

"Gesture of Place"
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In 2006 Rick Newby contributed essays to exhibition catalogs on the ceramic artists Lawson Oyekan and Rudy Aytio, among others.

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Within the pluralist landscape of contemporary ceramics, Rebecca Hutchinson is one self-defined ceramic artist whose work crosses more boundaries than most. Her mysterious, mostly white biomorphic forms—constructed of handmade paper brushed with a slurry of porcelain paperclay or woven of paperclay-coated sisal thread—straddle the divide between ceramic and textile arts, sculpture and the vessel, the ephemeral and the timeless, and between ecological concerns and the purely aesthetic. By remaining committed to the multiple traditions of ceramics, yet determined to follow her own path, Hutchinson brings a fresh perspective to the clay arts and what their role might be in an increasingly denaturalized world.

A professor of artisanry/ceramics at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth at New Bedford, Hutchinson is, as she likes to say, “of the tribe” of environmental artists, but she feels especially close to those, particularly Patrick Dougherty, Michael Singer and Roy Staab, whose works share with her ruggedly refined forms an exceptional sensitivity to site, natural materials and what she calls the “gesture of place,”¹ though she disavows any affinity with the massive earthworks of Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Nancy Holt.

Dividing her time between Massachusetts and Montana—and as the daughter of a medical technologist and a psychologist—Hutchinson finds herself deeply concerned about the links between the human and the non-human, with what she calls “total ecosystem function, specifically looking at dynamics of species survival and site activity individually as they function in the parameters of place.” This has led her to turn away, despite her training as a potter, from the fetishization of the well-crafted object so prevalent in recent ceramic art. Rather, she writes, “my interest in ecology has taken me to understand species structure and organism growth on all environmental levels.”²

This truly holistic approach leads to complex and delicate structures that most resemble spiders’ webs, the nests of birds or massed floral forms. Moreover, the 45-year-old artist’s earth-centered works partake in what the critics Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss call the tradition of the “formless,” a subset of modernism that explores the abject, the tactile and the entropic (“a degradation that leads to a continually increasing state of disorder and of non-differentiation within matter”³). Entropy appears most strikingly in Hutchinson’s outdoor sculptures, especially an ambitious series, *Ten Sites, Ten Situations*—made between 1995 and 2001 in, among other places, Corpus Christi, Texas; Marquette, Nebraska; Sewanee, Tennessee; and Cariari, Costa Rica—in which the effects of weather overtime invariably deconstruct her fragile structures. This recognition that all life is ephemeral can also be seen in her gallery works, which exist only in the spaces for which they are created and only for the time of the exhibition.

Hutchinson sees a clear connection between her own work and that of tier environmental-artist peers, engaged as they passionately are—in articulating concern for increasingly threatened natural systems, and the vast canvases of 19th-century painters like Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, who sought to capture the sublimity of the Rocky Mountains and, in so doing, helped to create the movement to preserve prime examples of the American Sublime (like Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks).

The works in three solo exhibitions—a 2006 installation at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild of Pittsburgh; the 2005 installation *Communal Condition* at Washington State University at Pullman; and

her 2004 New England Artist Awards exhibit at the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston—embody Hutchinson’s vision for an art that speaks of the strength and fragility of the natural world and of our profound connectedness to all things. At the same time, these works can function purely as gallery environments engaging visitors on many levels—as affecting abstractions, bodies in space and elegant objects for contemplation. Like the multiples of Eva Hesse (think of her suspended works *Contingent and Right After*, both 1969, which she described as “paintings as sculpture”⁴), Hutchinson’s post-Minimalist objects bear an uncanny and uncontainable charge—of emotion, spirit and intelligence. With each installation, she refined and extended her repertoire of forms and processes.

She intended the works in Pittsburgh, made of thousands of florets assembled out of rolled handmade paper sheets coated with porcelain paperclay and then pegged together with twigs, to be viewed from multiple vantages—more so than any of her previous installations. It took her a full year to assemble the florets, and 11 days to install these graceful floral forms. It is only when the viewer walks underneath them and looks upward that their true expansiveness—the multiplicity of their parts—becomes evident. While abundance might be said to be the theme of this show, the installation at Washington State celebrated, in Hutchinson’s view, gravity and, more particularly, the “gentleness of gravity.” These webbed objects, each different from the next, suspended from branches found locally, seem to drip and pull, terminating in sensuous curves that recall swallows’ nests. Spare and angular, these long-stemmed works—Asian in feeling—are unique in Hutchinson’s oeuvre.

The show at Boston’s Society of Arts and Crafts offered Hutchinson the opportunity to orchestrate an intimate space, a bay window in the society’s historic building, where she installed five skirted bell forms (“very feminine,” Hutchinson explains), with 100 florets to each stem. She wove the florets with sisal thread and again coated them with her signature paperclay, achieving a feeling of openness furthered by the absence of color—during the past half-decade, Hutchinson has limited her palette to white. Although her woven works seem distant from what we generally think of as ceramic objects, they stand within the continuum of clay arts. As the critic Glen R. Brown wrote in 2001, we can “read in [Hutchinson’s] elegant woven forms a suggestion of the memory inherent in the ceramic tradition—a popular speculation about the first fired pot is that it was a mud-covered basket accidentally hardened in a fire.”⁵

With each singular installation, Rebecca Hutchinson transforms space, captures our imagination and asks us to contemplate not just her arresting forms, but the natural phenomena to which they allude: the outrageous fecundity of flowers, the nurturance of nests, the strength and delicacy of spiders’ webs, and even the temporality of existence, especially our own. With these extraordinary works of the imagination, she challenges us to share her concern about, and care for, the lovely, evanescent and enduring natural world.

1. All quotations from Rebecca Hutchinson are drawn, unless otherwise noted, from interviews with the author, Helena, Montana, July 2005 and August 2006.

2. Hutchinson, unpublished artist’s statement, 2005.

3. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 14.

4. Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten and Linda Shearer, *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972), unpaginated.

5. Glen R. Brown, “Memory Serves: Time, Space and the Ceramic Installation,” *Critical Ceramics*, March 10, 2001, <http://criticalceramics.org/articles/ncecaol/memory2.htm>.