

'Vessels' contain a world of possibilities

By MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER

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The short walk down the stairs to the rear galleries at the Haggerty Museum of Art right now is something like a slip down the rabbit hole.

One feels suddenly shrunk to grass blade height, surrounded by towering and fantastical seeds or pods, maybe giant eyes or flora.

The fantasy world created by artist Kendall Buster is not unlike the Wonderland of Lewis Carroll's making, "curiouser and curiouser" upon adventuring in.

REVIEW

Visually suggestive of so many kinds of forms at once — from mammoth to minute, from rigid and man-made to random and naturally occurring — the sculptures keep the mind attempting to reconcile what looks contradictory but isn't.

Underlying it all and infusing a constant sense of ambiguity is Buster's very own type of "theory of everything." It is her common language of patterns and

IF YOU GO

What:

"Highrisevessels" by Kendall Buster

Where: Haggerty Museum of Art, 530 N. 13th St. (Marquette University campus)

When:

Through Jan. 8

Information:

(414) 288-7290 or www.marquette.edu/haggerty

rhythms and energies that exist in both science and her imagination, in the scaffolding of skyscrapers and the makeup of caterpillar cocoons and whatever lies in between.

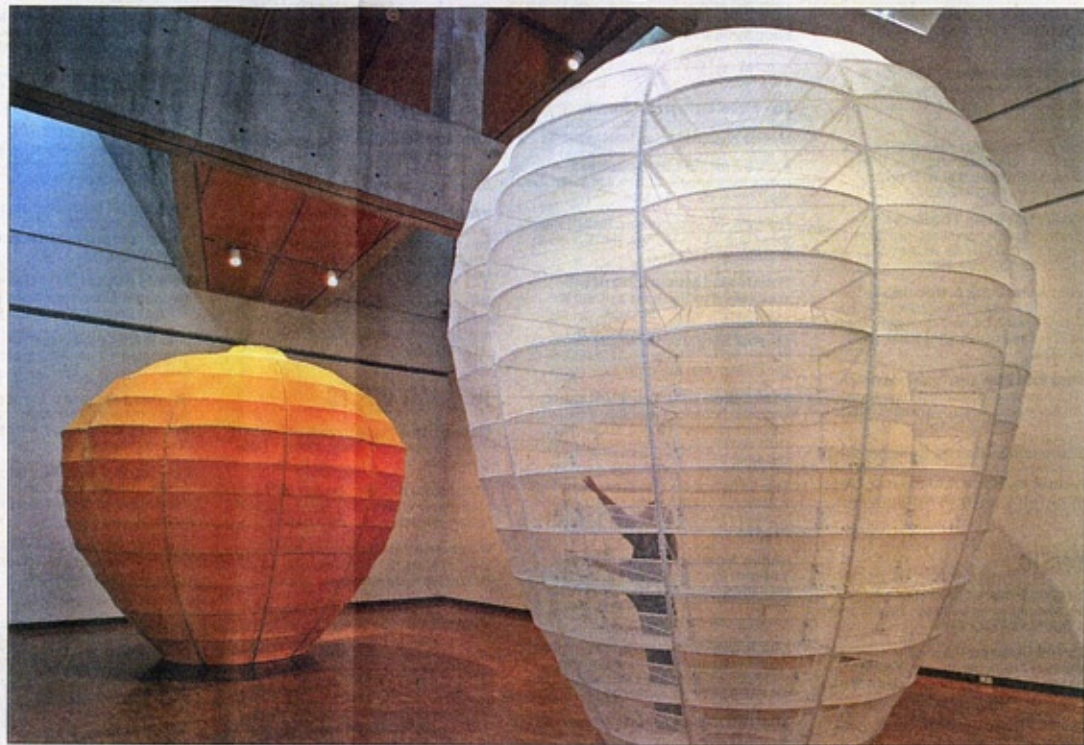
In a single sculpture, Buster conceptually assembles the equivalent of a Renaissance cabinet of curiosities, an entire collection of odd organisms and objects, brought together with an inquisitiveness

about the world at large.

A lot of her ideas stem from years huddled over a microscope, looking at the kind of order and abstractions that occurs in nature, in everything we see and touch, though on an invisible level. Now a well-regarded contemporary artist, she was a microbiologist in her pre-artist life.

That lab certainly comes to bear on works like "Yellowhighrise," which looks like a squat fruit the size of a hot air balloon or small chapel. An opaque fabric in the artificial yellow of yield signs is pulled over the bulbous sides like skin.

Its partner in the Haggerty installation, "Whitehighrise," rises higher still. Though taller and bigger, its gauzy, translucent fabric gives it a lighter feel, as if it could be broken apart and blown



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Lynne Shumow, curator of education at the Haggerty Museum of Art, demonstrates how Kendall Buster's "Whitehighrise" and "Yellowhighrise" are meant to be experienced from both inside and outside.

up and away like a dandelion in a breeze.

A slit or secret door running the height of each sculpture comes as a surprise. Placed around the back sides, they are a way in, a way to experience the art with the body as much as the eye.

Inside, the feel is both familiar and safe, like a womb or child's fort made from blankets and folding chairs, but also an unsettling strain of humor-horror, evoking "A Little Shop of Horrors" and its people-eating plant.

"I like to work with these spaces that give you a feeling of both threat and comfort," Buster says. "There is this notion of embrace that is sort of uncertain."

The internal structures made of bendable steel can be inspected more closely from the inside. The geometry seems too precise for an organic substance, betraying Buster's manifesto on the underlying intelligence of the universe.

The interiors look like soaring atria in high rise buildings, with open balconies overlooking chasmal spaces.

The sculptures' insides create a shift in the already ambiguous sense of scale.

GALLERY NIGHT ONLINE

Watch a video interview with Kendall Buster recorded while she was installing her work at the Haggerty: www.jsonline.com/links/kendallbuster.

This interview, one of more than a dozen, is part of the Journal Sentinel's expanded online coverage of Gallery Night & Day, which also includes narrated tours, slide shows, gallery profiles and an interactive chat.

For more information, please see Wednesday's Cue. To post an advance question to our Gallery Night chat with Mary Louise Schumacher, go to www.jsonline.com/chat.

One might feel like a giant, crowded inside, particularly in "Yellowhighrise."

The internal structure also resembles one pot nestled inside another, the cavernous interior of a beehive or the wedges of a lemon or lime, depending on where you stand and how you look.

An intense energy is enclosed within the sculptures, where the forcefulness and strength of the lines lies bristling inside. That sense of containment gives the work a feminine aspect, as does the weave-like feel of the South African, greenhouse-shade fabric Buster uses.

There are notes of sexuality, too, both sensual and matter of fact. Either sculpture could double as a jumbo ovum or ovary, and the openings intimate female sexual anatomy. A certain ripeness and a sense of the fragility of life come through.

Slits of translucency ring the sculptures and only add further to the charged nature of the artworks. They elicit curiosity, making Buster's driving creative force a contagion. We find ourselves looking and being looked at. We are both investigators and under inspection, voyeurs and specimens.