



THE ARTIST'S SWATO SAVVY

ECO ARTIST LYNNE HULL
LEANS AGAINST HER OUT-
DOOR SCULPTURE, "RESER-
VOIR TREE," WHICH PROVIDES
DISPLACED WATERBIRDS IN
DERBYSHIRE, ENGLAND, WITH
A PLACE TO CALL HOME. FOR
MORE ON HULL'S STATESIDE
PROJECTS, SEE PAGE 91.

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ART
AND SCIENCE, ECO ARTISTS BRING
INSIGHT, BEAUTY— AND SUCCESS—TO
ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION.

WAYO SAVE THE EARTH

BY FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

ECOLOGICAL ART—"ECO ART"—IS NOT JUST art *about* the environment; it is *by, for, with* and often *in* the environment as well. It is art that reconnects people with their surroundings and tries, in the words of eco artist Andrée Singer Thompson, "to reverse negative environmental impacts with positive solutions for healthy survival." It is art that literally builds bridges and ladders and roosts to help vanishing plants and animals to survive. Like other art, it can be startling or witty or beautiful; but eco art is usually functional and, above all, ethical—it acknowledges the wrongs

DAN McCORMICK'S GRACEFUL WILLOW BASKETS HELP RESTORE A CALIFORNIA CREEK.
McCORMICK'S PROFILE STARTS ON PAGE 90.

we humans have committed against nature and tries to right them.

Influenced by the Earth Art and Land Art movements of the 1960s and '70s, in which artists created outdoor, site-specific works out of natural materials, eco art is a "small but growing worldwide movement," says curator Amy Lipton, who helped stage this summer's "Ecovention," a seminal exhibition at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center. That eco art is having an impact on environmental problems is undeniable, according to Lipton. Just one example is artist Mel Chin's 1991 "Revival Field," a polluted brownfield in Minnesota that he converted into a living sculpture made of plants that

absorb toxic metals, thus decontaminating the field as they grow. Now there's an entire line of work called "phyto-remediation" based on this technique developed by agronomist Rufus Chaney, Ph.D. But, notes Lipton, "It was an artist that brought it to public consciousness." Ironically, the emphasis on function and on interdisciplinary collaboration—with scientists, engineers, architects—that makes eco art so effective also keeps many museum and gallery professionals from recognizing it as an art form. As Lipton and others point out, the art world has long had a problem dealing with art that can't be hung, shown and sold. But for the growing number of eco artists—including Jo Hanson, Dan McCormick and Lynne Hull, profiled here—eco art is not about the art world; it's about the

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "You begin seeing the practical manifestation of the most wasteful society in the world," Hanson was most attracted to the metal fragments, and it is these scraps, later collected from all over the city, that go into what she calls her urban sculptures. She has turned pieces of cars, bikes and tools, along with hardware, keys, coins, cans and jewelry, into abstract metal collages and figurative renderings of animals, insects and people. Lately she has been making gardens, nailing pull-tabs and bottle caps into scrap wood and branches and attaching painted faucet valves and bike-tire rims for the heads of flowers. For more than 30 years, Hanson's work has earned her civic awards as well as exhibitions and placement in dozens of public and private collections.

Other than recycling materials, however, these pieces do not tinker with the ecology of the environment. Their main function is to "arouse an awareness about wastefulness," says Hanson, who created an innovative (and ongoing) artist-in-residency program at San Francisco's waste-disposal facility in 1990. But the work she's been doing recently in Sonoma County, two hours north of the city, takes an active role in solving ecological problems. Here her home and studio sit on the bottom of a deep, narrow canyon bordering a creek, which roars in the winter and barely whispers in summer. This swatch of earth and water is her canvas now.

Her work here is a restoration project in which the artist labors with the environment to help return it to its natural state, before farming, logging, road-cutting and other human activities began to disrupt it. In 1994, Hanson started by removing ivy, a particularly invasive species that twists itself into the roots of other plants and can damage even the mighty redwoods, this region's native royalty. But the lack of ivy groundcover and successive years of winter floods devastated much of Hanson's half acre, as the creek broke out of its banks, taking everything—topsoil, sandbags, gardens—along with

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Jo Hanson: Recycling Trash Into Art

In 1970, Jo Hanson was disgusted with the amount of garbage in front of her house, on a "powerfully windy" corner in a rough-and-tumble San Francisco neighborhood. So she began to sweep her block every morning, filling trash bags with candy wrappers, car parts, drug needles, and scraps of food, fabric, paper, metal and plastic, then throwing them away. An up-and-coming sculptor, painter and installation artist, she resisted the temptation to transform the garbage into art because she wanted it to be seen for what it was—trash. But one day she swept up a pile of paper hearts and musical notes. She had no idea where they came from, but they were there again the next day and the next, for a whole week. She gave in to their whimsy, made them into a collage and turned her career toward recycling garbage into art objects. In the process she helped to create a new kind of artwork that both informs and acts on ecological concerns.

"When you deal with street trash, you deal with the sociology and the ecology of the area," says Hanson, whose first exhibit of art made from garbage in 1980 was jointly sponsored by the Mayor's Committee on Litter Man-

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agement and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "You begin seeing the practical manifestation of the most wasteful society in the world." Hanson was most attracted to the metal fragments, and it is these scraps, later collected from all over the city, that go into what she calls her urban sculptures. She has turned pieces of cars, bikes and tools, along with hardware, keys, coins, cans and jewelry, into abstract metal collages and figurative renderings of animals, insects and people. Lately she has been making gardens, nailing pull-tabs and bottle caps into scrap wood and branches and attaching painted faucet valves and bike-tire rims for the heads of flowers. For more than 30 years, Hanson's work has earned her civic awards as well as exhibitions and placement in dozens of public and private collections.

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it. Finally Hanson began to work *with* the water, rebuilding the banks and making them higher. After several years of firm but gentle reinforcement, she has been able to coax the creek to "dig deeper into its own natural channel rather than taking out the banks," she says. Meanwhile, native plants—bracken fern, redwood sorrel, wild ginger—have reestablished themselves, helping to further prevent erosion.

All very nice, one might say after a tour of the grounds on a moist, quiet afternoon, but is it art? "In my opinion, what distinguishes art is the integrative aspect of it, the relationships. An artist thinks relationally, comprehensively; you relate anything you do to everything else," says Hanson, surveying the work that she and nature have embarked upon. She points to the sticks and sandbags poking out of the creek bank and laughs. "Aesthetically, this is god-awful," she says. "But it's a work in progress. And the work goes very slowly." In five years, she says, it will look wonderful, and it will also be self-sufficient, requiring little help from her.

On a storyboard documenting this project, for displaying at both art and environmental exhibitions, Hanson has included this line from John Muir: "Whenever we try to pick out something by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Though Muir was a conservationist, not an artist, he speaks for the interconnectedness that lies at the heart of both art and ecology. This integrative approach, Hanson believes, is what artists can bring to environmental projects, making them not only successful but also beautiful. For instance, she says, if the Army Corps of Engineers were to tackle her erosion problem, they'd use mostly concrete, and five years from now "it would still look ugly." Plus, she declares, the concrete "would-

ONE OF JO HANSON'S "FAMILY PORTRAITS," MADE FROM THINGS SHE FOUND ON THE STREET.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 90



The Artist's Way to Save the Earth

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63

n't be helping with the true restoration of the bank because it would be preventing the natural reforestation."

Part sociology and part ecology, Jo Hanson's artwork reflects her curiosity and understanding of how living things—people, plants, animals—live and work together. She remains excited by the newer artists and the latest collaborative projects springing up all over. The mainstream art world now pays more attention to eco art than ever before, says Hanson. But the real progress, she believes, is that "this valuable art thinking is getting increasingly integrated into other ecological work" as the artist's way begins to infiltrate all aspects of our lives, and we all begin to think with looks and relationships in mind.

More information on Jo Hanson and other eco artists can be found at the Women Environmental Artists Directory Web site at wead.dreamfish-creative.com.

Dan McCormick: The Hidden Agenda

What a difference a setting makes. In a gallery, Dan McCormick's graceful willow-branch sculptures answer the "But is it art?" question with a resounding "yes." The curved, elongated "baskets" suggest nature in all her feminine curves, and their ample airiness lets them take up a lot of space without seeming aggressive. But once they are installed in the field, these baskets perform what McCormick calls the hidden agenda, acting as silt traps for eroding streams and helping to reestablish the equilibrium of the riparian, or watershed, environment. The baskets eventually break down, but the willow—a plentiful native species with great strength and flexibility as well as an almost miraculous ability to reroot—takes hold, setting the stage for a natural succession of erosion-controlling plants to repopulate. Back at the gallery, McCormick says with a grin, viewers "have no idea that in a year these sculptures are going to look like crap." And in five or ten years, other than a healthier ecosystem, there will be no

sign of them whatsoever.

Though the environmental agenda of these sculptures may be hidden from gallery viewers, it plays a crucial role in determining what they look like. "The shape is suggested by the site and the material," explains McCormick, as we make our way along a hillside creek, a tributary of the larger Olema Creek that empties into nearby Tomales Bay on the awe-inspiring coastline of California's Point Reyes National Seashore. He points out how the low, wide middle portion of one basket sinks into the deepest part of the exposed bank, while the ends taper to fit into the narrower walls. For each piece, McCormick measures and sketches the particular spot to be bolstered, then bends and ties the willow branches to match that site. Form, in other words, follows function, in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Cofunded by an art gallery and a local conservation group, McCormick's work is as effective as it is enchanting. A walk along this creek demonstrates the stark contrast between the denuded, trampled soil torn up by years of cattle grazing on one side of the fence, and the springing-back-to-life soil on the other, as willow baskets in various stages of decay have helped the banks to rebuild, plants to reroot and the creek to return to its natural flow rate. But what really gets McCormick—and many others—excited is the return of the salmon, whose numbers have been decreasing in the area for decades. According to park hydrologist Brannon Ketchum, it's impossible to tie the recent increase in the creek's salmon fry to McCormick's work, but the cumulative effects of the sediment baskets along with other restoration efforts seem to be helping.

"What if you could hold enough silt back in a riparian system to allow one salmon egg to hatch, charge out into the ocean, swim thousands of miles throughout the Northern Hemisphere and two years later come back to the same spot and spawn another generation?" the 51-year-old McCormick asks, his mind truly boggled by the heroics of nature as well as the possibility of

assisting in the process. "By a creative act of art, you are allowing this biological organism to live through its life cycle. That's a big act of art!"

The success of these sculptures, both in artistic and in ecological terms, stems from a thorough and innovative collaboration between art and science. McCormick, who has a background in urban design and landscape architecture, has been involved with riparian systems since 1980 when he met hydrologist Ann Riley and activist Camille Schemmerling, innovators in the field of urban creek restoration. Now it's the parks-department scientists who determine the environmental trouble spots and test the artistic solution. "They give us a biological problem, like erosion, sedimentation or polluted water that needs to be filtered," explains McCormick, "and we present them with a scheme." There's a back-and-forth between the artist and the scientists, who have asked him, for instance, to find a biodegradable substitute for the wire he uses in constructing his baskets.

The collaboration inspired by these watershed-recovery installations reaches even farther into the community. Now an artist-in-residence at a local middle school, McCormick brings students into the project as well. "We've got artists and scientists and kids coming in here and putting in sculptures and," he says, his voice rising in excitement, "we're making a difference downstream." Furthermore, he points out, many of these children are the daughters and sons of the local ranchers, whose cattle-grazing habits are partly responsible for the erosion and pollution of the watershed. When the kids go into the field for research and installation, they see firsthand the chain of devastating events that overgrazing can cause. And so these young people, who may grow up to become ranchers themselves, are one more example of how the effects of ecological artwork often take place downstream in both space and time.

For more information on Dan McCormick's work, e-mail him at waterartist@earthlink.net.

Lynne Hull: Art for Wildlife

When something as violent as clear-cut logging takes place in an ancient forest, the reverberations seem to go on forever, like echoes in a canyon, or the concentric circles of a stone dropped into a pond. In Wyoming's Medicine Bow Forest, logging of the old-growth trees disrupted the life cycles of many species, including the pine marten—a slightly larger cousin of the weasel—which lives in the natural debris that takes decades to accumulate on a forest floor. In an attempt to help the pine marten maintain its way of life, eco artist Lynne Hull went into the younger forest and turned logs, boulders and brush into a series of structures that mimic their old-growth havens. The "trick" worked, according to a Forest Service research team, which found evidence of martens using these dens for sleeping, hunting and eating.

"A lot of what I do is eco atonement," says Hull, who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, but travels all over the country and the world installing sculptures that help restore environments for native plants and animals. "It's in apology for what we have done in the way of downgrading habitats." Her first pieces, unseen by human audiences, were "hydroglyphs," or symbols carved into rocks in desert areas of Utah and Wyoming. Their purpose, apart from imparting beauty, was to collect water for local species in a dry area rendered even more parched by the diversion of its water supplies for human use.

Since then, much of Hull's work has been aimed at audiences of plants and animals (including, but not limited to human animals). In Wyoming, where she started out as a potter, she realized that "there really wasn't much audience for contemporary art." With a laugh she says, "There was way more wildlife than people, and the work sort of lost its meaning when it got sent off to a gallery elsewhere." So she went directly to the plants and animals and helped to create a new art form, "art for wildlife," which incorporates solid scientific experimentation to address habitat restoration. "It was an oddball idea, but I wanted to make that positive gesture toward the

earth and other animals," she explains. "If art is supposed to be a cutting-edge gesture of society, why not make that gesture to other species?"

Those gestures take many forms. Wing-shaped bundles of brush in Williamstown, Massachusetts, that give butterflies and caterpillars a place to hibernate. Floating islands made of wood planks in a new reservoir in the north of England that had begun to attract waterbirds but had no natural structures for resting or nesting. A branch ladder propped up against a tree in Kenya, giving humans a giraffe's-eye view of a nature preserve. Tall, wooden "raptor roosts" that provide nesting sites for hawks and eagles in areas along migration paths where trees—their usual roosts—have been cut down. Otter havens constructed of logs and sticks and stones. Goose-nesting platforms made of sinewy branches twisting and twirling around each other for support.

Hull, who is in her fifties, often works in the wake of developers who have paved over microenvironments for shopping and housing complexes. In Florida, for example, development plans often include decorative retention ponds; but these ponds are a poor attempt to preserve some of the natural habitat, as they are relatively sterile and provide no habitable structures to entice the plants and animals that could live there. So once again, Hull is installing floating islands made of planks and branches to provide a resting place for turtles, frogs and wading birds. Like other islands she has created, these should eventually evolve into what Hull likes to call "biodiversity life rafts," attracting a host of insects, fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and plants. In other words, these rafts will take on a life of their own, growing into complex ecosystems with connecting concentric circles radiating inward and outward, like echoes in a canyon. ♦

Lynne Hull's work is included in "Eco-vention" at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center June 22–August 18. Her Web site (www.wecsa.com/ecoart) contains photographs of her sculptures and descriptions of their locations.

Living in the Now

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67

If you have trouble entering the Now directly, he adds, "start by observing the habitual tendency of your mind to want to escape from the Now. . . . Be present as the watcher of your mind—of your thoughts and emotions as well as your reactions in various situations."

If some of that sounds familiar, it should. The appeal of Tolle's teachings stems in part from his ability to distill the essence of traditions as disparate as Vipassana and Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta (which originated the practice called Witness Consciousness), Christian mysticism, and *A Course in Miracles*—absent the religious jargon and the foreign words that he feels alienate more seekers than they inspire. His aim is to present the essential truth of ancient spiritual traditions by using "signposts that are as neutral as possible."

"He leads you by describing enlightenment in the simplest language," says Ulla Mentzel, a fellow participant, over a vegetarian lunch in Omega's spacious but spartan dining hall. Mentzel, a fortysomething native of Germany who now hails from Marin County, California, was saved from a crushing depression following the unexpected breakup of a relationship by listening to Tolle's audiotapes. "Because of his own mystical experience, he can look at other sacred texts and see what is real and what is overlay," she says, referring to the dogmatic material inserted into the Gospels and Buddhist sutras that tends to obscure the original wisdom of the masters.

Glenn Prottas, sitting across the table, agrees. A Bostonian now in his fifties, Prottas has been practicing Tibetan Buddhism for the past 20 years but finds Tolle both more accessible and more compelling. He asserts that Tolle's neutral terminology and absence of ritual allow the essential truth of our nature to shine through unobstructed. With Tolle, he says, it's "like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Toto pulls back the curtain [to reveal the wizard]. He shows you the whole thing."