

# Kathy Bruce



## Ritual Renewal

BY ELLEN PEARLMAN

Kathy Bruce explores bamboo and other non-invasive organic materials, building site-specific works that have implied ritualistic connections to the land and that investigate climate, ecosystems, and plant and animal life. She also uses the figure and, more specifically, the archetypal female form. For too long, in both painting and sculpture, men have projected their inner dialogues and psychological tensions onto the female body. Bruce has helped to reclaim the female form from this male stereotyping, transforming it from a passive slate into a spirit of possibility. The idea of woman as harbinger of growth, fecundity, ritual, nature, and renewal can be seen as impossibly quaint and sentimental—or quite radical. Most contemporary art arises from an urban, technological impulse, and examples that deal with themes of nature, especially nature and ritual, tend to be lumped together as primitive, outsider, ecological, or 1970s-derived earth art.

Bruce's sculptures reconnect contemporary society with lost traditions based on the fertility of a primeval earth goddess (for example, Pachamama of the ancient Andes). In the past, many prehistoric structures and sculptures paid homage to an earth goddess, as evinced by the Venus of Willendorf, the ruins of the Neolithic Ggantija temple complex in Malta, and the remnants of the Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae in Orkney. The archaeological sites, in particular, have inspired Bruce to use living plant material that interacts with her sculptures and responds to the surrounding environment. Some of her works encompass the life cycle of an entire growing season, with the plants starting out as seedlings, progressing to full flowering vines, and then withering away to leave the sculptures in their original state.

Opposite: *The Graces*, 2008. Bamboo, sea grass, raffia, plywood, morning glories, and nasturtiums, 12 x 8 x 8 ft. This page: *Sod Mound Earth Maiden*, 2008. Bamboo, straw, chicken wire, and sod, 25 x 22 x 9 ft.

When she was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Bruce began using bamboo, a material with a long history as a craft material in Eastern cultures.

In order to achieve specialized technical mastery, one had to train under a skilled master in a guild. Almost all guild members were men. Bruce's bamboo works challenged such traditional biases. Her sculptures were made of mostly found wooden objects mixed with painted, draped, and stained canvases. She inserted bamboo protrusions to expand from two-dimensional surfaces into three dimensions. Viewers often had to walk through or around these multi-dimensional installations.

While in graduate school in sculpture at Yale, she built wooden table-top sculptures, drilled holes into the wood, and placed bamboo strips that thrust outward to resemble drawn pencil lines. Bamboo offered a distinct formal advantage in these works since it holds its shape, as opposed to softer materials like cord and string, which depend on other types of support. But it was bamboo's theatrical possibilities that led to Bruce's thesis on wearable sculptures. That theme extends into newer work through her studies of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. She was especially intrigued by





*Metaphysical Menina II*, 2008. Bamboo and recycled shredded paper, 15 x 10 x 4 ft.

offered another inspiration. These open cubes stacked one on top of another support spinning wheels of pyrotechnics, which produce amazing displays when lit at night. A special master fuse slowly burns through each level of the cube, setting off a charger, which in turn triggers different levels of fireworks. Witnessing this spectacle freed Bruce's preconceptions about the structural properties of bamboo. In order for bamboo to form any kind of coherent structure, it must be braced and then stabilized. Bruce had to teach herself how to support individual sections by splitting them into halves or even quarters in order to best distribute their load-bearing responsibilities.

*Composting Vessel* (2008), made of bamboo, raffia, and netting and installed at Jersey City University, takes the form of a female figure embracing a basket of com-

*Homage to Neruda*, 2008. Scavenged recycled driftwood on rock base, 8 x 4 x 10 ft.



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Above: *Composting Vessel*, 2008. Bamboo, raffia, netting, and leaves, 10 x 8 x 6 ft. Right and detail: *Earth Maiden*, 2007–08. Bamboo, raffia, recycled wood, grass, and live shrub, 18 x 5 x 40 ft.

posting leaves. With rounded arms and a full skirt, the figure tilts toward the earth, its joints tied together with raw raffia knots. The vessel is built using substructures within the structure, and each arc is counterbalanced by an opposing arc to create stability. That stability was put to the test when winds reached 65 mph for a two-day period and the sculpture held up.

*The Graces* (*July, August, September*) (2008), an installation on the Ithaca Commons in upstate New York, consisted of three female frame figures placed atop planter boxes. Morning glory and nasturtium vines, supported by bamboo stalks, grew over their bodies, congruent with the main attributes of the graces: mirth, good cheer, and beauty. When in full bloom, the figures resembled prancing maidens delighting in the summer.

*In Woman Gazing At The Heavens* (2007), a Diana-type figure perched atop a living lilac bush, holding out a drawn bow and arrow. Made of bamboo and raffia and installed at the Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park in Brooklyn, Bruce's figure looked out across the river toward the Statue of Liberty, a historical and allegorical figure of redemption and succor. This metaphor reflects the influence of theorist Marina Warner, who argues that Liberty belongs to a larger family of women used to embody abstractions (justice, wisdom, victory, chastity, fortitude, and truth, for example) and that these projections of idealized rectitude were imposed on the female body. Men, on the other hand, who were not used to embody abstractions, retained control—assertive, active masters. The placement of Bruce's installation across from this well-known symbol contained multiple layers of allegory and interpretation.

*The Earth Maiden* (2007–08) at The Land/an art site in New Mexico used recycled wood, grass, and living shrubs, while *Homage to Neruda* (2008) returns to the scavenged materials of Bruce's early works, using only intricately woven driftwood set on a rock base. Inspired by Pablo Neruda's figurehead collection in Isla Negra, Chile, it was constructed at the Nature Conservancy/Andy Warhol preserve in Montauk Beach, Long Island, New York.

Bruce believes in "the future of bamboo and raffia, because of its environmental constitution, availability, cost, and practicality. More and more people will use it—artists and others." Her own work exhibits a commitment to a sustainability that can help maintain the earth. Bamboo is a grass, not a wood, so it replenishes itself and is both biodegradable and recyclable. Adhering to low-impact modalities, Bruce keeps electrical consumption to a



minimum and tries to work mostly with hand tools. Each time she builds an installation, she is conjuring a spirit that she hopes will lead toward healing the deep fissures that have opened up between humanity and our environs.

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