

# A Walk in Chester's Woods

Art confronts nature in Chesterwood's outdoor contemporary sculpture exhibition

WRITTEN BY CARRIE SALDO  
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**T**HERE'S JUST A HINT of dust lifting off of the dirt path as Michael and Elsa Suisman, of Richmond, Massachusetts, wend their way through the Chesterwood grounds. "This is what they call *Stone*," Michael Suisman says, sweeping his hand to the left to point out a sizable mineral matter. The move elicits a smile from his wife that seems to say, *Let's move along, dear*, and chuckles from two others walking with the couple.

They are at the 1920s Stockbridge, Massachusetts, summer home, studio, and garden of the renowned sculptor Daniel Chester French, viewing Chesterwood's twenty-eighth annual contemporary sculpture show. But little did they know there would be a formal tour taking place just a few feet away.

Janet Riker, the guest curator of the show, says she often begins a typical tour by reminding people there are no stupid questions. On an atypical tour one warm, sunny, July morning, Riker is leading a journalist through the exhibition when she overhears Suisman's capering comment, but continues to discuss a nearby work. "You should ask what you want to know," Riker says. "That helps you understand the work."

As Suisman, his wife, and their two grandchildren arrive in front of the same work as Riker, they pause for a chat. "It's an interesting challenge to figure out what is art and what is not," Elsa Suisman says, responding to a question about why the quartet came to Chesterwood. Riker comments on this ap-



(Opposite) *Tendrils* by George Sherwood (above)  
*Ampie* by Barry Junjulas (below) *Goodrich Hollow* by Susan Flores

proach to art later on in the tour. "I think if people are exploring the show with desire that's fine," Riker says. "They should be actively engaging, and I think it's wonderful they are talking with their grandchildren about the work."

Riker, who is also director of the University Art Museum at the University at Albany, has selected the twenty-four pieces for the show. She suggests that visitors allow a minimum of one hour to walk the exhibition, wear comfortable shoes, and, with a number of the works sited deep in the woods, a good spray



of insect repellent isn't a bad idea either.

In her catalog essay, Riker writes that she found herself selecting works, from the one hundred or so submitted, that explore the idea of fragility and vulnerability as it relates to nature and the environment, but also to human experience and life itself. "There were a lot of artists sort of noodling around this idea," says Riker. The sculptors' works express the thread loosely connecting the objects in the show via a variety of media, including metal, wood, plastic, concrete, and found objects.

The exhibition, which runs through October 14, invites viewers to become scavengers seeking out the various works that speckle

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(Left) *Untitled* by Jason Karakehian (above) *Catattack* by Wendy Klemperer

the bucolic grounds. Lillian Mulero's *Sol and Me Up a Tree*, for example, sends visitors down a stone path to spy a work using binoculars. Patrons can also inspect a well-kept grassy field to view Michael Mingoia's *Chesterwings*, a "seedy" homage to Daniel Chester French.

Time spent at Chesterwood is often a contemplative journey, as one basks in the idyllic setting and as thoughts provoked by the works percolate in one's mind. For instance, Gordon Chandler's three welded steel sculptures, titled *Flame Thrower*, *Bazooka Shooter*, and *Mortar Launcher*, confront guests as they walk up a path. The three figures, however, don't bear the weapons for which they were named, thereby inviting ambiguity. What are they doing? Whose side are they on? Whose side are you on? What purpose does divineness serve?

New to this year's exhibition is the Lillian Heller Curator's Award: Lillian Heller, a New York City resident, visited Chesterwood for the first time when her son, Philip, and daughter-in-law, Anita, moved into the house across the road. In 1977, at age sixty, Heller

began to study sculpture. Her affinity for the form resulted in her creation of more than one hundred works by the time she died in 2004. Heller's creativity and passion inspired her sons, Philip and Fred Heller, along with their families to establish an endowment to fund the annual curator's award. "It means a lot in terms of their careers," states Riker. "There can often be not a lot of recognition for artists."

George Sherwood, one of two artists Riker selected for the award this year, believes it's best to happen accidentally upon sculpture. He says it generates an experience that alters one's reality a bit. "Then you get a true feeling." Sherwood's *Tendrils* is a seductive, stainless-steel kinetic piece that gracefully revolves around itself as it's propelled by the wind. "You don't really see my sculpture until you've seen it over a period of a year,"

Sherwood says, referencing his larger body of work. "It's always doing something different, and it's always a surprise."

Many of the works among the vast property at first appear to be outgrowths of the natural world; only upon closer inspection is it apparent that they are invasive species of a sort. Kaete Brittin Shaw's *Aerial Tendrils*, for instance, sprouts out of the ground and wraps around the trunk of a large pine tree. The small, circular porcelain pieces with scalloped edges and in a mix of fleshy pinks and muted browns easily pass as forest fungi.

Albany sculptor William R. Bergman approaches Chesterwood's contemporary sculpture show as an opportunity to experiment. He typically employs wheels, magnets, and other kinetic elements in his work. "Sometimes I feel like it is cheating," he says. "You have all of these moving parts, and



(Opposite) *Frozen-Encircled* by William R. Bergman (above) *Forest Sphere/Tree Wrap* by James Owen Calderwood

people are sort of attracted by them, where this work that's hanging at Chesterwood has to stand on its own without any whirligigs or wheels or handles or levers." Bergman's piece, *Frozen Encircled*, is a teardrop-shaped sculpture made from sections of plywood suspended from a tree. Vacant space in the middle of the sculpture seems to ask viewers to interject whatever feelings may have filled their tears in the past.

And Chesterwood seems a fitting place for this kind of reflection. Used from 1896 to 1931, French's studio at Chesterwood is home to a scaled-down model of the Lincoln Memorial, among other works that are very much a part of our nation's history.

Chesterwood docent Anjani Nelson points out that French worked at a time when artists were not particularly competitive and would often chip in to complete each other's work. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, another sculptor of the Gilded Age, was one of the artists with whom French was in close communication.

Riker sees parallels between French and herself, given that he forged relationships with his contemporaries as Riker has with hers. "Artists really love working here," Riker states. "This space was so important to French. . . . It gives the contemporary shows here a very special feel that isn't going to happen someplace without fields and woods." **Bl**

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**THE GOODS**

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