

Cover Story: 'Paradox' at the Point

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By Mary Thomas, Post-Gazette Art Critic

The shaggy Seussian cones and white picket fences at Point State Park weren't put there by the city's landscape crew. They're part of the public sculpture created for the Three Rivers Arts Festival.

This year's "Sculpture in the Park" -- an annual feature of the festival -- reflects both the artists' intentions and those of the new festival executive director, Elizabeth Reiss.

Reiss wanted some parts of the festival to change over its 17-day run, and what better way to show the passing of time than with living components that get bushier and more colorful as the days pass?

The two artists -- Roberley Bell and Michele Brody -- were selected by independent art consultant Kimberly Marrero, of New York, who organized the exhibition, "To the Flag: Taking Liberties," for the Three Rivers Arts Festival Gallery in January. She's also a former gallery director for the Monique Knowlton and Littlejohn Galleries in New York.

Each artist's work is fanciful but also draws attention to nature and the varied ways we relate to our environments.

The components of "Garden Paradox: Roberley Bell and Michele Brody" are site-specific and relate to the park and Pittsburgh's rivers, something that also pleases Reiss, who hopes festival participants will continue a historical exploration of the park.

Places like this, or New York's Central Park, Reiss says, have "the blood and the sweat and the tears of our humanity" underneath what is now green space.



Michele Brody planted grass seed on the figures creating a shoreline along a white gravel river near Fifth Avenue Place. It's part of "Garden Paradox," installations by Brody and Roberley Bell featured in the Three Rivers Arts Festival. (Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette)

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Which we "don't pay homage to" Marrero adds.

It's a "place of respite now -- an amazing location -- a very balanced place."

The 70 winsome little figures that line the stone block curve representing the 1754 river shore line of Point State Park are Brody's. Bottom heavy, their earth-packed bodies extend into necks that are part swan, part snake, and seem to be sensing the air and activity around them. Adding to their charm are their shaggy green coats. Pet them and you'll realize they're sprouting grass.

There's a yellow-brick-road quality to the path that runs between Brody's sculptures, inviting visitors to walk among them. Marrero compares the pathways to "metaphorical passages from one time to the next, from one state of being to the next." Brody sees them as the "Limen," the threshold at which a person passes from one state -- physical or metaphysical -- to another.

But the installation also served as an experience of pure delight one day recently for a toddler who grinned widely as she wandered among the forms, which were taller than she was.

Another 40 figures line paths of white rock on the traffic island on the Point State Park side of Fifth Avenue Place, where until recently an artwork for the 1991 Carnegie International by German artist Maria Nordman stood. The rock trails represent Pittsburgh's three rivers and are laid out in parallel orientation.

Bell's pieces also contain references to three.

White picket fences enclose three trees at the edges of the park's large open center. Bell, who'd researched the Golden Triangle before coming to Pittsburgh, said she selected the trees from photographs she took from the top of the Hilton Hotel because they "demarcated the triangle." Look over the fences at the clusters of yellow marigolds and purple ageratums, and you may begin to receive subliminal messages from the flowers. Actually, the marigolds spell out words like "life," "power," "merge" and "crest" while the ageratums sound a constant "river," each tree grouping representing community, agriculture or industry -- the social components of the riverside.

More enigmatic are the three tall vessel figures of Bell's "Locus Amoenus" work, the title referring, she says, to a "delightful place, a shining field of flowers surrounded by trees and with a crystal stream. This is the image Renaissance man used as a

Three Rivers Arts Festival

● **WHERE:** Point State Park and Downtown.

● **WHEN:** Today through June 23.

● **HOURS:** Noon to 9:30 p.m. daily for the food court and performances; noon to 7 p.m. for the family area; noon to 8 p.m. for indoor exhibits; and noon to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and noon to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday for the Artists Market and Pavilions that house the two-dimensional juried art. All exhibits end June 23 unless otherwise noted.

● **DETAILS:** Information for navigating the festival for persons with disabilities, and manual wheelchairs, will be available at the Festival Volunteer Booth located between the Hilton and Gateway 3.

● **WEB SITE:** www.artsfestival.net

model for the paradise garden." Within a triangular bed lushly planted with multicolored annuals stand the three amply curvaceous "topiaries" made of Astroturf and crowned with rows of artificial flowers in the colors found on ladies' hats -- pink, rose, cream, salmon.

The patches of living and artificial flowers and grass invite the comparisons and contrasts that the artists hope to set up, such as "What is real, and what is fabrication and fantasy?"

Bell, who lives in upstate New York, is assistant professor of foundations and drawing at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, N.Y. She was educated at Alfred University, the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the Instituto Allende, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Brody lives in New York City and recently received the Manhattan Community Arts Fund award and a New York State Council on the Arts Independent Project award. She was educated at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, California College of Arts and Crafts, Sarah Lawrence College, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, and Penn State University.

Marrero says that the artists have in common their interest in interactivity -- how the public responds to the work -- and their use of natural and artificial materials. Both "beckon," she says, Bell to look into her fenced areas and Brody to walk the pathways.

Bell says these "open urban green spaces are the last democratic public spaces." These two artists have given the citizens who stroll among their artworks islands of contemplation and of beauty.

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