

Roberley Bell

Inside Out

Laumeier Sculpture Park

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front cover: detail of *Wonder #1*, 2008

back cover: *Room with a view*, 2008

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acknowledgements

Laumeier Sculpture Park's presentation of *Roberley Bell: Inside Out* is the broadest survey of the artist's work to date. The projects in the exhibition trace nearly a decade of Bell's intense exploration of artifice, beauty and the human desire to control our environment. The artist asks a lot of questions with her recombinant twists and turns and, having lived with the exhibition, Bell's work is captivating with an intention and ability to turn on and, possibly, twist minds. I am pleased to have been part of bringing this outstanding exhibition to Laumeier's galleries and patrons.

This publication documents Bell's rigorous practice. There is, however, a challenge before us. As Bell games with us she dangles some colorful eye candy—she allows us to sense a comfort with what appear to be familiar, natural forms. It all appears so purposeful, even easy at times, but Bell will fool you. That is part of the joy of the work. Just when you think you have pinned down an idea it will morph and you will be slightly off kilter—alert and looking for more.

Working in the galleries with Roberley Bell was joyful. We spent a wonderful week together installing the exhibition while she also created new work on site. Some of the pieces had never been together in the same place until this exhibition. Bell (and myself, vicariously) had some true “aha!” moments in the process. Thank you to Roberley for her hard work and generous, collaborative spirit.

Special thanks are also due to Laumeier's staff for the many roles that they play in helping exhibitions such as this come to life. Thanks to Robert Goetz, Manager of Exhibitions and Collections and to his staff for an exceptional job. We also recognize Webster University's Jeffrey Hughes for including Bell in the school's on-going artist lecture series, Christine Pfister from the Pentimenti Gallery in Philadelphia for contributing work to the exhibition and John Massier for his thoughtful essay. I also extend my gratitude to the Laumeier Sculpture Park Board of Directors. We are fortunate to have such an exceptional group of individuals to help govern and support this institution.

Our deepest gratitude is also due to the Regional Arts Commission; the Arts and Education Council of St. Louis; the Mark Twain Laumeier Fund; St. Louis County Parks; Laumeier's docents, volunteers, friends, student ambassadors and patrons for providing year-round support.

Kim Humphries

Director of Exhibitions and Collections



Gallery 1 installation view

Postcards from the Hedge

I've spent the better part of the last decade in an ongoing visual relationship with the work of Roberley Bell.

When I first became aware of the work almost ten years ago, I took note of the psychological and emotional play between interior and exterior space and how particular perspectives were used to suggest an expanse amplified by subjectivity and memory. These first works were subtle black and white photographic images residing within decorative floral designs. They were quiet but persistent images that hovered before the viewer like something dimly remembered. Hardly heavy-handed, they were serious.

And then the postcards began arriving.

I started to receive cards now and then, illustrating a new work or installation by Bell, and I took a quiet thrill in recognizing that moment of the unexpected, the thing you didn't see coming, the curve ball that provokes a double take. I think the first card I received showed a sunny, grassy area within which stood two large green urns seemingly realized in artificial turf with bases and tops adorned by pink and white flowers. The whole scene was bracketed by yellow lawn chairs. It wasn't clear at first whether the flowers were real or not, though that ambiguity also clearly appeared to be the point.

What struck me, apart from the seeming departure from the previous photographic work I had known, was how wholeheartedly Bell embraced the language of topiary as a sculptural device. Rather than a droll, artistic intervention—say, plunking some implausible object into the landscape and remarking on our intrusive tendencies toward nature—Bell chose to articulate forms that, while sculpturally distinctive, could potentially be read as the furtherance of a landscape architect's artistic gestures—and let's face it, these forms were a kind of landscape architecture. But I also began to think about frivolity—the frivolity of form and color and what role that might be playing in the work.

The urn forms would return in subsequent postcards, once again framed by a seating arrangement and once turned on their sides. In all these installations, it was not always entirely clear where the line between nature and artifice was drawn and Bell's sculptural insertions into real outdoor environments treated these real spaces as another sculptural plateau. During the period of these works, I never spoke directly with the artist about them. They were just picture postcards arriving in the mail, as though from someone on a long holiday in unexpected lands. Then the location of the holiday seemed to shift into the gallery sphere, as the same green urn forms transformed into mats that spilled out from bulbous blue seats. The pink and white flourish of flowers remained, but other things like colored plastic inner tubes began appearing in her images, giving me pause for thought.

And then we arrived in the city of Batavia.

Along with a group of curators jurying a 2005 exhibition, I entered Bell's studio and met this new current in her work face-to-face in the form of a series of standing sculptures she had begun that she would eventually name the *Flower Blobs*. If my reaction to the regularly-arriving postcards was bemusement and surprise, I was startled to see this new work with a more acute sensation of the unexpected because it happened in person.

The trajectory of her work was revealing itself to me and, though we did dozens of studio visits with other artists and I had entered the process without preconceived ideas about which artists I might exhibit, Bell's work took a weird hold on me. Eventually, this new series would find itself sharing Hallwalls' space with two other artists making use of the trope of natural-seeming artifice. Propped up on inner tubes, extended with pool noodles, adorned with artificial flowers and butterflies and often coated in thick and goopy layers of bright paint, these works plied an irresistible mojo.

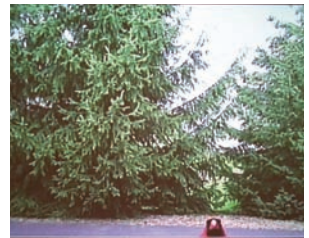
And they were not irresistible because they were pretty. They are pretty—and there's nothing wrong with that. But Bell's use of surface appeal—the bright, glossy, candified sheen and the furried sections of flocked lushness—is a calculated ploy. These works used frivolity as a mannered device to subtly (or is that grotesquely?) veil what else might be going on in the works. Her use of color is always measured and sensible, but it's also aggressive and it takes a little while for that first sensory blast to cool off and for your eyes to get accustomed to the visual language at play.

Then you begin to notice how many of the standing ones seem about your height and how they manage to appear alternately elegant and awkward. Which is not to suggest that they are anthropomorphic stand-ins for the audience but they are produced at a scale that draws an easy physical relationship with the viewer. They are intense, but never confrontational. Their central, “bodily” forms are the blobs at the heart of the cacophony, drawn from the recent trend of blobitecture, in which architectural forms are shaped to appear more organic than their component parts might initially suggest. Curiously, Bell's works simultaneously evoke other art historical (and pop historical) forms, as though they were uncertain whether they pined to be a Moore, an Arp, a Brancusi or the headdress of Carmen Miranda. So, if they are figurative decoys of us, they have a self-deprecating sense of humor about it.

These works also exemplify a tendency that has grown in contemporary art—in the past twenty years especially—toward a utilization of quotidian forms in a manner that seeks less to express irony or kitsch appeal (though it is impossible to entirely dilute their kitsch appeal) and more toward a hybridization of forms and colors. Commercial products have found their way into artwork for many decades, but their use as formal devices on par with any other artistic material is a relatively new development. While you cannot entirely dissolve irony any more than kitsch appeal, Bell's recent works operate in a



foreground: *Video Bench*, 2009; background: *Wonder #1*, 2008
right: *Cardinal*, 2007





background: *A Borrowed View*, 2008; center: *Other Landscape #1*, 2009; right: *Flower Blob #73*, 2006

terrain somewhat beyond those two concepts, and even beyond references to Pop art tenets. The artificial, the plastic and the store-bought are used here as tools of hybridized thought, visual and sculptural components that are selected by the artist because they speak as effectively as a smear of paint or any other more conventional material.

Where Bell had previously made the actual outdoors, in combination with real and artificial flowers, appear contrived and fake (however beautiful), she had now reversed the methodology and was employing obviously fake elements in a manner that was organic and natural-seeming, which sounds easier than it is. Bell is striving to make the artificial seem natural without looking natural. It might even be simpler to make some portion of the sculptures look convincingly real and blur the nature / artifice divide that way. But Bell chooses the more challenging route of remaining true to the essential artifice of her materials. Her store-bought pool accessories, fake flowers and even motion-sensored chirping birds overtly advertise themselves as-is. In doing so, they succeed in expressing a cogent, internal logic. The triviality of cheap commercial products is melded with delicate skill to generate new forms that, despite their artificiality, are credible and convincing entities.

While she had shifted her terrain back inside, this move would not be permanent and the fact that there was at least one more picture postcard to be received—with floating blob sculptures resting atop a placid lake—was a clue that interior / exterior space was a malleable, fluid equation to Bell. That some of the blob sculptures now reside within small set pieces that evoke and invert her earlier exterior tableaux is no accident. Even within this shift, Bell continues to flex her forms. New clear glass blobs have appeared, into which flowers are plunked, overtly evoking decorative vases. Colored mats read as modular carpeting. Blobs which previously perched atop their own vertical stems now rest on tabletops, one of the legs of a table fastened to a decoy duck.

The whole scene might suggest a catalogue image of better living in the not-too-distant future, except Bell has also begun to introduce the real into this imagined living space. A real tree trunk topped by a slab of brilliant orange, with a faux orange tree emerging from it, stands as its own oasis in proximity to the main cluster of blob forms. There is a delicate, purposeful harmony to it all. The blob resting on the table is topped by a swirled line whose wild energy is counterbalanced by the Zen stillness of the pointed orange dots nearby. Even the “glass-vased” flowers, which underscore the broader themes of manipulating the natural world, are used with sufficient concision to prevent them from seeming trite or merely decorative.

Bell's video of a window view depicts a cardinal in a lengthy battle with the pane of glass. As he endlessly attacks and retreats from his battle with this barrier the bird appears more avatar than avian further emphasizing both the real and artificial as well as the interchangeable realms of the interior and exterior. That the first works I knew—those serious-seeming black and white images—are exhibited alongside the campy articulations of the newer sculptures as well as this video is not as disjunctive as

it might at first appear. The floral patterning that appeared in those earlier works reappears in this new installation as a broad swath of wallpaper against which wall blobs are installed—though only on one wall in a room—with other sculptures laid against white walls, reiterating the dual impulse that reverberates through the works: interior / exterior, serious / preposterous, natural / artificial. That no clear preference is defined may be a key point in the work.

Equally key to the work may be the awareness of unexpected beauty. Bell's series of photographic diptychs (strangely enough, picture postcard-sized) documenting her walking tours through Salzburg provide a telling clue. They're not exactly about landscape or nature, though they are shot in a landscape and often include nature. They seem to be much more about singular, intimate moments in which emphatic colors and compositions come into play for the eye, a mélange of the natural and man-made world that surrounds us perpetually. Situated alongside louder, more exaggerated works that explode in color and preen for attention, these innocuous photographs, delicate as the butterfly specimens that waft through other parts of the space, may be the ultimate revelation about the eye of the artist and the view to which that eye is rapturously beholden.

Appropriately, Bell represents her literal Salzburg walks as drawn lines inserted across the middle of these diptychs—long, irregular, unexpected lines, and never the same one twice. They are marks that literally document her journeys, but also represent the line Bell is perpetually drawing between the natural and the man-made and it's worth noting that it's never a straight line. The terrain of nature and artifice through which Bell moves is always shifting. Their distinctions and proportions remain in a state of enthusiastic, unfettered flux.

One of the first meanings applied to these works is that they remark upon the controls we apply in trying to shape the natural world and make it conform to our desires, and it's wholly obvious and appropriate. But Bell's meaning does not reside solely in a critical dissembling of our relationship to the natural world. It can't, or else these works would not look like they do. Instead, she relishes the use of frivolity as a device to approach this idea. The duality of that process has, from the beginning of this long series, been fascinating. To be artificial and fake without apology while veering toward something elegant, beautiful, and potentially sublime, is much like one of Bell's Salzburg jaunts—a circuitous trajectory but one loaded with possibility.

John Massier

Visual Arts Curator, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center



Flower Blob #77, 2006

exhibition list | *Roberley Bell: Inside Out*

gallery 1

Perfect View Lisbon, 2001, handmade abaca paper with watermark and archival digital print, paper size 25 x 36", print size 14 x 16" ¹

Floating Flowers, 2009, blown glass, flowers, 6 x 5 x 5" each (10) ²

Flower Blob #68, 2005, steel, cast foam with dyed plastic and flocking, plastic flowers, beaded fruit, 60 x 16 x 11"

Flower Blob #83, 2009, cast foam and plastic, flocking, tree trunk, plaster, 65 x 22 x 12"

Perfect View St. Petersburg, 2001, handmade abaca paper with watermark and archival digital print, paper size 25 x 36", print size 14 x 16" ¹

Flower Blob #75, 2006, painted fiberglass with plastic flowers, novelty bird, 65 x 14 x 20"

Flower Blob #82, 2009, cast foam with plastic, flocking, tree trunk, wood, 60 x 22 x 16"

Perfect View Deerfield, 2001, handmade abaca paper with watermark and archival digital print, paper size 25 x 36", print size 14 x 16" ¹

hall

Between the Memory and Then, 2000, screen print on rice paper, stuffed birds, 12 x 28" ³

Between the Memory and Then, 2000, screen print on rice paper, stuffed birds, 16 x 16" ³

foyer

Flower Blob Orchid Vase, 2006, cast foam, pigmented plastic, flocking, flowers, 12 x 5 x 8"

Wunder Kammer for Laumeier, 2009, blown glass, preserved beetles, preserved butterflies, artificial lichen, dimensions variable ²

gallery 2

Flower Blob #77, 2006, painted fiberglass, plastic flowers, novelty bird, 36 x 20 x 21"

Flower Blob #84, 2009, cast foam, flocking, painted birds, plastic flowers, 32 x 16 x 16"

Flower Blob #65, 2005, cast foam with dyed plastic, flocking, plastic flowers, beaded fruit, 24 x 16 x 9"

Flower Blob #62, 2005, cast foam, pigmented plastic, flocking, palace flowers, 24 x 16 x 9"

Flower Blob #63, 2004, cast foam, plastic flocking, beeswax, beaded fruit, plastic flowers, 19 x 12 x 10"

Flutter #3, 2008, cast foam forms, plastic preserved butterflies, plastic, dimensions variable

gallery 3

Other Landscape #3, 2009, pigmented fiberglass, pigmented foam, silicone, applied wall vinyl wall, dimensions variable

Flower Blob #80, 2008, pigmented fiberglass, resin, plaster, artificial flowers and butterflies, 54 x 16 x 22"

Wonder #5, 2008, plaster, expanded foam, plastic, preserved butterflies, 20 x 32 x 15"

Other Landscape #1, 2009, blown glass, steel, inner tube, plastic bird, wood base, 60 x 24 x 16"²

Other Landscape #2, 2009, blown glass, steel, pigmented plastic, found china bird, 23 x 12 x 10"²

Flower Blob #73, 2006, painted fiberglass, plastic flowers, novelty birds and fruit, inflatable, 58 x 24 x 24"

A Borrowed View (exploded view), 2008, digital printing, 29 pages each with artist's velum drawing overlay, image size 2.5 x 2", page size 10 x 6.25"

A Borrowed View, 2008, digital printing, bound book, 58 pages, image size 2.5 x 2", page size 10 x 6.25"

gallery 4

Room with a view, 2009, pigmented fiberglass, polychrome steel, found china bird, wood, foam mats, blown glass, plastic ducks, flowers, artificial lemon tree, inflatable, dimensions variable²

Flower Blob #64, 2005, cast foam with dyed plastic, flocking, plastic flowers, plastic balls, flocked bird, 20 x 16 x 12"

gallery 5.1

Wonder vase #1, 2009, blown glass, preserved beetles, flowers, 9 x 17 x 9"²

Wonder vase #2, 2009, blown glass, preserved beetles, flowers, 9 x 11 x 9"²

gallery 5.2

Cardinal, 2007, color video with sound; Michael White, editor and videographer

Video Bench, 2009, pigmented fiberglass, blown glass, steel, foam, real flowers, 58 x 32 x 28"

Wonder #2, 2008, mechanical bird, preserved butterflies, moss balls, plastic flowers dimensions variable

Wonder #1, 2008, mechanical bird, preserved butterflies, moss balls, plastic flowers, dimensions variable

¹ Prints produced while an artist in residence at the Dieu Donné, New York

² Glass sculpture in the exhibition was produced during the artist's residency at the Tacoma Museum of Glass, Tacoma, WA

³ Prints produced while an artist in residence at Hand Print Workshop International, Alexandria, VA

artist biography

Roberley Bell spent her childhood in Latin America and Southeast Asia, before returning to the United States to attend the University of Massachusetts and State University of New York at Alfred where she received an MFA in Sculpture. Bell is the recipient of many grants and fellowships including two from the New York Foundation for the Arts, a Pollock Krasner Fellowship, two Fulbright fellowships as well as several residency awards. Bell is represented by Pentimenti Gallery of Philadelphia.

selected solo exhibitions

- 2009 *Inside Out*, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis
Wonder, Armory Art Center, West Palm Beach
- 2008 *Becoming Blurred*, Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia
- 2007 *Becoming Blurred*, ADA Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2006 *At Play*, Black and White Gallery, Brooklyn
Window Dressing, Paul Petro Gallery (window project) Toronto
- 2004 *Dressing*, Black and White Gallery, Brooklyn
- 2002 *Trace*, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo
- 2001 *Always the Immigrant*, Old Dominion University Gallery, Norfolk, VA
- 1997 *Place Memory*, Allegheny College, Meghan Gallery, Meadville, PA
- 1996 *The Site of Memory*, Wright State University, Contemporary Art Museum, Dayton

selected public and outdoor site projects

- 2009 *Paradise re-made*, Tower Kronprinz, Kaliningrad, Russia
- 2008 *Hovering*, Abington Art Center, Philadelphia
Gates, Costa Lopez Park, Cambridge, MA
- 2007 *Anomaly*, I Park, East Haddam, CT
Bloom, Onondaga Community College, Syracuse
- 2006 *Art on Campus*, Sculpture Space at 30 Hamilton College Campus, Clinton, NY
- 2004 *Gardens 2004*, Grant Park, Chicago

selected group exhibitions

- 2008 *Fantastical Imaginings*, Delaware Center For the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington
Wildlife, Mt IDA Gallery, Mt IDA College, Newton, MA
- 2007 *Beyond / In Western New York*, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo
Persistent Play, Cohen Fine Art Center Gallery, Alfred University, Alfred, NY
- 2006 *SCOPE Miami* art fair, (Curators Office, Washington, DC), Miami
Bridge Art Fair Miami, (Pentimenti Gallery Philadelphia), Miami
Garden, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Richmond, VA

For a complete biography visit: <http://www.roberleybell.com>

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