

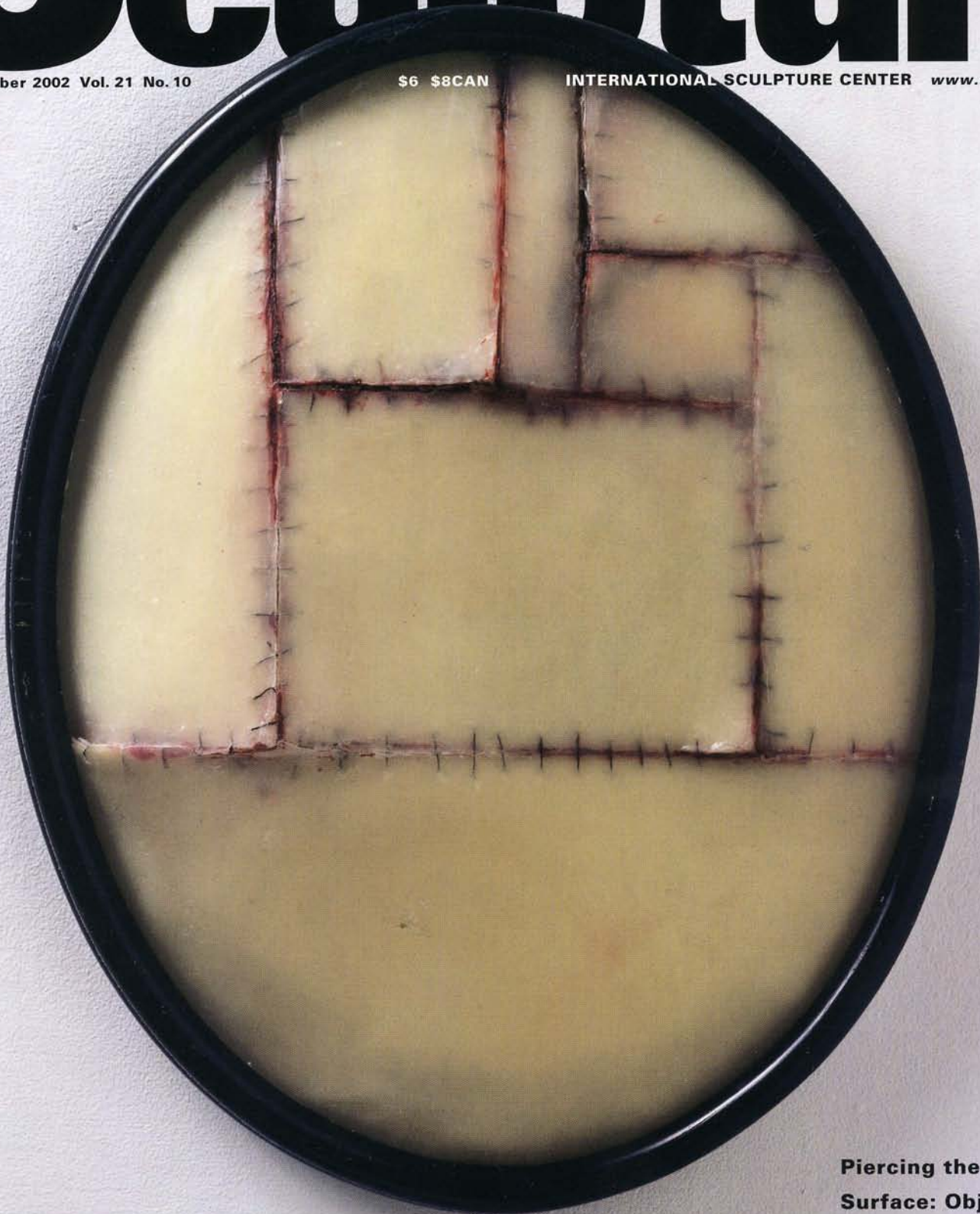
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**Piercing the
Surface: Object,
Body, Earth**



Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park

by Tania Evans

Since the 1995 opening of the Frederik Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan, almost three million people have enjoyed its 125 acres of botanical displays and outdoor sculpture. With a nearly religious fervor, the Meijer Gardens has promoted the joy of the natural world and the artistic expression it inspires. It has been a \$50 million, privately funded effort by Fred and Lena Meijer.

The 30-acre sculpture park is highlighted by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Plantoir* (2001), a 25-foot garden trowel dug into the ground at a spot chosen by the artists. The jaunty angle, bright color, and sheer size radiate the signature Oldenburg humor. This bond between nature, art, and lightheartedness is the thematic core of the garden.

An asphalt walkway winds 1.5 miles through a gently shaped terrain. Chronologically, the path travels 100 years, and geographically it embraces the whole world. Visitors can start anywhere. The path might lead from Rodin's *Eve* (1881, cast before 1920) past Henry Moore's *Working Model for Divided Oval: Butterfly* (cast 1965) to Jacques Lipchitz's *Hagar* (1971). Or one might start at *Plantoir*, visit Louise Nevelson's steel folding screen *Atmosphere and Environment XI* (1969), and then look to George Rickey's *Four Open Squares Horizontal Gyrotory—Tapered* (1984), which floats gently on the pond. One might pause before the chiseled female form of Manuel Neri's *Odalisque IV* (1994), only to turn and discover Keith Haring's cheerful *Julia*. But before taking two dozen steps, visitors realize a breadth of art that extends beyond anything else in the Midwest.

Of the 24 contributing artists, seven were present at the May dedication: Mark di Suvero, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Richard Hunt, and Caroline Ottmers. Hunt was the Meijer Gardens' first commissioned sculptor; Caroline Ottmers won its first site-specific sculpture competition in 1988. There are also works by Antony Gormley, Barbara Hepworth, Bill Woodrow, Dietrich Klinge, Jim Dine, and Igor Mitoraj.

Three primary considerations shaped the physical space of this "organic quilt," according to Joe Becherer, Curator of Sculpture: "Honor the natural vegetation of the site; plan for eventually siting 80 sculptures, many of which have yet to be considered; and, respect the Michigan climatic extremes of snow, cold, heat, humidity."

Barbara Hepworth, *Summer Dance*, 1971. Bronze, two parts, 29 and 35.5 in. high.

Interest in a sculpture park began in 1995 when a sculptural advisory committee was formed to continue acquisitions of 20th-century realism—an interest reflected in Fred and Lena Meijer's personal collection of figurative works by Marshall Fredericks. The plan was to build upon this base. Then the Gardens bought works by Alexander Calder, Deborah Butterfield, and Alexander Liberman. The Meijers also began to fund *American Horse* (one of two casts of a work by Nina Akamu that is sometimes referred to as "Leonardo's Horse"). In 1999, Becherer was hired as curator, and the idea of a permanent sculpture park took shape. Three pieces by Akamu were acquired, including *American Horse*. Becherer began actively seeking outstanding work; the May 2002 opening featured 20 new sculptures.

"The place was not tailor-made," said Coosje van Bruggen. "When I heard about another sculpture garden I wanted to run away, but when Claes and I visited we were asked to walk around in a garden and we saw their great plan, and there was openness and vulnerability. We found our site and they said, 'It's a non-site.' But now we wanted it and I said change this and move that and do this and no one told me to stop. I discovered we could do it."

van Bruggen's first reaction to the idea of the Midwest garden was common. Becherer felt that "one of the hardest tasks was to convince sculptors that the Midwest was a real destination. There's still a lot of East Coast bias. We have a great collection at the Gardens now, an incredible foundation of artists and ideas. Everything we bring into it from now on will have to hold up."

Mark di Suvero is represented by his massive *Scarloti* (1994–2000), which moves gently in the wind. In time, this unpainted steel sculpture will be surrounded by a wildflower garden. di Suvero says, "It's a question of spirit—I like to run the crane and cut the pieces and set the pieces and see the work evolve like a plant growing, but it's



COURTESY FREDERIK MEIJER GARDENS AND SCULPTURE PARK

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Left: Igor Mitoraj, *Light of the Moon (Tsuki-No-Hikari)*, 1991. Bronze, 142 in. high.

Below, left: Caroline Ottmers, *Full Circle*, 1999. Industrial porcelain, 7 x 7.5 x 10 in. to 15 x 16 x 22.5 in. Below, right: Louise Nevelson, *Atmosphere and Environment XI*, 1969. Painted, weathering Cor-ten steel, 111 in. high.

material. It's a dream and is the same for other artists. It's the reference in Arnoldo's pose to peace, or the beautiful Richard Hunt's *Column of the*, all those things represent a idealized. And all are permeated with a feeling of necessity."

Pomodoro made his first choice for his garden a year ago, choosing for his *Disc in the Form of a* pose. "One side is very open," he says about the location, "and it is discrete." Plantings create a backdrop behind the piece and help visitors see it with their eyes. "The sculpture is on a slight elevation," he explains. The park has used slight elevation and other subtleties to discourage a direct path.

Pomodoro's bronze is based on a natural desert occurrence. Water drips onto sand and eventually bowls it upward into the shape of a flower. In accord with the Meijer plan to make art playfully accessible, the indoor museum boasts take-apart replicas of *Disc* and three other sculptures. Pomodoro is delighted: "They put it in for the children so they know what inspires an artist."

The park invites visitors to mark a Sculpture Score Board. So far, respondents said their favorite sculpture is *Plantoir*, with *American Horse* a close second; the artist they are most curious about is Pomodoro; the best setting goes to *American Horse*; the least understood sculpture is Hepworth's *Summer Dance*; the most interesting

sculpture from different angles is Liberman's *Aria*; and the piece most likely to make you faint is Woodrow's *Listening to History*.

At the panel luncheon on opening day, Fred Meijer asked the visiting artists what addition to the garden each would like. They enthusiastically replied with the names of artists. But Meijer was thinking more personally. "What would each of you like to do that would fit into our garden? What would be the last thing you would like to create in your life? Think about it and give it to me in writing," he suggested, never afraid of the cornerstone question.

Tania Evans is a writer living in Michigan.

