

## *Intimate Discoveries: Nature and Poetry in the Art of Mayme Kratz*

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May, 2002

When French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote *The Poetics of Space* (1958), an investigation of space, poetry and metaphor, he stimulated a new awareness of external and internal environments by using poetry to illustrate how such realms can be articulated. His seminal work subsequently influenced countless visual artists to explore art and poetics in new and profound ways. Fascinated by both nature and poetry, Mayme Kratz has fashioned cast resin sculpture and two-dimensional works that provide an intimate look at the external world and the internal world with poetic grace and grandeur. Her art, capturing the essence of the interconnectedness of nature and space and the creative spirit, is at once haunting and beautiful.

Of course, exalting nature through art is not a new development in America. In the 1800s, for example, the Hudson River School artists portrayed nature in all its sublime splendor as a means of nourishing the soul. The use of visual, abstracted expressions of nature, however, is a later phenomenon, examined well by John Baur of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1958 he organized an exhibition, “Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art,” which included fifty-seven artists. Ranging from Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, and Helen Frankenthaler to Philip Guston, Hans Hoffman and Willem deKooning, these artists appear to have been chosen more for their abstraction than for their conscious examination of the essence of nature. Nonetheless, Baur divided the exhibition into three distinct categories, within what he called “the all-embracing universe around us”: (1) the tangible world of land and water, (2) the intangible world of light, sky and air, and (3) the eternal forces of germination, growth and death which make up the cycles of life and season.<sup>1</sup> What resounds in Baur’s thesis is the larger question that each artist addressed—the relation of abstract art to all experience and the artist’s approach to reality through abstraction and symbol.

Mayme Kratz deserves just as much attention as those eminent artists who preceded her in 1958. She not only addresses all three of Baur’s distinctions within the “universe around us,” but she epitomizes the search for understanding and communication that links artists of every generation. Focusing on the difficult decisions that artists must make to successfully express

concepts of nature for a higher purpose, Baur also explains the advantage of an abstract approach. He writes:

The abstract approach confronts the contemporary artist with agonizing difficulties and a series of nearly impossible choices: between image and gesture, order and chaos, expression and communication, truths private and universal. Yet it has also given him a tool of extraordinary sensitivity with which to probe beneath the surface of things to the very heart of human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Because Mayme Kratz has made these difficult choices with rare sensitivity, she has been able to achieve an intimate, yet profound look at nature in her art as a way to understand greater aspects of our existence—a feat that commands attention.

Kratz was born in 1958 in San Diego County and raised in the old mining town of Julian, a small mountain community known for its apple orchards. There she had a slow-paced, idyllic childhood that allowed her the solitude and time to explore nature in a rural environment. With her parents and two brothers, Kratz grew up in a pristine land characterized by majestic oak trees, tall pines, and clear air. Living in this rustic area provided Kratz with myriad opportunities to stretch her imagination and explore nature. During the summers she rode horses, fished in the pond near her house, hiked in the mountains and tended the family's garden. Most influential to her creative development, however, were her frequent sojourns into the dense stand of woods behind her house, often at night when the world seems magical and alive with possibilities.

Like many children with inquisitive minds, Kratz wanted to understand how life forms worked, and fantasized about becoming a doctor someday. By the time she was 6 years old she was dissecting plants and animals to learn about their structures and functions. The pond near her house provided a ready laboratory for experimentation. After catching bluegill and catfish, she attempted her own form of organ transplants. Using her mother's tiny sewing scissors, needle and thread, she removed the livers and other organs of one fish and sewed them into another, believing that exploring the inner workings of animals was a good way to learn about medicine.

Her intense investigation of nature acted as a source of discovery—uncovering the unknown, the hidden and the forgotten. As Kratz explains, “When you grow up in the country, you have a lot of animals that eventually die. I would bury them; then a few weeks later, I'd wonder

whether they were really dead. So, I would dig them up. I knew they were dead but believed that a transition would happen and there was still a life form there—I didn't want to miss it."<sup>3</sup> These innocent, yet earnest preoccupations kept her engaged for hours. Before long, her focus on life forms became the catalyst for a lifelong interest in nature and the metaphoric possibilities of the cycles of life and death.

While still retaining a fascination with nature, Kratz developed an early interest in art. Leaving San Diego County in her teens, she moved for a short time to Escondido, California, where she focused on art, working in a plant nursery to support herself. Within a few years she returned to Julian, lured home by the opportunity to work with James Hubbell, a noted local artist and architect who had gained a reputation for his imaginative, freeform designs for chapels, restaurants and private residences in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Hubbell's development as an artist and approach to art making paralleled her own. Hubbell, who had a keen interest in horses and nature, taught himself to become an artist and architect, merging an interest in poetry, nature, and mixed media to create art and architecture that focused on concepts of transcendency. As Hubbell explains, "Nature is embedded in us down to our toenails; the earth is where we come from and where we go. Stardust is measured in our molecules. We may be flickering candles, afloat in an eternity of time and space. Can we, these specks of dust, coming from the mud, sing to the stars?"<sup>5</sup>

This five-year apprenticeship proved to be invaluable to Kratz, as she learned such skills as glass window construction, bronze casting, mosaic tiling and building construction. Such experiences finely tuned Kratz's technical abilities and allowed her to develop her own artistic vision. In particular, her experience with Hubbell encouraged her to be free to use a variety of materials and to refine her skills as a stained-glass artist, which manifested in both architectural applications and sculptural works. Influenced by Hubbell, the colorful qualities of glass and its luminescence became the focus of her own work, resulting in window design and three-dimensional sculptural works reminiscent of kite forms. These early glass shapes, hung from the ceiling and against the wall, ranged from 24" x 30" to an impressive 60" x 36." Focusing on light and shadow, they moved slightly, casting shadows on the wall that suggested birds in flight.

Such personal investigations continued while she worked with Hubbell, an affiliation that lasted until 1984 when she went to Scotland to build a large glass façade designed by Hubbell for the Universal Hall building in the community of Findhorn. After the two-month fabrication

process was complete, Kratz traveled to France, Switzerland and Italy, where she experienced the rich heritage of European artistic treasures, in particular intrigued by the paintings of Renaissance artists Fra Angelico and Hieronymus Bosch.

Drawn to the majestic landscape and the long history of a supportive cultural community, she returned to the United States and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. After marrying and settling into studio/living quarters off Upper Canyon Road, Kratz directed her attention to painting, beginning with a series of self-portraits influenced by the works of Der Blaue Reiter artist Alexei von Jawlensky. At this time, Kratz also began to read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in particular passages referring to the *Bardo thödol*, about the after-death experience (The Art of Dying).<sup>6</sup> Within a year, she had created her “Bardo” series of paintings.

These figurative and abstracted works focused on shadow, light and movement, a natural progression from her earlier glass sculptures. But in this new series, instead of the uplifting effects of light and shadow, these paintings were dark, and dealt with the disintegration of the body and the transformation of the soul. As the artist explained, “The bardo is a forty-nine-day period, and at the time I wanted to isolate myself for that exact amount of time and only paint. It became clear that it was too difficult to do this and still function in the real world.”<sup>7</sup> Still, this experience marked a transformation in the artist and the way she approached her art. While Kratz had earlier investigated the external world, she now focused on the introspective nature of the creative process.

More changes would occur for Kratz in the coming years. While the land and the culture of New Mexico held her heart, a burgeoning market for private and public commissions and affordable studio space encouraged her to move to Phoenix in the mid-1980s. This move proved to be beneficial for Kratz. Within three years she was invited to exhibit her new body of work, the “Vertigo” series, in a New Directions exhibition at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts. Her oils on canvas were marked by shapeless, abstracted figures falling in a dark void, an extension of the “Bardo” series she had completed earlier. Inspired by dreams about flying and falling, these paintings also spoke about the leaps of faith one makes throughout life. The exhibition was met with mixed reviews, but nevertheless the critics acknowledged her as an important emerging artist and established her as a part of the cultural fabric of Arizona.<sup>8</sup>

As her art developed, Kratz began to place her abstracted figures in a landscape—eventually the full compositions became landscapes. Many paintings focused on an eerie light source—an

ethereal glow that emanated from an undefined place. The work became about the landscape, surely inspired by her recollections of nocturnal visits to the woods outside her family home in California, but also influenced by her experiences hiking in the mountains around Santa Fe and desert mountains around Phoenix and northern Arizona. During this time, Kratz also began to incorporate framing techniques as integral parts of the compositions. She covered the surfaces of these frames with pine needles, seeds, and other dried organic matter that she found on hikes and in her garden.

Not merely decorative elements, the materials applied to the heavily laden frames were saturated with dark pigment, retaining the appearance of the detritus of nature. They were vaguely reminiscent of the effect of the lead and straw that Neo-Expressionist painter Anselm Kiefer so powerfully incorporated into his large-scale land and cityscapes of that decade. The heightened emotional content in his work through dimension and texture intrigued Kratz and allowing herself the same freedom to experiment, she continued to develop her work in dramatic ways.<sup>9</sup> Eventually her compositions became less about the formal landscape. Eliminating the horizon line, she returned to the mysterious void of her earlier paintings. This time, however, the void was not about the unknown expanse of space in the cosmos, but an increasingly inward-looking investigation of the microcosm of nature.

During this time of experimentation (which included the use of fluids, papers and wax), Kratz took a pivotal turn with her work. Finding that many of her materials were not permanent enough for her purposes, in 1990 she began to create three-dimensional forms using polymer resin.<sup>10</sup> Casting in this material not only resulted in the translucent properties she desired, but it allowed her to imbed many of the same materials that earlier adorned the surface of her two-dimensional framed paintings. The sculptural shape she created was a small house, the standard icon of the American home—pitched roof and four sided, it acted as metaphors for safety and nurturing. Often these works were mounted on tall stilts of welded steel rebar, further enhancing the symbolic content of the sculpture. Offset by its base, the isolated house forms signify solitude and isolation, referencing the individual, both in body and thought.

Kratz used the house shape for more than its metaphoric content, however. To her this form, as she explains, “. . . creates an order and a sense of belonging and boundaries, and gives me a starting point. It’s like creating a garden . . . you find . . . order, then plant, and chaos happens.”<sup>11</sup> While the symbol of the house could be seen as something that implies serenity, it

also defines another realm—of memory and the dream world, a state of unconsciousness that embodies the concept of the uncontrollable in its primordial nature. Gaston Bachelard, with whose theories Kratz is familiar, echoes this notion of the house as the container for chaos in the form of dreams. Viewing the house as one of the “greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind,” he explains:

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”<sup>12</sup>

Kratz is aware of the power of this metaphor and—as an avid reader, journal keeper and writer of poetry—merges her interest in memory and dreams into a visual that prompts universal understanding.

Just as compelling in these works as the shapes, however, is what is placed inside them. Increasing her menagerie of organic materials, she floated an array of animal and vegetable parts and wholes: sunflower seeds, butterfly wings, moths, sunflowers, cicada wings, ocotillo skeletons, lizard remains, bee wings, dead birds, nests, cactus remains. By tinting the resin, she captured the images as if in amber, or frozen in time in a dark primordial sludge. This translucency encourages the viewer to look into and through the work, not merely at it. This visual effect allows for symbolic references to be made on multiple levels—the sensual nature of the material, the metaphoric implications in the shape of the sculpture, and the emotional response garnered from the contents of the work.

Another shape that Kratz utilized, beginning in 1993, was the block form. Placing individual three-dimensional squares next to each other, Kratz created wall installations. By adhering several elements of resin together, multiple compartments of disparate objects could be juxtaposed with one another, creating contrasts and corollaries in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. Within a couple of years, her house forms became more complicated and larger, foregoing the stilted base and appearing columnar at times. By working in a modular form and joining several individual blocks to increase the scale of her works, Kratz opened the door of opportunity for herself to create large-scale corporate and public works by commissions.

The mid-1990s was a prolific period for the artist and the fruits of her labor were rewarded by the press. While Kratz frequently utilized her own and other's poetry as sources of inspiration, her art during this period brought out the poet in the critics as well. Applauding the quiet and mysterious effect of her work from the exhibition, *In the Garden*, one journalist remarked:

Kratz's garden is a mystical place where the tendrils of growth and decay tangle and rub, where haunting specters appearing on the ground and in the night sky during moonlit walks glide easily past us. Through these tranquil pieces, the artist successfully invites us to join in."<sup>13</sup>

What touched her audience is how Kratz embraced and preserved the dead and decaying of nature, elevating the ordinary to the extraordinary. By the careful selection of materials and the tinted resin shape that embodies them, the artist attempts to bring out what she describes as "the soul of these natural things, the invisible part that lives on after they appear to die."<sup>14</sup> The cycles of birth, growth and decay are thus enshrined, perhaps halting the process momentarily to study it as a reflection on the self.

During this time, perhaps in response to the ending of her marriage, Kratz also expanded on her choice of materials to include such found objects as plaster doll parts. Fragile arms and legs, dug up in the process of creating a garden, float in her iconic house forms and speak of secrets and memories, of what is buried and exposed—an expression of her sense of vulnerability at the prospect and trepidation of being alone. Keenly aware of the power of presentation, after the elaborate glass containers for the toes, fingers and hair of saints she had seen in Italy many years before, she called her works "altars" or "reliquaries," heightening the significance of her art.

As if to show her resilience to look beyond herself and life's daily concerns, she focused primarily on images from nature, creating at this time an entire wall of small spheres against a black background. In these works, seeds, bees, butterfly wings and roots, which she called "links," float delicately in amber-tinted resin. Explains the artist, "Essentially, I view them as our link with nature, something that we'd ordinarily just step on and wouldn't see. I try to give them a presence, a place."<sup>15</sup> While encouraging the viewer to see what is normally overlooked, these spheres are reminders of the artist's declaration that she too exists, that we each feel a sense of importance when addressed intimately.

Other examples of Kratz's personal introspection revealing the essence or importance of life can be seen in *Nine Pages (A Dream of Home)*, 1992, a bird's nest embedded in thick, milky

white resin that she sliced into “pages” to reveal the nest at different levels, similar to the meticulous slicing of a CAT scan. Once again, with the image of the nest in Kratz’s work, correlations can be made to Bachelard and his inquiry into the poetics and primal nature of the nest, an image that he believes is of extraordinary significance. He elaborates, “We want them to be perfect, to bear the mark of a very sure instinct.”<sup>16</sup> Bachelard expresses the notion that when we examine a nest, we “place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. . . . Our house, apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dreams, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home.”<sup>17</sup> By slicing the nest in this work, Kratz not only examines in detail the very structure of the nest, but symbolically reexamines herself and the sense of security she once had, now split apart.

About this time, Kratz also began to make two-dimensional panels that she mounted on the wall. Still formed of her medium of pigmented resin imbedded with organic matter, these works were single panels or mounted side by side as diptychs or triptychs. Commenting on the dialectic narrative in these panels, one critic described a work from her exhibition *Fragments of a Former Life*:

In *Holy Longing*, the left section is beige painted with cracks like a parched desert land. A tiny gecko is set in the surface like a fossil, the remnant of some other life, some other time. The center section has a dark, mahogany core. Subtle colors spread out from this core and darken into black, the way varnish clouds with age. This tiny abstraction manages to suggest a birth, a star emerging from the darkness. The right section is a pale orange. The tiny bits of texture on the surface are curls of hair trapped beneath a beeswax glaze. Here is the light that emerges from the painting’s dark center. This is the coda of earth, night and sun.<sup>18</sup>

Emphasizing the narratives and the subsequent meaning that emerges from her work, Kratz reaffirms the cycles of life by an introspective look at nature through the arrangements of simple organic matter and color.

In 1998 further developments in Kratz’s work occurred. A productive and significant year, her house forms grew to become columns, increasing in size and narrative content. As the artist explains, “I feel the column forms are a little more narrative than the houses. The houses are more like a moment captured in time and the columns are about a story.”<sup>19</sup> In this year, Kratz was invited for a three-week residency at the famed Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, Washington. Working with a team of trained glassblowers, she was able to realize her ideas in



“hot glass,” a medium that was new to her. With the technical support provided to her and a full time studio assistant, Kratz was able to develop her ideas with a different approach. “What interested me most about working with glass was the luminosity,” Kratz explained. “I still find this to be true, however, the medium in its liquid state is quite amazing. When working with hot glass it is like working with liquid light. You have the distinct feeling that you are creating something from fire.”<sup>20</sup>

When she returned in the fall to Pilchuck, she hired the same team that she worked with during her residency to assist her with the “Memory Cell” series. This series consisted of clear blown glass spheres imbedded with various organic objects only visible as charcoal remains due to the hot glass process.<sup>21</sup> While these “Memory Cells” reminded her of her childhood and the hours spent searching for tadpole eggs, she also was aware of the emerging references to microscopic cells and the idea that memory might be captured within the cells of the body. Increasingly, by virtue of the implications imbued in the remains from nature and how she ordered them, it became obvious that her work was, as one critic remarked, “nature not described, but felt.” As Kratz elaborated, “What I deal with is a battle between dark and light, between what’s seen and what’s unseen.”<sup>22</sup> The increasingly detailed look at nature combined with references to the dualities of life (yin and yang, outside and inside, light and dark, reality and transcendence) makes Kratz’s work significant beyond the mere beauty of its parts.

Because Kratz has kept journals and has been exposed to poetry since she was a child, it is interesting to examine how poetry and writing have affected her work. For instance, when she was at Pilchuck she was moved by a passage from “The Journey” by David Whyte, in *The House of Belonging*.

Above the mountains  
the geese turn into  
the light again

painting their  
black silhouettes  
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything  
has to be  
enscribed across  
the heavens

so you can find  
the one line  
already written  
inside you.

Sometimes it takes  
a great sky  
to find that

first, bright  
and indescribable  
wedge of freedom  
in your own heart.

Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out

someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes  
of your life.

*You are not leaving  
you are arriving.*<sup>23</sup>

While Kratz does not aim to illustrate the poetry that touches her, certain images, or rather the essence of those images, make their way into her art, reflecting the same sensibility and poetic resonance.

A new series of works emerged in Kratz's *oeuvre* at the millennium. Boat forms, first introduced in the exhibition *Waking in the Dark* at the Joseph Gross Gallery at The University of Arizona, presented new symbols and metaphors, delicately jewel-toned resin still encasing dried geckos, plants, and insects. At first she intended to cradle them on metal legs as she had done with her earlier house forms. Instead, she laid them on their sides, marooned on a cold steel table with intense lights illuminating the stranded specimens. The simple decision to leave them prone and displayed as a grouping caused a more dramatic reading of the form, loading it with

more possibilities. This installation tells of a journey into the unknown—leaving everything behind for uncharted territory. It is a journey that we all take in one form or another with the same sense of wonder and trepidation. Once again the metaphoric content in her work shares equal importance with its seductive beauty.

Kratz continues to address symbolic references to journeys to the unknown in recent work. To the artist, these works are about personal change and transformation. While spending two weeks backpacking in the wilderness of Arizona and Utah last year, she was touched by the immensity of the sky and the majestic nature of the earth, at once reflecting on transitions at mid-life. She was reminded of Galway Kinnell’s poem, “The Middle of the Way”:

I wake in the night,  
An old ache in the shoulder blades.  
I lie amazed under the trees.  
That creak a little in the dark,  
The giant trees of the world.

I lie on the earth the way  
Flames lie on the wood pile.  
Or as an imprint, in sperm, of what is to be.  
I love the earth, and always  
In its darkneses I am a stranger. . . .

The coals go out,  
The last smoke weaves up  
Losing itself in the stars.  
This is my first night to lie  
In the uncreating dark.

In the human heart  
There sleeps a green worm  
That has spun the heart about itself,  
And that shall dream itself black wings  
One day to break free into the beautiful black sky.

I leave my eyes wide open,  
I lie here and forget our life,  
All I see is we float out  
Into the emptiness, among the great stars,  
On this little vessel without lights.

I know I love the day,  
The sun on the mountain, the Pacific  
Shiny and accomplishing itself in breakers,

But I know I live half alive in the world,  
Half my life belongs to the wild darkness.<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting on nature, transition and the concept of floating in the emptiness of the void, she created *Dark Journey* 2002, in which the shed-skin of a snake floats in an inky black darkness. Kratz had also used the spiral pattern as a symbol three years earlier when she created *Curious Wounds*, 1999, inspired by a dream. In *Curious Wounds*, exposed poppy seed pods spiral outward in a fleshy ground; the journal entry attached reads, “When I woke I remembered seeing the curious wounds—spirals on each shoulder. My skin had opened to accept what was missing. There was no bleeding, only the haunting sound of wings.”<sup>25</sup> To Kratz, the spiral is a form that she often finds in nature, indicating the “constant and relentless” evolution and movement of leaving an emotional place and arriving at a new one.<sup>26</sup>

Spiral references can also be seen in *Leaving/Arriving*, 2001, and *Divided Journey*, 2001. Encountering insect trails forming spiral patterns and petroglyph symbols on the rocks during her excursions into the wilderness inspired her to continue her investigation of this pattern and its implications in art and life.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the divisions of background color in these works indicate the idea of two opposing feelings and the resulting division in the soul. Reflecting again on Kinnell’s poem, Kratz’s divisions strike a similar chord to his musing on the duality of a life half grounded to earth and half devoted to “the wild darkness.” In *Divided Journey*, 2001, however, the divisions (black above bone-white) have an additional reference point—that of making a difficult decision and the weight that it bears.

In *I Arrive from Places Unspeakable* 2001, another work that describes the wonder of the universe and humankind’s place in it, Kratz fragments the painting into nine joined panels. Each panel reveals new secrets—introducing x-rays emerging from a milky blue void, she juxtaposes them with a panel of randomly ordered cicada wings and panels of seeds spiraling into orbit. Holding the composition together, a single seed holds reign in the center panel. To Kratz, this work speaks about the memory of being born and the idea that we are made up of parts and pieces of the universe. The center seed panel indicates the heart, the center of our being, around which everything is formed.<sup>28</sup> By altering the dark and light panels within the composition, she also addresses the balance of dark and light while firmly anchoring the composition into a cohesive whole.

Another work that merges multiple panels into a larger, gridded composition is *Crossroads*, 2001. From a slightly mottled deep red, almost blood-like void, a nebula of poppy seed pods emerges as if the viewer is traveling through a galaxy, at once an interior and exterior one. This work refers to the transition from the first half of life to the second, the midlife passage as a psychological crossroad. Heavily influenced by the poetry of Mary Oliver at this time, Kratz perhaps reflected on a passage from “Riprap”:

Does the grain of sand  
know it is a grain of sand?  
Will secrets fly out of me  
when I break open?  
Are the stars standing  
in any order?  
Is supplication  
useful?”<sup>29</sup>

For those who have gone through the midlife experience, doubt and questioning are a part of the process. All too familiar—this part of the journey through life is both terrifying and exhilarating, and Kratz visualizes it in ways that successfully merge the psychological with the emotional and the visual.

Perhaps the most direct reference to midlife passage is her series about turning forty. In *Arriving Forty*, 2001, the artist unabashedly speaks about the aging process, relating the experience to her own biology. This group of five tall, slender columns is a monument to the progression of life.<sup>30</sup> Like obelisks to the self, these blue tinted totems are filled with white objects that emerge and recede. Like poignant moments in one’s life, the memories come and go. This piece is part of a series that she did to commemorate a pivotal time in her life. *Becoming 40*, 2001, a flesh-colored column of resin is embedded with crumpled pages of her journal, reflecting the idea of the skin and the veins that nurture the body. *40*, 2001, aptly comprises forty stacked and fused blocks in a pinkish red resin embedded with bird eggs. Relating to the body, it most directly addresses the feminine aspect of aging—that of the loss of menses, as demonstrated in the ever lightening of the deep red color found in other works, and the eggs—symbols of the fertility that will soon be lost. And while such themes are naturally bittersweet, they are indicative of a tone that has remained constant in her work. Commenting on her exhibition of this series, critic Richard Nilsen observed, “If there is an overarching mood to her work, not only in this show, but over her entire career, it is a tinge of melancholy, an

awareness of loss.”<sup>31</sup> Yet this emotional response to life is not an end in itself. Through her art, Kratz continually seeks understanding and acceptance of the vagaries of life’s experiences.

The most poignant example of the concept of acceptance and transcendence in Kratz’s work is seen in *Forest*, 2001. An installation of nine “trees,” this work was inspired by the poem by David Wagoner entitled “Lost.”

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.<sup>32</sup>

The elongated trunks of Kratz’s resin shafts are imbedded with objects from trees—leaves and bits of bark—like long test tubes, as if to preserve the identifiable remnants of something familiar and safe as a way of keeping from losing oneself. Once again, Kratz’s identification with nature as a source of inquiry and understanding remains firmly rooted in her compelling three-dimensional forms.

One of most direct pieces among her current work is *Desire*, 2001. Pure sensual response is derived from this passionately blood-red gridded panel, a single dove’s wing emerging from a void peppered with seeds and cactus thorns. Hardly melancholy, this work is bold and confident, a testament to the surges of life and love. If anything, the painting becomes a banner of defiance—neither age nor loss will sap the artist’s vitality and passion.

As Kratz becomes more at peace with her life and her relationship to its cycles she so adeptly portrays, so does her work become clearer in its symbolic and aesthetic makeup. This is evident in *I Live My Life (Orbit)*, 2002. In this two-dimensional piece, a nine-paneled grid in a soft white ground comes together forming a simple circle of Texas laurel seeds. This relatively monochromatic piece emerged from a response to Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem in *A Book for the Hours of Prayer*:

I live my life in growing orbits  
which move out over the things of the world.

Perhaps I can never achieve the last,  
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,  
and I have been circling for a thousand years,  
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,  
or a great song.<sup>33</sup>

Kratz's art unfolds like the narrative of her life. Connected to nature, to life, and to poetry, she constantly discovers new and uncharted territory for personal introspection. Through the use of resin, a medium known for its industrial slickness, she has conjured a lushness and depth that brings about a sense of the infinite. Her careful choice of materials, from the simplest winged seed to the most elegant design in nature, and the order in which she positions them, become instant symbols of the cycles of life and metaphors for her personal existence. Her ability to transfer the "simple" into profound statements reveals her affinity for poetry and how it affects her visual statements. As Gaston Bachelard relates, "Once we have been touched by the grace of super-imagination, we feel it in the presence of the simpler images through which the exterior world deposits virtual elements of highly-colored space in the heart of our being."<sup>34</sup> Mayme Kratz has accomplished such a feat in her art.

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<sup>1</sup> John I. H. Baur, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1958), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Mayme Kratz, quoted in Kathleen Vanesian, "Cast from a Different Mold," *New Times*, vol. 27, no. 7 (1996): 61.

<sup>4</sup> The final project Kratz worked on for Hubbell was the fabrication of eighteen doors for a palace in the United Arab Emirates, a commission that became the focus of critical acclaim. James Hubbell, a student of the Cranbrook Art Academy in the mid 1950s, is considered by some to be a visionary. He has designed and built ecologically-sound buildings intended to "heal the soul and renew the spirit," among them the Sea Ranch Chapel in San Diego, CA, and the Kuuchama Ecological Center in Tecate, Mexico, as well as parks, wildlife sanctuaries and religious centers world-wide.

<sup>5</sup> James Hubbell, quoted in David Pearson, *New Organic Architecture: The Breaking Wave* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Literally interpreted as the "in-between state," the *Bardo* differentiates six different categories: birth, dream, meditation, moment of death, supreme reality and becoming. The first three *bardos* characterize the present life as a phase of "suspended state." The last three *bardos* encompass the forty-nine-day-long process of death and rebirth. See Franz-Karl Ehrhard, *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* (Boston: Shambhala Pub., 1991), 16-17. My thanks to Liisa Philips for her ongoing assistance with Buddhist teachings.

<sup>7</sup> Mayme Kratz, (personal communication, April 6, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Calling her paintings, "not especially appealing," Lynn Pyne was affected by the ghostly quality of the work and the "demonic figures" that emerged from the void. See Lynn Pyne, "Ghostly Figures Float On Abstract Canvas," *The Phoenix Gazette*, 17 October 1987, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Another artist that Kratz looked to for the motivation to experiment was Kiki Smith, whose work she admires for her ability to work in a variety of media in both two and three dimensions including installations. Kratz, April 6, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> The artist is aware of the consequences of prolonged exposure to this material and its antithetical qualities to the natural forms she examines. In the early 1990s she took a year off from working with the substance to recover from a severe allergic reaction, resorting to casting in sugar, which ultimately proved unsuccessful. Improvements in her studio have allowed her to continue with less hazardous consequences. See Kathleen Vanesian, "Cast from a Different Mold," *New Times*, 15-21 February 1996, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Vanesian. "Cast From a Different Mold," 61.

<sup>14</sup> Mayme Kratz, quoted in Vanesian, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Bachelard, 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Portwood, "Kratz Exhibit Gives Viewers Much to Muse On," *The Arizona Daily Star*, 1 November 1996, sec. D, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Mayme Kratz, (personal communication, April 1, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Kratz, April 4, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Kratz enjoyed working with hot glass at Pilchuck. Of the experience she said, "Working with the medium in a liquid state and feeling the heat of the material is very much like sitting around a campfire in the wilderness. It feels like some sort of primal ritual; and because you need a team while working with the medium, it adds to the feeling of a ceremony." The following year she worked as an assistant to Judy Tewaletstiwa, with whom she later exhibited at the 2001 Phoenix Triennial at the Phoenix Art Museum. Kratz, April 1, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Mayme Kratz quoted in Richard Nilsen, "Artist's Vision More Than Skin Deep," *The Arizona Republic*, 10 May 1998, p. G7. Nilsen is another critic moved to poetic musing about Kratz's work. In this review he said, "The work is always ravishingly gorgeous, but it is never about beauty. If anything it is about death and loss, the passing of season and years, the process of living and dying. It all seems as fragile as the nests, as stinging as the thorns on the ocotillo."

<sup>23</sup> David Whyte, "The Journey," in *The House Belonging*, copyright 1997 by David Whyte (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Company, 2002), 37-38. Reprinted with permission from Many Rivers Press and the author.

<sup>24</sup> Galway Kinnell, "The Middle of the Way," in Robert Bly, *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (Portland: Sierra Club Books, 1980), 176-177. Excerpt from "Middle of the Way," from *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* by Galway Kinnell. Copyright © 1964, and renewed 1992 by Galway Kinnell. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

<sup>25</sup> Mayme Kratz, in "Waking in the Dark," exhibition catalogue, Joseph Gross Gallery, The University of Arizona, and Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Gaston Bachelard can be brought into this discussion in his examination of the "dialectics of outside and inside." He exclaimed, "But what a spiral man's being represents! . . . One no longer knows right away whether one is running toward the center or escaping." See Bachelard, 214.

<sup>27</sup> For a fascinating look at the many variations of spirals in nature, see Theodore Andrea Cook, *The Curves of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979 (first published in London by Constable and Co. ,1914).

<sup>28</sup> Mayme Kratz, (personal communication, April 2, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 30. Reprinted by permission of Perseus Books Publishers, a member of Perseus Books, L.L.C.

<sup>30</sup> Mayme Kratz, interview with author, 10 February 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Nilsen, "A Feel for Nature," *Arizona Republic*, 29 November 2001, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> David Wagoner, "Lost," in David Whyte, *The House of Belonging: Poems by David Whyte* (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 1999), iii. From *Traveling Light: Collected and New Poems*. Copyright 1999 by David Wagoner. Used with permission of the poet and the University of Illinois Press.

<sup>33</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "I Live My Life," from *Das stundenbuch*, first written 1899-1903, translated by Robert Bly in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 13. Copyright © 1981 by Robert Bly. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

<sup>34</sup> Bachelard, 227-228.