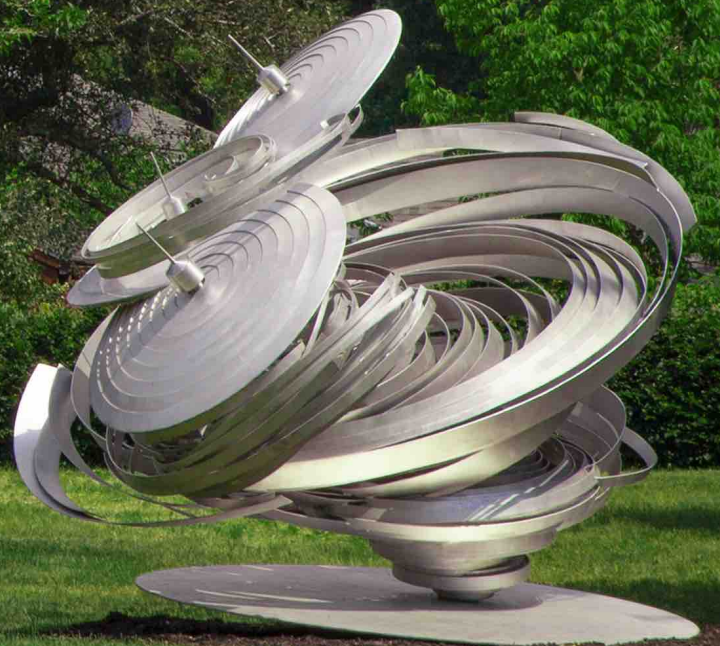


# BEAUTIFUL STRANGERS

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WENDELL CASTLE  
E.V. DAY  
FITZHUGH KAROL  
MARK MENNIN  
MICHELE OKA DONER  
TONI ROSS  
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Curated by James Salomon

at the Berkshire Botanical Garden  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

May 26 through October 8, 2018



*THE BEAUTIFUL STRANGERS OF  
THE BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN*

By Kelcey Edwards

*Nature here is vile and base... choking and fighting for survival and... growing and... just rotting away...  
It's a land that God, if he exists, has created in anger... Taking a close look at what's around us, there is  
some sort of a harmony. It is the harmony of... overwhelming and collective murder... There is no real  
harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this all full of admiration for the jungle.  
It is not that I hate it, I love it. I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment.*

— Werner Herzog in *Burden of Dreams* (Les Blank)

*Beautiful Strangers* is not set in the jungle but rather in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in the exquisitely pristine landscape of the Berkshire Botanical Garden where beneath the garden—and every garden—is the same wilderness that humans have sought to tame in the name of beauty and through the ancient practice of seeking sanctuary by creating harmony out of chaos.

Nestled in the gardens are the sculptures of 10 powerful artists whose artworks are natural bedfellows in this atmosphere of highly orchestrated natural beauty. Representing a range of work in scale, material, subject and influence—from the monumental 12-foot painted urethane *Male Torso* by Ned Smyth to E.V. Day's cast aluminum *Pollinator (Water Lily)* sculptures—the works are brought together by curator James Salomon like guests at a dinner party. Walking through the garden in the changing light of day, one gets the sense that the night is young and there are many stories to be told. Some pieces are site-specific and ephemeral, such as Toni Ross's gold leaf intervention *Found Lines I, II and III*, or Stephen Talasnik's *Tree Hive, Number 3*. Others, such as Mark Mennin's granite *Classical Interiors* or Wendell Castle's bronze *Grand Temptation*, are works that, like bristlecone pine trees and stories, will outlive us all. And so, in contemplating the exhibition *Beautiful Strangers*, we will begin with the end.

## DEATH

*The sculptures draw people into the gardens where the lifecycle is always changing—the light, the backdrop, the blooms... every time people return, they discover something new.*

— Matt Larkin, Board Chair, Berkshire Botanical Garden

Stephen Talasnik is keenly aware of the fact that his ephemeral art has a lifecycle of its own. The natural reed and bamboo pole utilized in the construction of his sculpture *Tree Hive, Number 3* are susceptible to the elements, changed by wind, rain and temperature. In spring and summer, the lines of the sculpture become eclipsed by the tree's canopy. By the time the cycle completes, the artwork will be nearly invisible, for the patina of the materials will have changed to match that of the copper beech tree around which it has been installed.

"I invest a great deal of time in building something that I know will not last. As you build it, you are conscious of the fact that you are building death," he says. Many of Talasnik's large-scale pieces are burned after the exhibition, a process whereby the sculpture, he feels, merely takes a different form. "In a botanical garden," he tells me, "there is death, and life, and death."

STEPHEN TALASNIK

*Tree Hive, Number 3, 2018*

Dimensions variable

Natural reed and bamboo poles





Wendell Castle, I was told, never missed an opening—London, Louisville, New York City—up until the very end. The *Beautiful Strangers* exhibition was conceived this past fall, with the opening date set for the spring, and Castle died of pneumonia in January, four months before the opening. He wasn't *sick*, just suddenly gone.

Hailed as the father of the American art furniture movement and widely considered to be one of the most celebrated and influential artistic innovators in his lifetime, one might assume Wendell Castle had begun to tire. On the contrary, “there was no sense of winding down, no sense of being late in his career,” his gallerist and friend Jennifer Olshin told me. “He expected to be around for another 20-30 years.”

Wendell Castle is often described as a stereotypical midwestern man—understated, steady, hard working—a man who went to the studio every day, even on Saturdays. “He was like these Twentieth Century American poets whose simplicity and plain speak belied a tremendous depth: William Carlos Williams, Frank O’Hara,” Jennifer explained. “You have to be a genius to simplify, to come up with 5 words that mean something. With Wendell, every gesture had reverberations. And it was always about the work.” Wendell Castle fought in WWII, I learned. However, the experience did not leave him embittered, for afterward he returned home and witnessed the rebirth of his country.

Castle's sculptures resonate with the highest hopes for humanity: compassion, humor, even forgiveness. He began working in bronze later in life, drawn to the material's indestructibility, and perhaps in search of immortality—a final innovation in his ongoing effort to make work that would remain relevant beyond his own lifespan.

Like Castle's sculpture *Grand Temptation*, Alice Aycock's aluminum sculpture *Untitled (Cyclone)* is designed to last—a spinning form that, as Aycock describes, references “the chaotic beauty of fluid or flow dynamics.” In contrast with Talasnik's *Tree Hive, Number 3*, Aycock's *Untitled (Cyclone)* is static and durable, powerfully constructed as a reference to the uncontainable forces in nature for which it is named. In conversation with Alice Aycock, we discussed the deep need for artists—and perhaps all people—to understand, before they die, the story of their life. “We hope that it will all fit together like a big puzzle. But maybe it doesn't. Narratives are fragments. Some of them will fit together and some of them won't.” Reflecting on Talasnik and Aycock's words and on Castle's groundbreaking career and far-reaching influence on generations of artist and designers, I stand before Castle's piece in the garden. It is a bench, of sorts, like many of his works—a sculpture that seems to beckon guests in the garden to gather as a community by conveying the simple message, across time and beyond even the death of the artist: *There is a place here for all of us; we all belong here, together.*

WENDELL CASTLE

*Grand Temptation*, 2014

42" by 127" by 55"

Bronze, Edition of 8



ALICE AYCOCK

*Untitled (Cyclone)*, 2017

105" by 117" by 123"

Aluminum, Edition of 2



## LOVE

*'Beauty' is related not to 'loveliness' but to a state in which reality plays a part.*

— William Carlos Williams

*For my own sake there was nothing for me to do but to love you. I knew that if I allowed myself to hate you, that in that dry desert of existence over which I had to travel, and am travelling still, every rock would lose its shadow, every palm tree be withered, every well of water prove poisoned at its source.*

— Oscar Wilde (as quoted by Alice Aycock during an interview)

*DK + PN*

— Carving on quaking aspen tree, Toni Ross, *Found Lines II*





In this garden, I wonder, who are the Beautiful Strangers? For Mark Mennin, they are the works of art—the sculptural events installed throughout the garden, works he refers to as “visitors.” Rob Wynne poetically describes the show’s title as “an elegiac everyman, doing a dance on the head of a pin,” a sentiment both melancholic and egalitarian. “It sounds like your heart is leading the way somewhere,” he muses. The curator of the exhibition, James Salomon, no doubt recognized the many possible interpretations when he selected the title, for Salomon possesses the high ambition and open-hearted nature to conceive of an exhibition like this in the first place, and—as the artists in the exhibition can attest—would move heaven and earth to make it happen.

Like Mark Mennin, my assumption, initially, was that *Beautiful Strangers* referenced the works of art: the textured material of the various sculptures, the curved lines, the sheen of the surfaces. Rob Wynne’s sensual mirror-polished bronze *Drops*; E.V. Day’s sexually inviting *Pollinator (Water Lily)*; Michele Oka Doner’s cast bronze *Relic, Future Tense*—part leaf, part phallus; Toni Ross’s gilded trees *Found Lines I, II* and *III*, as ancient seeming and seductive as a bejeweled Cleopatra. But on closer consideration, I realize there are many layers of meaning in the context of a garden where there are seductions of various kinds at play: the erotic forms of flowers, the perfumed air, lush trees and vines seemingly drunk on love, leaning into each other across distances, roots reaching out in search of water, leaves outstretched like hands in search of light. Or, as Herzog insisted, perhaps they are simply choking their competitors in the name of survival, one aspect of a murderous, natural world—of which we too are a part—whose sole intention is to replicate itself.

Michele Oka Doner's *Relic, Future Tense* speaks to this directly—a work that is intentionally aggressive, wild and intense. The phallic form she has attached to the leaf is, she confesses “impossible and monstrous.” We talk about the drama of the work, the latent threat. “It is poised to do something, but what that is I couldn't answer.” She pauses, reflecting, “...Pollinate it?”

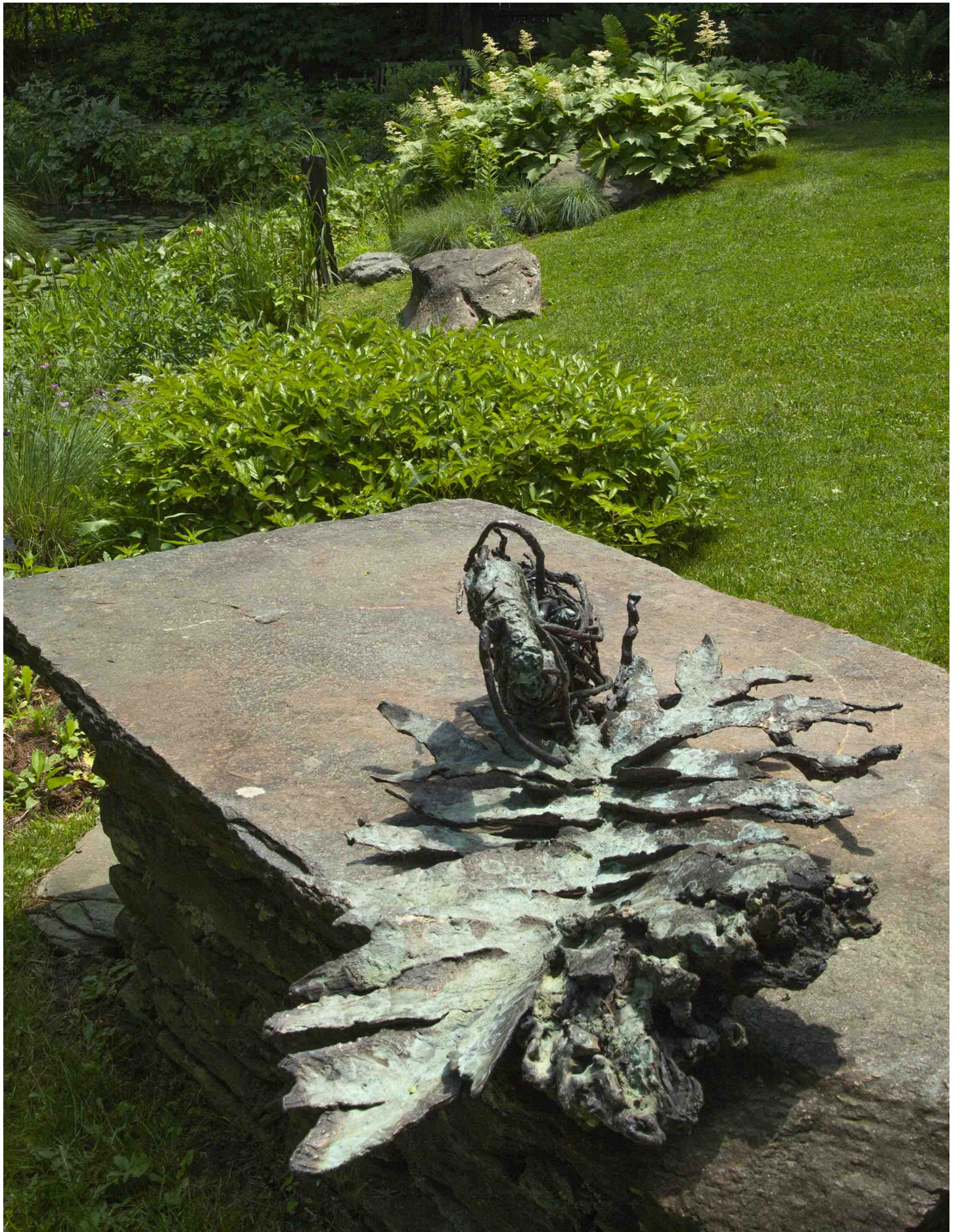
E.V. Day's aluminum *Pollinator (Water Lily)* series is another example of overt sexuality. “I ditched the petals,” she explains, “leaving only the reproductive parts of the flower exposed.” The original flower was taken from Monet's water lily pond in Giverny, France. She pressed and scanned the flower using a 3D scanner, and then enlarged it to six feet. “Looking into the enlarged image of the water lily, I saw architecture, masks, chalices, vaginas, horns, thorns, fire, insects, the origins of art nouveau and the curvilinear lines of the baroque. It all comes from the study of nature and botany.” She found herself deeply moved by this profound experience drawn from something one might see every day. “I saw everything within this flower, this accessory of sentiment.” She chose to work in aluminum—the same lightweight, durable material used in the construction of spacecraft—for its relationship to aerospace and as a means to conceptually reinforce the notion of having transported the ephemeral flower through digital space.

MICHELE OKA DONER

*Relic, Future Tense*, 2015

16" by 47" by 31"

Bronze, Unique



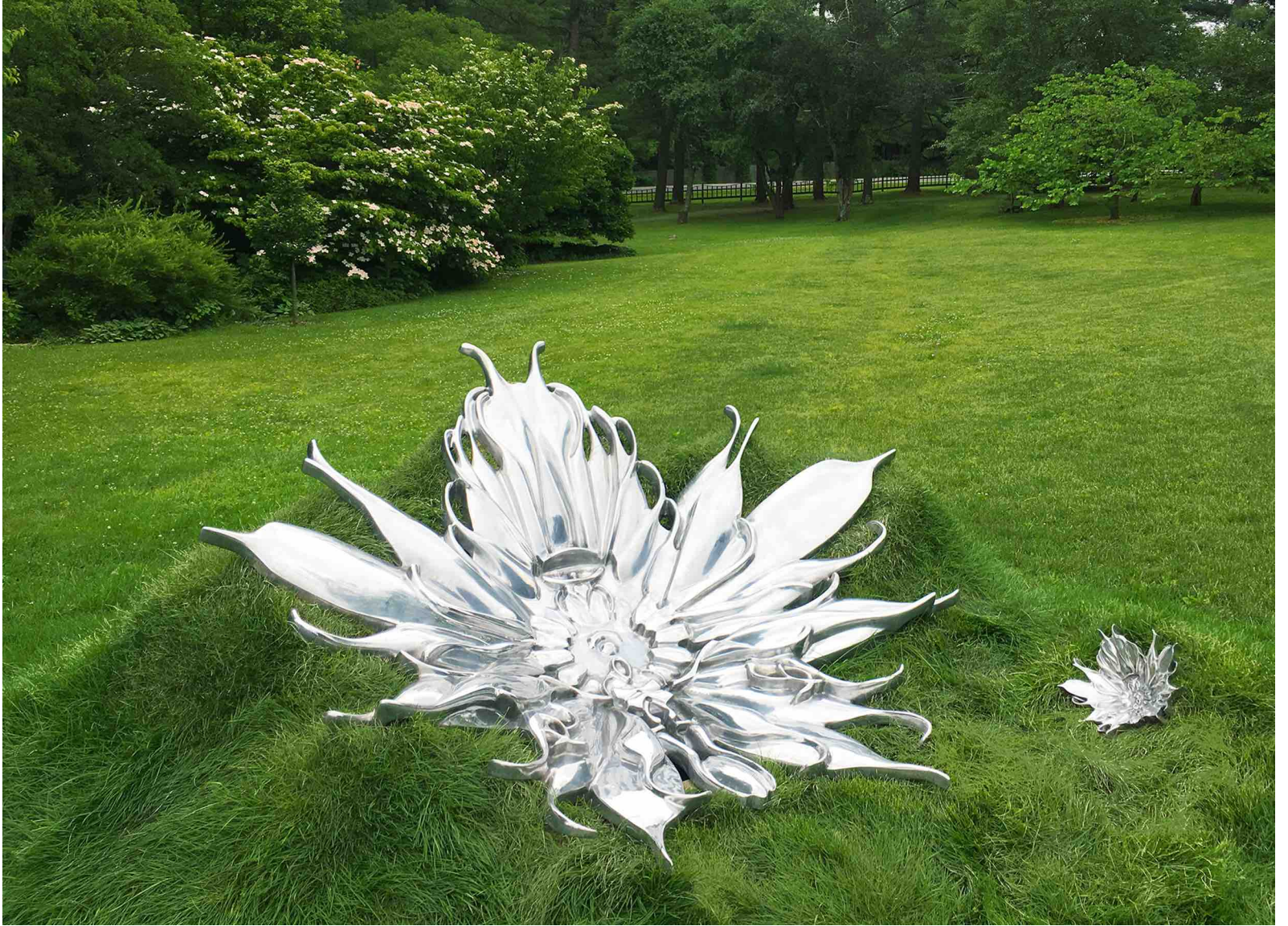
E.V. DAY

*Pollinator (Water Lily)*, 2012

18" by 72" by 72", Unique

5" by 12" by 12", Edition of 5

Cast aluminum







Similarly juxtaposing permanence with impermanence, Wynne's triptych *Drops*, mounted on the trunk of a white pine tree conjures different moods for different audiences. Like tears, they can be an indication of joy or sorrow. Wynne describes his process as a sculptor as one of coaxing meaning out of the stubbornness of materials—a description, I think, that would apply well to gardening, were you to replace the word “meaning” with the word “beauty.”

Wynne insists that, in a garden, artwork should have a glancing relationship with the surrounding nature. Its role, he feels, is to give the viewer a moment to pause. “Putting *Drops* outside on a tree was a *sappy* thing to do,” he tells me with such charming, deadpan humor that the pun is forgiven.

There is love and joy in the garden too, a sense of celebration in works such as Mark Mennin's *Classical Interiors*. His hand-carved granite chairs are made from columns of Quincy granite—the same granite that much of the old Penn Station was built from. Like Wendell Castle's piece, Mennin's chairs indicate a timeless gathering place. There are two chairs, he explains, to indicate a *place* rather than an *object*, emphasizing the connection to the garden tradition of follies, where infrastructural moments can get discovered through discarded bits of architecture that flirt with the functional. “It's a tidier way of rolling around in the mud,” he laughs.

There is a similar sense of wonder in Fitzhugh Karol's totemic white pine and tar sculptures, *Pulse*. Karol is an artist who describes his creative process as following energy, and who speaks passionately about the importance of exhausting himself physically during the realization of his work, and the feeling of riding an energy wave with which he's trying to catch up. “You have to hold on, see where you go... *like writing*,” he says. Karol is also a first-time father to a daughter who is 10 months old at the time of this writing. When I ask if he feels the growing sense of mortality that often accompanies first-time parents, he answers, hesitantly, “not yet,” and I can feel in the silence that follows the weight of a parent's love for their child, a love that another artist described as “the only love a person couldn't kill.”

ROB WYNNE

*Drops*, 2015

(1) 24" by 5", (2) 14" by 5", (3) 37" by 6"

Three mirror-polished bronze elements, Edition of 8



MARK MENNIN

*Classical Interiors*, 2018

Two elements, 52" and 42" by 56" diameter

Granite



FITZHUGH KAROL

*Pulse*, 2013

Five elements, each 156" by 16" diameter

White pine, tar







Children are an ideal audience for the sculptures of the garden, for their clarity of thought and their way of understanding without knowing. My children are growing *like weeds*, I am told. Their whispers to me, *do not forget us—we will be gone too soon*. When I asked my four-year-old what love felt like to her, she answered “a little sad, a little mad, and a lot happy.” When I asked her what it looked like, she said “beautiful.” For this young audience, other children aren’t referred to as strangers at all—they are called *friends*.

Inspired by the show’s title, Toni Ross decided to pair gold leaf with tree bark—two beautiful elements that exist in the world as strangers to one another. Ross speaks of the incredible generosity and enthusiasm of board member Matt Larkin, who helped ensure that no harm came to the trees in *Found Lines*. Working carefully not to disrupt the bugs scurrying around their home, Ross applied gold leaf to the bark using water-based adhesive, a technique that resulted in a dazzling effect she describes as resembling ribbons draped over the trees. “The piece was not meant for longevity,” she emphasizes. “The goal,” she says, “was to highlight and to encourage visitors to contemplate the life of the tree and draw attention to the extraordinary patterning of the bark that might normally go unnoticed.” Through her research and friendships with the arborists at the garden, Ross was able to safely execute her vision by leaving the crevices exposed so the tree could breathe, limiting the application of gold leaf to the dead exterior of the bark. “You must leave a circle around the tree open,” Ross explains. “People once felled trees by wrapping them.”

There were many friendships formed during the planning of the exhibition. There are the artists who made the work through painstaking ideation, conceptualization, experimentation and labor—each work a record of their exertion. The board members and staff of the Berkshire Botanical Gardens who have shaped the garden’s past, steward the garden’s present and safeguard its future. There are the philanthropists and volunteers without whom *Beautiful Strangers* and the gardens themselves would not exist. There are the journalists who share the story and the public who come to bear witness, to share in the experience, to give it meaning. We were all, at one time, beautiful strangers. However, the title of the show is, in essence, a fallacy, for the moment strangers recognize the beauty in the other, they are no longer strangers.

TONI ROSS

*Found Lines I*, 2018

Site-specific intervention

Gold leaf on selected trees



## ORIGINS

*The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.*

— Muriel Rukeyser

There are the stories that make us, the stories we tell ourselves, the stories we tell others, and the stories we don't.

Ned Smyth speaks of the formative influence of his father, a renowned art historian who spent years of Smyth's childhood traveling with his family throughout Italy in his study of art and architecture. Smyth recalls the influence of friendships that were the gifts of chance and circumstance—he was picked up in New Jersey while hitchhiking to SoHo by artist Keith Sonnier, who helped him get his first job at FOOD, a local haunt for artworld luminaries like Philip Glass, John Cage and Gordon Matta-Clark. As we speak, Ned leads me around his studio on Shelter Island, a high-ceilinged maze of stones and sticks gathered from nearby beaches. “The art,” Ned says, “is in finding these preexisting forms in nature and then enlarging them into monumental sculptures reminiscent of Paleolithic icons.” *Male Torso*, like much of Smyth's recent work, conveys the artist's reverence for the origins of matter. “The rocks I discover are broken off from the history of matter, the formation of the planet. My art is no longer about my interpretation of images, it's about looking at nature, and experiencing what nature does to you, on a gut level.” We spoke for three hours that morning, sipping coffee and trading stories. As Smyth recounts memories in gentle tones, a red fox walks quietly along a low stone wall just outside the barn-like building, framed by the light of the open door.

Wendell Castle was a student on a road trip with a friend when he learned about the famous sculptor Alexander Calder. He looked up his address and knocked on his door. Calder was welcoming, showed them the studio and told them about his travels around the world. Like Castle, Fitzhugh Karol sought mentorship early in his career. Karol had a year long apprenticeship with Toshiko Takaezu, one of the leaders of the modern ceramics movement, famous for creating closed forms that denied the pot or vessel its function. Karol claims to have learned through osmosis during this time, building his work ethic and dedication to self and craft. Takaezu would write words and phrases on the insides of her closed vessels, secrets that one could only know if the piece were broken.

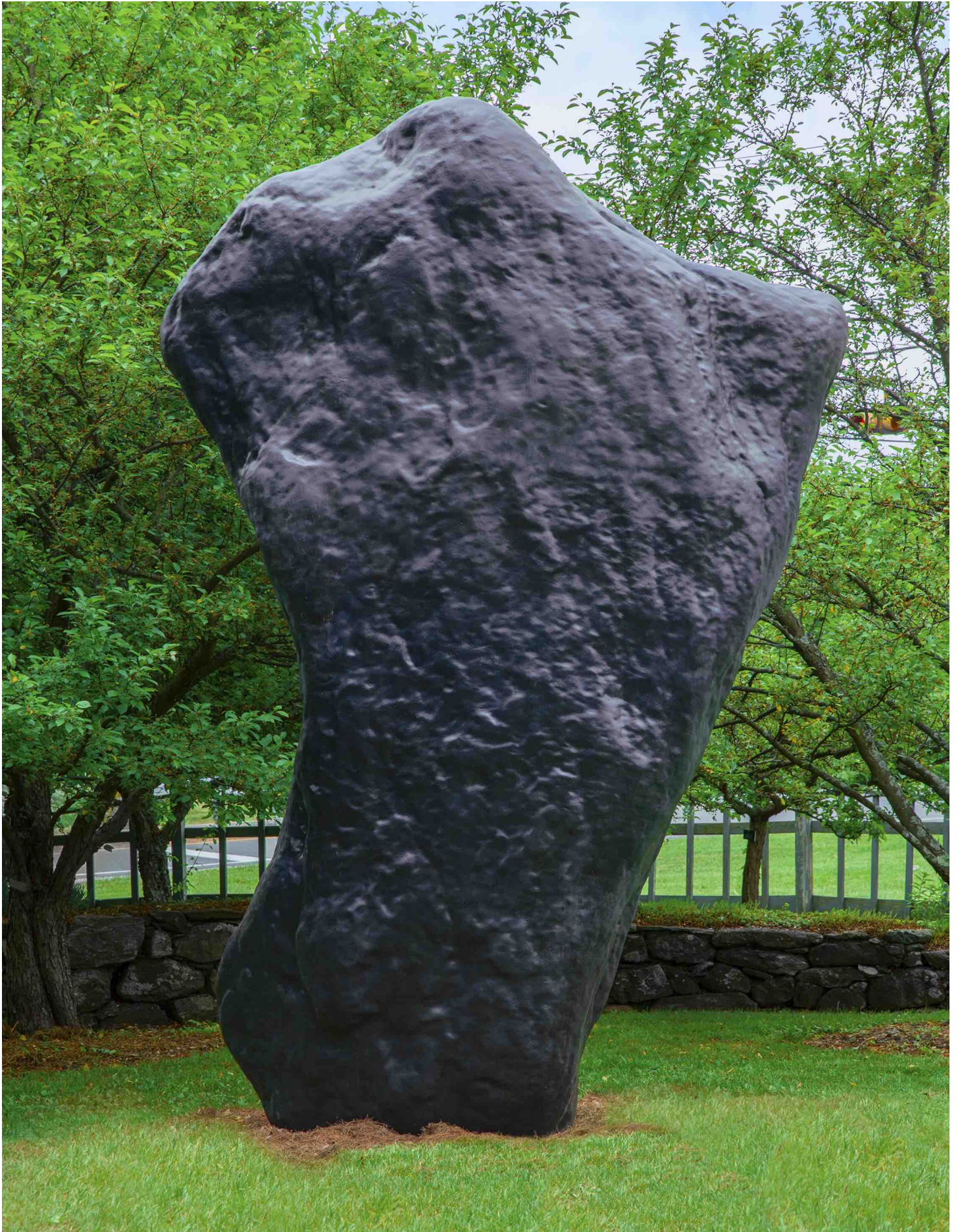
Michele Oka Doner told me a secret during my visit to her studio. She pulled me off the elevator as I was leaving to entrust it to me, eyes twinkling—it is a gift to humanity she is planning, already set into motion. *No one has done this*, she shared, emphatically. *No woman.*

NED SMYTH

*Male Torso*, 2015

144" by 96" by 30"

Painted urethane



## THE FUTURE

*Keep going.*

— James Salomon, Curator



Mark Mennin believes that, as humans, our greatest assets are our imperfections. “Our imperfections make us more interesting,” he says. “In the context of a garden, a sculpture might seem more formal, but what we are doing is filled with imperfection... Even great architecture is filled with design flaws.” He speaks about the unspoken consensus between all creative people that what they do is imperfect, while the natural world is perfection.

For Michele Oka Doner, our future is in peril. There is an ominous tone in her works, such as *Hominin*, *Burnt*, a cast bronze work that she made from a piece of found wood that she describes as part mask/part torso. In a society fixated on youth culture, she feels the need to direct her audience’s gaze to the death and decay in a full lifecycle. “We must not look only at the bloom,” she cautions. “There’s no bloom if you don’t re-fertilize.” She speaks of the assault on the institutions of democracy; on our loss of the middle class; the displacement people feel in the absence of jobs they can relate to and the ensuing drug epidemic. “My work is a wakeup call,” she says. “Career artists must respond to the times and transcend these moments while maintaining their personal vision... and these are dramatic times.” Through her work, she hopes to bring nature back into our vocabulary. As she speaks, her words conjure an angry Neptune mourning the polluting of the ocean.

The stones Ned Smyth has been working with have been identified as glacial till, the unsorted sediment derived from the erosion and melting of glaciers. They were broken and dragged by progressing glaciers, ground, crushed and dropped at the glacial moraine, and finally smoothed by tides and sand before washing up on the beaches near his home. In the future, he hopes to identify where these rocks originate and travel to their quarries of origin, to harvest large pieces of stone with which he will digitally carve monumental sculptures from these smaller forms.

MICHELE OKA DONER

*Hominin, Burnt*, 2015

44" by 14" by 5"

Bronze, Edition of 3



Toni Ross is concerned about the future. She speaks of the need for sanctuary—a word loaded with meaning in today’s geopolitical climate. “What does it mean to be strangers, to seek sanctuary by coming together in search of a place to feel safe?” she asks rhetorically. “What’s driving the insanity of the world today is a fear of what you don’t know.” Like the other artists in the exhibition, her work aspires to draw people in so that they make take a closer look at—in her case—trees that they might normally just pass by.

E.V. Day believes that we will need to use technology, in concert with nature, to solve many of the world’s problems—problems that were often created by earlier forms of technology. “As the concept of environmentalism becomes integrated culturally, we must continue to explore the relationship of nature and technology,” she says. “In the future, our species will depend on technology to preserve the complex beauty and mystery of the world, and to build a new and sustainable world for generations to come.” It is a future that is nearly impossible to imagine.

Alice Aycock, like many of the other artists in the exhibition, is distressed about the future of our planet. She was heavily influenced by the land artist Robert Smithson. Smithson's works dealt with the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment over 50 years ago. Like Toni Ross, she says that what we need more than ever are sanctuaries. "This idea of a garden and valuing something for its own sake, something that appeals to us as humans—it is so important that there be places like this."

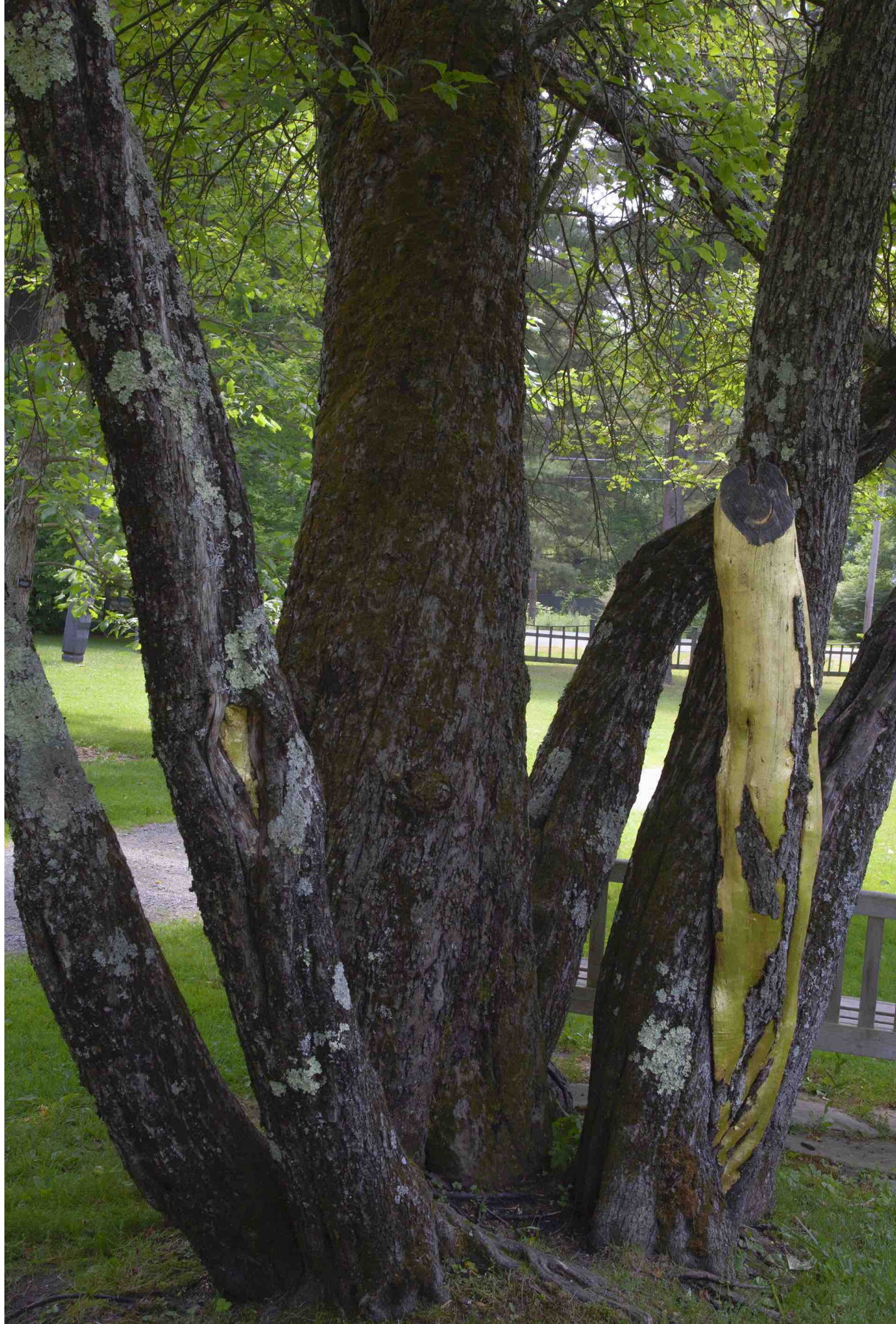
And so we will end where we begin: celebrating the magnificent gardens and the works of these great artists; celebrating the work we ourselves do that brings meaning to our brief lives; seeking out sanctuaries in a world that we may love against our better judgment, and protecting those sanctuaries at all costs; and, if we are fortunate enough to be surrounded by friends and family—beautiful strangers we have come to know and love, embarking on this journey together—telling one another, when we need to: *There is a place here for all of us—keep going.*

TONI ROSS

*Found Lines III*, 2018

Site-specific intervention

Gold leaf on selected trees







This exhibition was made possible with the generous support of  
The Dorothea Leonhardt Fund at the Communities Foundation of Texas

*With special thanks to*

Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo, *BBG Trustee*

Matthew Larkin, *BBG Board Chair*

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Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY

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Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, CO

Olin Hall Galleries at Roanoke College, Salem, VA

*Published on the occasion of the exhibition*

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5 West Stockbridge Road

Stockbridge, MA 01262

[www.berkshirebotanical.org](http://www.berkshirebotanical.org)

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