

BIOSCAPE IN THE SKY

Kendall Buster at Boise Art Museum

Nature, once the sole preoccupation of romantic painters and poetic seekers of the sublime, has become a factor for artists outside of the usual landscape genre. In unexpected ways, organic structures found in biology have come to inform a significant amount of the more interesting contemporary art made nation-

her career to creating three-dimensional studies that evaluate architecture and the stages of a city's development in terms of biological processes.

In one sense, the installation is an inventory of diverse types of architecture throughout history and different cultures, from the Coliseum of the Roman era to the arenas, high-rises and nuclear reactor towers of our time. In between are references to a mosque, a bridge and the domed dwellings of the Zulu, which she photographed in South Africa. These various structures have a diagrammatic aspect to them, enhanced by the transparency of Buster's surface material that allows the interiors to be seen simultaneously as if they were computer models. Yet the membrane-like shade cloth Buster uses to cover the steel framework also evokes a single,

living organism in the process of growth and regeneration.

Buster's familiarity with the concealed, microscopic world of cell division and growth has led her to see our urban landscapes as evolving much the same way. As Curator Sandy Harthorn notes in her introduction to the catalog, "[Buster] sees cities as living environments that metaphorically bud, swell and stretch in various directions ... more often developing in spurts, spreading and sprawling [in response to] structural design, topography and density." Her premise is demonstrated by the pod- and bubble-like shapes interlocked with or emerging out of established structures. It is a sculpture in which, according to the artist, "old forms generate new forms through processes that suggest budding, merging, hybridization or absorption."

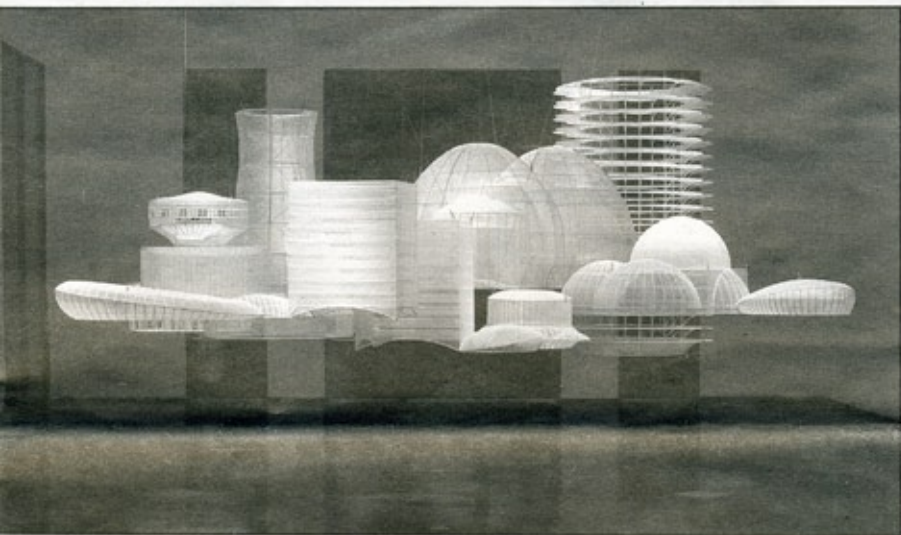
It is as if the viewer is being offered an inside look into a hidden, yet dynamic, world over which we assume we have absolute control but do not.

The most intriguing aspect of the installation is the viewer's ability to get inside and interact with the work. *New Growth* is suspended by cables to a height of five feet, enabling us to observe its intricacies close at hand and from within. It is from this perspective that the work takes on its most compelling characteristics. Inside this organic world of shifting porous membranes, cellular divides and suspended sightlines, one's own scale seems diminished, bringing home what Buster calls the "contradictory promise of protection and trap," evoking a "peculiar mix of euphoria and vulnerability."

There are other attractions to this multi-faceted work, stirring the imagination in different ways. For example, the weightless round tower structure with its flat, horizontal planes and internal atrium reminds me of an exotic flying machine, a relic of the marriage between early technology and wishful thinking that marked the first years of flight. Also, the potentially hard-edge steel rod framework and the taut steel cables suspending the structure surprisingly do not challenge the ethereal transparency created by the white mesh, but rather are softened by it for a nice serendipitous effect.

Part of the grace and balance the installation exudes is due to the artist's careful consideration of the space for this site-specific work. Upon coming to Boise and scoping out the site a year ago, Buster was immediately struck by how the natural light would be an important element, and the time of day and particular season play critical atmospheric roles. (This winter, with the low, gray light and snow on the ground outside the windows, the work took on a certain minimal, northern exoticism.) In addition, Buster made note of the nuances of the Sculpture Court's interior, and echoed its curves and linear aspects in the piece. Given the artist's conscientious customizing, *New Growth* may never look this smart anywhere else. **BW**

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Kendall Buster, *New Growth*, Installation at the Boise Art Museum

ally, especially sculpture. Not incidentally, foreign cultures boasting a closer rapport with the natural world than ours are often the stimuli for this kind of work. The environmentally rich, multiculturally savvy Pacific Northwest is particularly conducive to this sort of aesthetic (as demonstrated by several sculptural installations at the Boise Art Museum in recent years), but it is by no means restricted to our corner of the country.

Kendall Buster is a native of the South, currently living in Richmond, Va., where she teaches sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University. Since mid-February, and through October 17 of this year, her new installation entitled *New Growth* has resided with a quiet grandeur suspended in the Boise Art Museum's spacious Sculpture Court, for which it was specifically designed. This leviathan, 27-foot-high room, bathed in natural light, is a space that can be daunting for any artist to tackle. But, here again, it proves a receptive venue for those with an expanded vision and dynamic sense of scale. Buster uses the airy expansiveness of the space to literally breathe life into what at first appears to be static architectural form.

New Growth is an unusual hybrid of architectonics, organic forms and processes, and fabric art. Buster succinctly describes it as "biological architecture," but it is a bit more complicated than that. She brings to her art a background in microbiology, and a deep interest in the history of architecture and the way cities evolve, as well as a respect for the intricate handwork in crafts like weaving and sewing. This latter element should not be taken as a gender statement or a play on male/female dichotomy, but as an appreciation for the cell-like details and building blocks that constitute the grandest of schemes. With her degree in medical technology from the University of Alabama, which she completed before studying art at the Corcoran School of Art and getting her MFA at Yale University, Buster brings a precision to her sculpture, conceiving and executing her projects from the cellular level on up.

When you think about it, architecture and urban planning incorporate a number of notions that have organic connotations, including modularity, growth, regeneration, sprawl, colonization, scale, fluidity, to name a few. Buster has devoted much of

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