

Laura Evans: The Aching Web

Like phrases of movement conceived by a choreographer, Laura Evans' inventory of reconfigured tree branches accumulate in her studio as clusters of related elements whose forms and meanings are contingent upon an additional phase of creative connectivity and construction – interdependent performative processes involving strategic placements and intuitive responses on site at the Boston Sculptors Gallery. In that environment, Evans orchestrates shifts in scale, passages of density and openness, combinations of agitated and sinuous lines, and directional changes between vertical and horizontal, all to communicate a dynamic range of rhythms, energies, and associations.

The governing aesthetic of *The Aching Web* – one of cumulative, incremental, related gestures – is recognizable from several of Evans' earlier sculptural groupings of similar objects, including paper bags (*Bag Lunch*), cardboard tubes (*Characters*), and sculpted bones (*Rune Fragments*). However, the experiential nature of this room-size installation involves a significant perceptual shift away from symbolic content that resides in an object to meaning that is dependent upon the sensory and intellectual engagement of viewers/participants. Moving through, under, and around the sculptural episodes of *The Aching Web* not only demands bodily awareness but also invites subtle yet continuous mental negotiating between the legibility of the branches as “branches” and the resolute abstractness of the overall installation. Whereas the individuation of related objects was Evans' guiding principle in previous multi-unit works, here it is the cumulative effect of interdependent elements.

At the heart of *The Aching Web* is the self-guided manner in which Evans intends for us to explore the installation at our own pace and in varying degrees of detail. Conceptually, her approach seems to have been informed by growing up as a Quaker and being educated at Hampshire College – experiences that shaped her respect for finding meaning through self-direction and independence. Before crossing the gallery's threshold, visitors might notice branch elements occupying some of the street-side windows; at the entryway where a stairway leads to the main event, a limb reaches overhead from gallery floor to windows beckoning some of us in an opposite direction. Passing under a canopy of branches at the top of the stairs we find dispersed throughout the space myriad other configurations – some isolated, others entangled – resting against the wall, lying across the floor, hanging from the ceiling, occupying the corner, surrounding a column. This formal diversity engenders an array of subjective associations, lying for some of us in memories of experiencing the grey shadows and barren trees of a wintery landscape or, for others, in the corporeal knowledge of aging limbs and joints evoked by gesturing branches thick or thin, knotted or straight, contracted or outstretched. A sculptural mindscape, where beginnings and endings often are indistinguishable and cast shadows vie with the reality of the branches, might describe the kind of experiential synthesis that Evans seeks, one in which nature, body, and mind commingle.

Animating *The Aching Web* is a poignant sense of connectedness between the interrupted life forces of the trees and the dynamics of our bodies, a characteristic that has its origins in Evans' hands-on process. She begins by collecting downed or broken branches in her Savin Hill neighborhood in Dorchester. Back in the studio, traces of nature's creative forces (pattern, texture, contour) merge with Evans' sculptural interventions (sawing, snipping, sanding) – actions representing countless points of contact between tree limb and sculptor's body. Wherever she strips away bark, her gesture exposes vulnerable interior surfaces. Evans diminishes the physical differences between tree species (mostly maple, with occasional cherry, black walnut, and wisteria) by applying a coating of AquaResin resulting in a unifying, monochromatic palette (a milky stain which she likens to the color of bleached bones). As a counterpoint, to connect branches Evans models matter-of-fact joints (made from Apoxie Sculpt and

baring the imprint of her touch), which read as prominent eccentric details. Thwarting any suggestion of seamlessness, they instead punctuate countless directional shifts throughout the structure.

“I enjoy inverting the natural growth pattern that one expects from a tree branch, pairing a branch that starts from thick to thin and obviously growing in one direction with one that does the opposite. These two branches (lines) meet at points where it is unclear or questionable as to where the energy is flowing. Has it stopped? Is it still there? Is it resting in the ‘joints’? Does it move outside of the visible form?”

Evans’ act of translating nature into the aesthetic sphere is a practice with a long and complex history born in large part from a primeval interrelation between the landscape, our bodies, and our senses. In nature’s fluidity and impermanence, we recognize the cyclical processes of renewal and degeneration that define life’s forces. A tree, with its immediately recognizable yet endlessly idiosyncratic shape, may be one of the more anthropomorphic forms in the landscape; it is also an essential image of time. For contemporary sculptors like Evans who have turned to it as material and subject (peers including Patrick Dougherty, Anya Gallacio, Carol Hepper, Evan Holloway, Giuseppe Penone, Rona Pondick, and Alan Sonfist, among many others), the tree often epitomizes the paradox of trying to give a fixed form to the flow of time and the urge to articulate what we cannot completely know. With intelligence and intuition guiding her, Evans has transformed the common tree branch into a complex network of forms and forces, which in its many starts, turns, and pauses, embraces the exhilaratingly yet achingly unpredictable nature of life lived in her studio and the world.

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