

ABSTRACT

Wanderings, a Childhood Introspective

By

Cathy Dean Perry

April, 2014

Director: Hanna Jubran

SCULPTURE AREA

This report of Creative Thesis examines the transitions of my family life, generational traditions, and enduring memories of my childhood. These are portrayed through bronze, aluminum, and welded steel sculptures arranged into intricate natural forms. My memories from childhood growing up with five sisters are directly expressed through this biographical body of research. Twigs, seedpods, and blossoms found in nature are woven into the work highlighting specific memories. This biographical work reflects families entwined, tangled, and existing together through the joys and travails of life.

WANDERINGS, A CHILDHOOD INTROSPECTIVE

A Report of a Creative Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture

By

Cathy Dean Perry

April 2014

©Copyright 2014
WANDERINGS, A CHILDHOOD INTROSPECTIVE

WANDERINGS, A CHILDHOOD INTROSPECTIVE

By

Cathy Dean Perry

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF

THESIS: _____

Hanna Jubran, MFA

COMMITTEE

MEMBER: _____

Carl Billingsley, MFA

COMMITTEE

MEMBER: _____

Gerald Weckesser, MFA

COMMITTEE

MEMBER: _____

Robin Haller, MFA

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN:

Michael H. Drought, MFA

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
PERSONAL HISTORY	2
PROCESS	3
BRAMBLE TUNNEL.....	6
FLY AWAY.....	7
ARBOR OASIS.....	7
DAHLIA.....	8
WHIRLWIND.....	9
HULA HOOP.....	9
MOTHER HEN.....	10
THE TALL THIN WOMAN.....	11
BOUNDARIES.....	12

SPIRIT TREE.....14

CONCLUSION.....15

LIST OF PLATES

1. BRAMBLE TUNNEL.....	16
2. FLY AWAY.....	17
3. ARBOR OASIS.....	18
4. DAHLIA.....	19
5. WHIRLWIND.....	20
6. HULA HOOP.....	21
7. MOTHER HEN.....	22
8. THE TALL THIN WOMAN.....	23
9. BOUNDARIES.....	23
10. SPIRIT TREE.....	24

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of a domestic environment, cycles of the seasons, and portrayal of childhood are explored through the use of natural materials captured in bronze and aluminum, and steel sculptures. Materials I use for the bronze casting are in a specific state of transition such as the verge of bloom, at full flower, or going to seed. The steel sculpture expresses families entwined, interwoven, and surviving together. Steel rods are manipulated, woven, and twisted together to represent specific points in my childhood memories. The work represents growing up on a farm in southwestern Kentucky with my mother and five sisters. It is connected to family life through many generations of traditions. Sticks, twigs, and pods found in nature are woven together using different techniques to portray my memories of these experiences. My childhood memories with five sisters on the family farm and our transition to a single parent family are expressed through this body of work.

PERSONAL HISTORY

On the day I was born Mama was home with my three older sisters. We did not have a telephone so she would signal my grandmother down the road by turning on the porch light if it was time. However, my grandparents were busy this time of year with the fall harvest of corn. My father had been gone most of the day but arrived home just in time to rush her to the hospital. I came into this world ten minutes after we arrived at the hospital. This personality trait of impatience and always being active is expressed in the bronze sculpture *Whirlwind*.

My mother was one of the strongest and most forceful people I have ever known. She raised me and my five sisters alone. Our father abandoned us when I was four years old. As a waitress she worked every hour that was offered. Her work ethic is the example that we all follow to this day. We had each other and that was something not to be taken for granted. The oldest sister at home would care for the younger girls. We were taught valuable lessons by growing up poor. All of us girls appreciated every little thing that was given to us. One thing we always seemed to have was a hula hoop. It was an inexpensive toy that we could save up for and buy. We would ride to town with our grandparents on Fridays when they shopped for groceries. The biggest treat was to have a few cents to spend and go into the Ben Franklin Five Cent Store. Ben Franklin was a wonderland where we could buy a hula hoop for less than a dollar. The store was a magical place where kids could play with all the toys. We could buy bags of candy that were scooped out of candy jars. I counted out my change to pay for candy the first time in this store.

Summer was always our favorite season and we played outside most of the time. The woods were our playground, and the trees became the monkey bars. Grapevines were our

swings, and the hillsides down to the creek were our slides. Giant leaves from the sycamore trees became parasols for young girls and boats sailing down the rushing creek.

Natural material such as grapevines, seed pods, blossoms, and twigs embody the memory of my childhood. I collect these materials to use in my sculptures each year when I visit the family farm.

PROCESS

Bronze Casting:

Direct Burn Out and Traditional Lost Wax in Plaster Investment Molds

The use of materials found in nature showcases all the time I spent in the woods, up in a tree, and down at the creek. Bronze is a very precious metal that has been used for centuries to place importance on an object. It endures even in harsh environments. Although growing up we had a difficult life, my sisters and I always stood together. The lasting relationships between my sisters and me are precious to me. Six twig sculptures embody the essence of each girl. The six *twig sisters* are built using the process of weaving twigs, branches, and blossoms into forms. Each piece is formed individually using natural materials such as twigs, blossoms, vines, and nests. The main structure of the sculptures is made with grapevine. Grapevine is used to reference all the time we girls swung on the vines down at the creek. These organic materials are dipped in wax to allow the pieces to be heat welded together into the sculptural form. Flower blossoms and buds are especially difficult to coat with wax. The hot wax wilts the petals if left in the wax pot too long. A fan is used to gently blow the petals to allow the wax to cool.

The *twig sisters* were made in multiple forms. The process of making these pieces in separate forms allows for manageable molds. A plaster investment mold is used. The plaster

investment is a traditional process that has been used for centuries. The outside walls of the mold are tar paper with wire mesh inside. The sculptural form is placed two inches from the walls and the bottom. The liquid plaster investment is mixed and poured around the form inside the tar paper. The mixture is sand, plaster, and water. Plaster investment allows for higher temperatures in the molds for burn out. The mold is placed in a kiln and burned out four days at 1500 plus degrees. The process of direct burn out refers to burning out the organic material. This traditional lost wax method burns away the organic material and leaves a void that is filled with molten metal.

Bonded Resin Sand Piece Molds

The bronze sculpture *Spirit Tree* was cast using bonded sand molds. . A sycamore limb was cut into four sections. The sections were bedded in dry sand to allow for the first of the four part mold to be formed. A bonded sand mold was packed around each section and to cure at least twelve hours. It is opened and rolled over to allow the dry sand to be taken out. A second section is then fashioned on top of the first. After it cures, the mold is opened and the log section removed. The mold is then lined with quarter inch thick foam strips. Bonded sand is packed into the space on top of the foam strips along with two to three inches on top to finish the core. The section is cured and then opened. The foam is removed leaving a quarter inch hollow space between the sections. The mold sections are strapped together. The molten bronze is poured into the quarter inch space left when the foam was removed. The bronze sections are welded into place. Smaller segments of twigs is cast solid for the limbs and added to the main structure. The temperature of the bronze for casting is 1900 – 2100 degrees.

Aluminum Casting:

Bonded Resin Sand Piece Molds

The sculpture *Boundaries* is a corner section of cast fence posts brought from Kentucky. They were cast using two and three part piece molds. The tobacco stick rails for the fence were cast solid. The other posts were cast hollow. The process for casting the aluminum in a two or three part bonded resin sand mold is the same as the bronze casting. The temperature for aluminum casting is 1275-1300 degrees.

Weaving:

Plain Weave

Spirit Tree holds within its branches and around the trunk a hand woven brightly colored woven textile. The panel was woven in two parts on a four-harness loom. The main 38 inch x 48 inch section wrapped around the trunk was woven first and represents my mother. The weaving then split into three parts per section woven in different colors. The finished weaving has the mother section with six smaller weavings on the ends. These six sections represent my five sisters and me. These parts are attached to the main section by the twenty-foot unwoven warp. The yarn used was a variety of cotton, rayon, and wool. The vertical yarn is the warp and is hand-dyed rayon in multiple colors. The horizontal yarn is the weft and is cotton and wool. Basic plain weave structure was used to weave the yarns together. The weft threads chosen were textured. The smaller sections were left separate to hang from different limbs.

Constructed Sculpture

The steel sculpture *Bramble Tunnel* is formed in three parts. The wooden fence sections are measured and cut to fit each individual slot. Each post is placed to show the most knots and variations in the wood to highlight the irregularities. The entire fence sections are permanently together. Steel rods are cut to fit over each area exactly. The rods are shaped by hand and rolled with a variety of techniques. I create large curves through the use of a roller then twist and bend by hand. They are then woven around the fence like the bramble briars in the fence rows.

“BRAMBLE TUNNEL”

One of the most vivid memories of my childhood is playing under the overhanging bramble branches around our pond and along the creek bank. This environment seemed especially made by nature to envelope me into a world of my own imagination. The tunnel of green propelled me and my sister into imaginary kingdoms where we ruled our entire domain. The two of us loved to play in the tunnel. Trying to catch the enormous bull frogs that loved the shady tunnel as much as we did was a lesson in pure frustration. *Bramble Tunnel* is a reflection of this secret hideaway. The leaves are hand cut steel using the sycamore tree leaves as a pattern. We played along the pond banks hiding from view within the brambles. Six faces that represent me and my sisters are placed among the metal branches. We were convinced no one could see us within the brambles. The pond area was not an area we were allowed to play.

The lesson in futility of trying to catch one of the box turtles sunning on logs showed how tenacious we were as children. The turtles were slow on land but in a flash they would slide off the logs in to the water. The pond became a great playground and forbidden island that could not be resisted. Metal leaves and vines twist through the form to suggest how the wind moves through and around the brambles.

“FLY AWAY”

Fly Away, represents my sister Connie. She was always reed thin and lanky. The skirt was fashioned from twinning vines into long slender curls to portray her form. Long wispy hair represents the motion of the two of us swinging for hours from trees. She holds a bird's nest in her hands. Every summer we would eagerly await the barn swallows that would build their nest in the milking barn. Hours watching the nest building were a source of complete fascination for two little girls. The swallows would gracefully sweep down toward the pond, scooping a beak full of water to mix with the mud to build the nest. We visited every day and waited impatiently for the sight of little beaks peeping over the edge. A few nests were made low enough we could gently pick up a bald little nestling with scraggily down for feathers. “Fly Away” is honoring this long ago memory by casting the twigs in to bronze using the lost wax and direct burn out method.

“ARBOR OASIS”

The Concord grapevine arbor was one of our favorite places to lounge in the summer. The cool leafy bower shaded us from the hot summer sun. The vine would then share its fruit with us as we played. *Arbor Oasis* is the sculpture that represents my sister Sherry. She had a very fair complexion and would always burn easily in the summer sun. Playing under the grape

arbor would provide her with much needed relief. The arbor was built close to the ground because my grandmother was short. Sherry was also short so it allowed her to reach the fruit. The only time she would play with me was under the grape arbor. This sculpture has the grapevine twisted and curled into a bell shape with short spikey hair. Her hair was always cut very short. It stood straight up on her head similar to a porcupine. All of us girls loved to eat the grapes and see how far we could spit the seeds. The grapes can be seen in her hand and across her torso. She carried the love of grapes into adult hood by canning jelly every year. This family tradition of canning grape jelly was learned from our grandmother.

“DAHLIA”

Dahlia symbolizes my sister, Teana. This sculpture represents my memory of an incident that happened when our mother took a photograph. We were lined up in a stair step pattern youngest to oldest. We were at my grandmother's house arranged in front of her flower bed. Teana, being a little child, did not want to sit still for the picture. My mother picked one of my grandmother's prized "Dinner Plate Dahlia" flowers and gave it to my baby sister to entertain her while the photo was snapped. She ate it. I remember they picked petals out of her mouth and I thought it was hilarious. The hair of this figure is made from flower buds which I dipped in wax and cast in bronze. The hair stands out all around to represent her younger years. When she was young it was daily chores for an older sister keep her hair combed, so I made the hair a focal point.

“WHIRLWIND”

I was never quiet or still as a child. I was very active and busy from the time I woke up until bedtime. *Whirlwind* is my portrait and uses the grapevine for the main structure. The twigs are twirled around in a motion to represent my personality. Very active and busy from the time I woke up until bedtime; I was never quiet or still. The motion of the twinned vine portrays this activity. One hand is swinging around with the skirt of my dress. The other hand grips a bouquet of daffodils. The daffodils show the first bouquet of flowers I ever picked for my mother. Every year my sisters and I would trek through my grandmother's cattle field to the neighbors. We had to walk through the fields to avoid the road. We were not allowed to walk down the road. In this field stood a lone tree surrounded by a sea of daffodils every spring. From our front porch you could see the patch of yellow in the distance and we knew they were blooming.

“HULA HOOP”

Hula Hoop is the vision of my sister Dottie. She is tall and slender. This *twig sister* has a flowing skirt with flowers and a nest tucked into the skirt edge. The torso is a tightly woven mass of small grape vines tucked into a slender narrow waist. In her hands she holds a hula hoop woven out of grapevine. Growing up I always wanted to be like her. I have fond memories of the hula hoop starting at her feet and her walking it all the way up to the wrist and back down again. Dottie was the best with the hula hoop. Her hair was really long and heavy down the back. The sculpture has a long braid that hangs down the back.

“MOTHER HEN”

The last twig sister is *Mother Hen*. This represents my sister, Pam who was the oldest and mothered us. We are two years apart except for the youngest sister. This is one of the reasons we have always stuck so close to each other and learned at a young age to depend on each other. As a single mother with six little girls, my mother depended on Pam to watch us. The younger girls are represented by five birds and five flowers placed within the skirt. In her hands are five daisy flowers to represent the thousands of flower necklaces she fashioned for us younger ones over the years.

“THE TALL THIN WOMAN”

Traditions passed down from my mother are especially sentimental. One tradition is using the “three sisters” from American Indian practice to grow things in the vegetable garden. Corn stalks would support bean vines. Melons would grow along the ground under the corn stalks. Beans would climb the corn and receive enough sunlight. Corn would shade the tender melons from the hot sun. Melons would shade the ground and choke out weeds. The use of one plant to support another from different seasons is a practice that is utilized in my flower gardens as was in my mother’s gardens. I grow clematis vines in rose bushes as my mother did in hers. In some of the cast bronze you will catch a glimpse of a flowering vine, a full blown flower, or a crinkled seed pod that have meanings beyond their natural beauty. The trumpet vine will forever be connected to my mother’s garden. In her last summer, we watched the hummingbirds enjoy a wonderful feast at this favorite flower. This poignant memory of the trumpet vine hummingbird is captured in the bronze sculpture, *The Tall Thin Woman*. This is a

sculpture of her standing in the flower garden. The skirt flows back to show the blowing wind. In one hand she holds a floppy garden hat and the other a flower with a hummingbird perched on the side. The wind whips and slings the hat as if trying to rip it out of her hand. Her long hair is braided but also whipping in the wind.

One of my best memories was spending time with her in her flower gardens. Her favorite place to be was the flower garden. I have cast bronze from flowers, seed pods, and stems from my mother's flower gardens. This is a way to freeze time and preserve the many lessons that she taught on flower gardening. One lesson learned was the beauty to be found in wild flowers. Some people do not look at these as anything but weeds. We would go down to the creek and collect wildflowers that would take a place of pride in her shade gardens. My mother even saw the beauty in the much hated common thistle. She was captivated by the butterflies that would cover the thistles pink blossoms every summer.

One shrub that she continued to try to grow in her gardens was a camellia. The camellias are not native to Kentucky and do not grow well there. Her determination was never realized. Mama died in 2008. Our families still celebrate her love and determination by planting them in her memory. The sculpture, *The Tall Thin Woman*, is tending to the flowering bush within the fence section of *Boundaries*. The flowering bush has camellia blossoms and buds along the stems to honor her love for birds and flowers.

“BOUNDARIES”

Boundaries are a cedar fence corner with tobacco stick rails. The fence posts were cast aluminum from molds taken of posts brought from our family farm. One of the posts was saved from a fence row that my grandfather put in place at least forty years ago. The rails were cast aluminum from molds taken of antique Kentucky tobacco sticks. The family farm relied on a tobacco crop during my childhood. The sticks were used as fencing after tobacco was phased out except for the larger farms. We would weave the sticks through and around the old barb wire. The use of sticks and limbs within the fences were similar to the historical wattle fencing used in England. The older generations of neighbors that lived on surrounding farms taught my mother this technique.

Next to this fence grew a flowering bush that attracted many hummingbirds. The bush was cast in bronze using the direct burn out and lost wax method. The bush is an airy, delicate landing spot for the hummingbirds that dart around. The wings of the birds are in motion to mimic the action of the hummingbirds that last summer with my mother. Flitting from flower to flower, the birds were in constant motion. We were engrossed in the territorial fights that broke out between the hummingbirds as they flew around the garden.

“SPIRIT TREE”

My mother was a lifelong bird watcher. This love for birds is reflected in the sculpture, *Spirit Tree*. This sculpture is a tree cast in bronze. The branches arch out from the main trunk in a waving delicate motion. Along the trunk base are roots flowing under and over. Placed among the branches are many different birds. The love of birds and learning the songs were taught to us at a very young age. I learned how to whistle back to the Bob White quail at the age of five. We would try to outdo each other identifying a new bird. I am forever fascinated on how many chicks can be in a little nest with their yellow beaks sticking over the edge. Bird watching has carried into adulthood with me. Part of my legacy is to teach my children the different birds and their songs so they can one day can pass this along to their own children.

The *Spirit Tree* trunk holds the woven rendition of Mama fashioned in her favorite color, pale pink. The pink color reflects her choices of favorite flowers such as the pink poppy. Lovingly encircled around the trunk, the weaving flows as if the tree itself gave birth to it. From the main weaving the fringe breaks into six sections that flow down and then turns up into individual sections. Each of these sections represents me and my five sisters. All of the individual weavings are attached to tree branches. This flow of life represents the natural progression of children growing up. Each individual weaving is a different color. These colors have a specific memories attached to it that relates to that sister.

Pams section is blue. She has blue gray eyes and wears this color often. The color goes well with her ivory complexion. These soft, easy tones of blue remind me of her laid back personality. The red weaving represents Dottie. Red was always worn by the sisters that had dark complexions. Our mother always told them how pretty they looked in red. Dottie's favorite color

has always been red. The green represents Sherry and her love of vegetable gardening. The color is restful and calming which reflects her personality. Yellow was chosen for me. The yellow is a harvest tone which is one of my favorite colors. Autumn is my favorite time of the year. Teana always loved orange so this was chosen for her. Beautiful sunset colored hues of autumn are her favorites. The many ranges of orange found in falling leaves remind me of her. Connie is represented by the color purple. She always loved the flowers on old fashioned dresses and tiny purple flowers found in the woods.

The *Spirit Tree* trunk was cast from molds of the sycamore tree. Along the creek was a large sycamore tree that hung over the water. This sycamore has many memories for us girls. In the tree hung a huge grapevine that draped down in a circle before climbing back up. My uncle cut the grapevine a foot above the bank so we could swing over the water with it. Every summer we would play on this tree and grapevine at the creek. I spent hours sending sycamore leaf boats down the creek to a waiting sister to catch. Hats were made from the leaves and stems. The bark was peeled and constructed into fairy houses along the banks. All of our summer adventures and memories are tied to this tree.

CONCLUSION

This biographical work portrays traditions of memories of childhood, farm practices, , and single parent family life through bronze, aluminum, and steel sculptures. A variety of natural materials used in the casting allows for intriguing and intricate detail on the sculpture. The pieces were woven together using techniques that are a link to family traditions. The memories of growing up on the family farm with five sisters are conveyed through this work. This body of work allowed me to focus and celebrate my memories of simpler times. As I move forward my focus will turn to the next generation. I will work on a series of sculptures capturing my children at different times in their lives. The circle will then be complete.

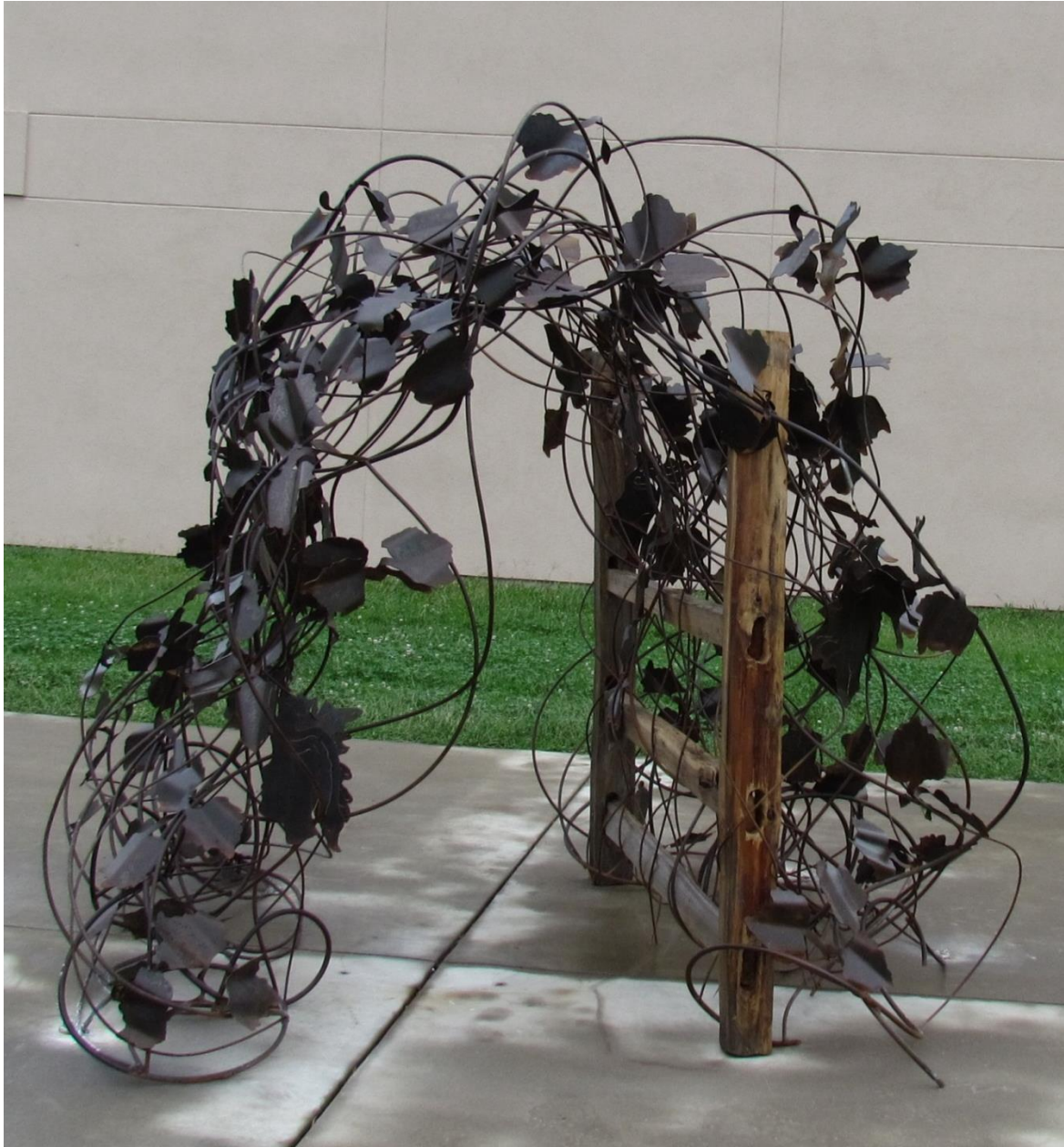


Plate 1

BRAMBLE TUNNEL

2013

Steel, Cedar

7ft x 7ft x 8ft



Plate 2

FLY AWAY

2013 Bronze

2'2" x 1'4" x 1'



Plate 3

ARBOR OASIS

2014

Bronze

3' 4" x 1' 6" x 1' 3"



Plate 4

DAHLIA

2013

Bronze

2' 4" x 1' 2" x 1'



Plate 5

WHIRLWIND

2013

Bronze

3' x 2' x 2' 4"



Plate 6

HULA HOOP

2014

Bronze

4'2" x 1'8" x 1'6"



Plate 7

MOTHER HEN

2014

Bronze

4' x 2' x 2'



Plate 8
Plate 9

THE TALL THIN WOMAN
BOUNDARIES

2014
2014

Aluminum
Aluminum, Bronze

5' 3"x2' x 3'
4' x 4' x 4'



Plate 10

SPIRIT TREE

2014

Bronze

9' x 8' x 9'