hulled construction and the chambers-within-chambers also give it the feeling of a maze or an outsize trap meant to catch some large, cunning pests.

Judy Greenberg, the Kreeger's director, commissioned the piece as part of a new educational outreach initiative that she developed with Debbie Haynes, Georgetown Day

School's art director. The initiative, called the Museum and School Partnership Program, was funded by an anonymous donor and Learning Tree International, a foundation based in Reston. A group of 11 students drawn from Duke Ellington School of the Arts and Georgetown Day High School participated. Three students from American University assisted them.

It marked the latest in a series of community outreach efforts by the Kreeger, which is a private, nonprofit museum located in the former residence of Carmen and the late David Lloyd Kreeger, the Geico insurance magnate. Philip Johnson, one of the most prominent American architects of the postwar era, designed the house. The museum's collection is small—about 180 works of art—but includes a fine group of African masks and figures, as well as paintings and sculptures by some of the most famous names in 19th and 20th century art—Picasso, Monet, Chagall, Cezanne, Beckmann and Stella, to name a few.

Since it opened on June 1, 1994, the Kreeger, which has a five-person staff and 50 volunteer docents who lead tours, has organized a number of events focused on the Washington art community, including panel discussions and a lecture series.

"We've only been open for four years, so we're still developing," Greenberg says. "But it's very important for us to be involved with the community and its artists, as Mr. Kreeger was. He was very involved and collected work by Washington Color School artists such as Gene Davis, Tom Downing and Sam Gilliam. The things we're doing continue that mission. Projects like 'Garden Snare' are what he would have wanted."

The idea behind "Garden Snare" was not to have the students help construct the sculpture, but to take them through the creative process of an internationally known artist based in Washington.

Buster, who teaches at the Corcoran School of Art and is passionately devoted to the process of

making art, was an ideal choice.

"I first met with the group in February, and we talked about how I come up with the idea for a piece," Buster said. "I'd never worked with high school kids before, but they were amazingly engaged and mature. We started out doing a lot of brainstorming and sketching. Then in March, I had them bring in something, an object, that they would use as a basis for abstract drawings. They came up with some crazy drawings. The idea of the form-in-a-form came from their drawings."

The students from Georgetown Day included Fiery Cushman, Prima Patterson, Ned Jaszi, Peter LaBier, Philip Seaton and Matt Robinson. Participating from Duke Ellington were Anthony Amato, Lovet Harris, Mara Wilson, Philip Buggs and Matthew Bier. They were assisted by Patrick Fagan, Suzanne L'Heureux and Aaron Yassin of American University.

Besides contributing ideas to Buster's design for "Garden Snare,"

the students also produced their own maquettes, small model sculptures based on their drawings. Their works were shown at American University's Watkins Gallery in June. The group also made a video of their experience, which was shown when Buster's finished sculpture was assembled in the Kreeger's garden in early June.

The video features an interview with Buster in which she is asked some disarmingly direct questions, such as why she chose art as a career and why she is so dedicated to the creative process.

"I don't think it's a career—it has to be an insane, obsessive passion," Buster replied, looking a bit startled. "I don't know why we do it. I think it's because we can't help ourselves. I certainly can't."

Kendall Buster, on display indefinitely at the Kreeger Museum, 2401 Foxhall Rd. NW. Escorted tours only; advance reservation required. Tours begin at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday. Call 202-338-3552.