

strange forces & hidden places

American-based sculptor Patrick Dougherty explores human connections with nature through his ephemeral work

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Three 'hale' (huts) made of 'hale' (straw) and 'hale' (straw) built from 'hale' (straw) in Hawaii.



Childhood Dreams (2007)

BELOW Patrick Dougherty in the midst of willow saplings



Photo courtesy of Melish Studios

that sounds perilously close to romanticism, and not at all like our usual hard-headed selves, it's because there is undoubtedly a form of poetry in Dougherty's sculptures.

Under his coaxing hands and keen eyes, wooden sticks and twigs come together to swirl, roll and entwine lovingly and seemingly effortlessly to form organic silhouettes and shapes that tickle the imagination, and dredge up quiet, perhaps long-buried desires to renew our connection with Mother Earth. The – much! – larger than life sculptures are often clustered together in groups; and that, together with how they are grouped and their size often conjure up a fantasy world of dream forests and living connectedly with Nature. Their mystical quality only increases when you learn that each sculpture lasts only as long as the twigs – approximately two years.

Born 27 June 1945, Patrick Dougherty's secret childhood dream was always to be a sculptor and although his career path swerved into hospital administration for a while, he finally enrolled into the University of North Carolina in the early 1980s for sculpture and art history classes. His credibility and popularity grew and for the last 20-odd years, he has been a full-time sculptor. Doing eight to ten major works a year for organisations such as universities and art schools, botanic gardens and arboreta, art museums and the occasional business, Dougherty confesses ruefully that he travels almost constantly and sometimes longs for home. So we jump at the chance when he makes time in his busy schedule to chat with HC.

Why do you use only sticks in your work?

It seems to me that the key to a sculptor's choice of materials can often be found in the sculptor's childhood. I grew up in the woodlands of North Carolina which are overgrown with small trees and where forests are a tangle of intersecting natural lines. Like other children I made forts of sticks and this later directed my choice of materials as a sculptor. Picking up a stick back then and bending it seemed to give me big ideas, and I was able to capitalise on those childhood urges from long ago.

How do you make the sculptures work?

When I turned to sculpture in the early 80s, I had to rediscover what birds already knew: sticks have an

IN A TIME WHEN SO MANY PEOPLE ARE PUSHING TOWARDS THE NEXT high-tech boundary, the next high-tech material, the next futuristic design, where all is glitter and hard edges, it seems refreshing and almost quaint to come across something that seems to take us backwards to an earlier time and is all about nature and our connection with her.

When we saw Patrick Dougherty's works, it felt like a soft cool wind had just swept the cobwebs from our minds. And if

infuriating tendency to entangle with each other. It is this simple tangle that holds my work together. I have developed a process, an approach to building a sculpture. The first phase is to harvest some bigger saplings which I put firmly into the ground to serve as a structural base. Next I imagine my sticks as lines with which to draw, and I pull piles of young saplings through these structural supports. This builds up a beautiful surface which looks much like a line drawing on a sheet of paper. Finally I 'erase' or hide the blemishes with flourishes of very small sticks.

With branches and saplings, however, the line between trash and treasure is very thin, and the sculptures, like the sticks they are made from, begin to fade after two years. Often the public imagines that a work of art should be made to last, but I believe that a sculpture, like a good flowerbed, has its season.

What kind of woods do you use? How do you choose them?

Willow is a favourite sapling, but I also use Maple, Sweet Gum, Elm or Dogwood. Sometimes I use more exotic saplings like Sassafras, Crabapple or fruit woods. In Japan I experimented with reeds and bamboo and I have also used Strawberry Guava in Hawaii.

The saplings which I gather range from finger to wrist size, and I gather them with both colour and flexibility in mind. I have a new catalogue available on my website in which I give tips on finding the perfect sapling.

So what were your first sculptures like when you first started? Were they under your own studio?

When I finished my course of study, I decided to build a studio to get to work. The first sculptures were modest efforts that used sticks to build objects scaled to my own height. But as opportunities presented themselves, I began to attempt to integrate my work into architectural situations and then to play sapling sculptures off against natural settings. Through experimentation, I was able to upscale my efforts and build work that seemed to spin across the top of buildings and flow through groups of trees. In the last two decades, I have made 200 large-scale installations using tree saplings and branches.

Do you build the sculpture alone or do you have a team?

My trick, if I have one, has been to partner with an organisation and use their help in preparing to build the sculpture. One aspect of that effort has been the use of volunteers to help gather the saplings and help with the construction. Generally, I might have four people working at any one time, but during the three-week period of work, this might mean that fifty different people would have played a part in its development. The crew includes both rich and poor, educated or not, and people of all ages. It might be a

hippie and a businessman working with a grandmother and a high school senior. For a short period of time, all these people unite as stick workers and indulge some of their most basic urges to build. I have learned how to work productively with a team at my side and how to apportion work and be encouraging. I am fond of saying that sticks were mankind's first building material and even the modern person continues to have a deep affinity for using them.

You say in your artist's statement that you enjoy identifying a provocative site. Could you tell us what you consider a provocative site?

I think the element of surprise is an important factor in a successful sculpture; that is, finding a way of commanding immediate attention of those who come within range of a sculpture. If you look at the sculpture 'Running in Circles' in Langeland, Denmark, you will see how I supported a burst of saplings in the treetops of a grove of poplars bordering the North Sea. The work was placed so that tourists arriving from Germany by ferry would make a sharp turn and the sculpture would loom unavoidably in front of them. People felt they had to park their cars and take a closer look.

I also read that part of your inspiration for each sculpture is derived from the site itself...

In trying to discover what kind of work is right for a particular setting, I look for starting points. As I struggle to understand the location, I might see a word or a title on the newsstand, the outline of a mountain range in the distance, or hear a turn of a phrase from a passer-by. The creative state of mind is one rich in connections, whereby words and images can blend and give rise to an inkling of a new idea. Once the overall effort is described, the actual work is shaped day by day as I react to what I see and try to improve the overall effect.

Are there any particular meanings to the sculptures you make?

I think that a good sculpture is one that evokes in the viewer a wealth of personal associations. And I hear from viewers their many thoughts about favourite trees, stories about the Garden of Eden, and secrets about first dates just inside the tree line and out of the view of their parents' prying eyes. I personally enjoy using saplings as lines with which to draw and suggest in the sculpture's surface the powerful momentum of wind, water and the hidden forces of the natural world. Most importantly, people love to explore strange shapes and hidden spaces, particularly if they encounter them in unlikely spots.

I do temporary work and work which flies in the face of the traditional assumption that art should accrue monetary value and last forever. But I think my trade off is worth it. A fleeting childhood experience can produce an enduring memory, and I hope these works will endure in people's



