

The Three Rivers Arts Festival grows again

By Kurt Shaw
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If you have walked or driven past the front of Fifth Avenue Place along Stanwix Street recently, you have no doubt seen the meandering paths of oddly shaped topiary cones in the island lot across from it.

Looking like tall, hairy Hershey's kisses, the 41 3 1/2-foot-tall topiaries that traverse the grassy, triangular-shaped lot are set alongside white stone walkways that form a map of the three rivers.

Made of white lace fabric that has been sewn into cone shapes and stuffed with topsoil by artist Michele Brody from New York City, the cones were seeded with quick-growing rye grass and Kentucky blue grass three weeks ago and have been anxiously gestating in anticipation of their debut as part of the 43rd Three Rivers Arts Festival.

Although the cones and stone walkways are only part of Brody's installation - the major portion of which is in Point State Park - they have been placed on the triangular lot south of Stanwix Street as a metaphor to the beginning of the festival says Elizabeth Reiss, the festival's executive director.

Reiss and guest curator Kimberly Marrero, an art consultant from New York City, chose Brody and Roberley Bell - two artists who use horticulture and landscape as their media - to create installations for the "Sculpture in the Park" component of the festival because their works are about new beginnings - an appropriate choice for Reiss, this being her first full year as the festival's new director.

"Roberley and Michele's projects are more about fragility and the beginning of growth," Reiss says. "When we see these seeds come out of Michele's cones, that first blade of grass is so delicate and so young, and frankly, just loaded with optimism, that I think these two projects together will have that sense to them."

In Point State Park, Brody's grass-covered cones look more like geese as 69 of them take on a V-shaped formation, the result of having been placed along either side of a 2-foot-wide stone path that marks the shoreline of the point from 1754.

Although the cone formation next to Stanwix Street is untitled, Brody has given

the installation at the point the apt title "Marking the Shoreline." She says this piece is not unlike her previous horticultural-based works that she has created in response to specific environments.

"My general aesthetic is to work in response to what already exists rather than create something completely outside of its realm of what is there," she says.

This approach is similar to that of Bell, the other artist who has been chosen to tackle the park for the festival. Like Brody, Bell also is from New York State, but from Batavia, near Rochester.

Working from photographs that she took of the park from the top of the Hilton hotel, Bell picked three specific trees around which to place 8-foot-square, white picket fence constructions in an effort to call attention to the Golden Triangle.

"The idea that I had was to mark place," Bell says. "Really thinking about the triangulation here and the three rivers coming together."

Each of the three fence constructions has a theme - unity, life and labor - for which Bell has spelled out related words in flowers that she has planted inside the confines of each fenced-in tree.

An additional piece closer to the fountain titled "Locus Amoenus" also references the Golden Triangle with the triangular shape of a 35- by

28- by 35-foot flowerbed in which she has placed three 6-foot-tall urn-shaped sculptures covered in Astroturf and artificial flowers that represent the three rivers.

Bell has placed these types of urns in her installations before, but always in conjunction with live plantings. It is that kind of relationship - the juxtaposition of the artificial with the natural - that Bell uses to emphasize the human desire to control the environment. "All of my work deals with this mediation between the real and the artificial," Bell says.

One has to be thick-skinned to be this type of artist. Not so much because the public might fail to interpret the work, but because the works themselves might not cooperate with regard to bringing ideas to fruition by virtue of their perishable media.

Brody and Bell's works suffered a frost scare two weeks ago when evening temperatures slipped slightly below freezing. Bell was particularly concerned that the fragile, water-filled stems of the impatiens in the bed of flowers in "Locus Amoenus" would freeze.

But with the use of plant materials, the artists must embrace the inherent improbabilities of that medium. These materials germinate, mature and then

wither away. And sometimes they do not germinate at all, as seems to be the case with some of the grass seed in Brody's cones.

Regardless, Reiss is excited about the idea of these naturally evolving sculptural installations that will undoubtedly change throughout the course of the festival. "It's going to be fascinating and interesting to watch the evolution of these sculptures in the park," she says.

'Garden Paradox: Roberley Bell and Michele Brody'

- "Sculpture in the Park" in conjunction with the Three Rivers Arts Festival.
- Point State Park and Stanwix Street opposite Fifth Avenue Place, Downtown.

Three Rivers Arts Festival

- Through June 23
- Indoor exhibits: Noon to 8 p.m. daily
- Artists Market and Pavilions: Noon to 8 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays; noon to 9 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays
- Performances and food courts: Noon to 9:30 p.m. daily
- Children's area: Noon to 7 p.m. daily
- (412) 281-8723 or www.artsfestival.net

Kurt Shaw can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com or .