

Beverly Penn

## Artist Statement

Beverly Penn casts plants into bronze to create an enduring stand-in for the ephemeral originals, much like a memorial, to embrace the solemnity of their current demise. The notion of a memorial is significant in these times of climate change and extinction. Yet a memorial also links us to desire, so it can be equally hopeful, because within the idealized natural spaces we cultivate in our imagination, and in the world around us, our best intentions flourish and proliferate.

Posing elements from landscape according to human constructions is one means of articulating both the tragic and humorous complexities of contemporary culture. As the constructed environment steadily eclipses the natural world, mediated experience gradually replaces our direct interaction with our surroundings. This changes who we are and likewise reconstructs our sense of place in the world. As a voice of authority, western science categorizes and objectifies, using reductionist strategies to make sense of the world, but also, in the process, loses the way of seeing systems as a whole. To counter this system, Beverly Penn creates work that celebrates shared networks, regenerative practices, and the symbiotic complex adaptive systems at the heart of healthy ecosystems.

Beverly Penn imagines and depicts aspects of Nature that we actually cannot see, like root systems and fungal networks, as a way of calling attention to the magic and mystery of the unseen and arguably the most important systems that keep our planet alive. Like a vital web of tree roots, or a thriving system of mycelium—the underground fungal networks that support all life—the sculptures are constructed one small piece at a time, cell linked to cell, part to part, into hypnotic interlocking systems. The sculptures are then assembled on the wall like aerial perspectives of the land, growing perpendicular to the force of gravity, in an exploration of line, shape, density and complex patterning, to elongate perception and attention through a thickening of experience. Penn uses these sculptures to explore the contradicting need to both idealize and modify the natural environment; this work embraces both the scientific mind that

must categorize and shape a new body of knowledge, and the equally compelling desire to order and shape unruly plants into a desirable form.

Beverly Penn explores the relationship between native plants and invasive species, and her compositions of seemingly unchecked, feral, opportunistic growth refer to the effects of climate change and unbalanced ecosystems. In some pieces cast bronze sculptures marry plants that have a narrative relationship to each other, despite their geographic or biological diversity. Penn is intentional in using bronze as a reference to both the material's authority within the arts, as well as its expressive potential to give literal weight to the long-term and unintended effects of tampering with nature. Her sculptures are not facile botanical representations, but are deconstructed versions reconfigured into eerie portraits of a world gone awry. Through a series of purposeful, complex meanderings, invasives and natives are grafted together into a single portrait to honor their shared characteristics, disturbingly co-joined to be irrevocably connected, yet steadfastly apart.

In artworks that respond directly to the ravages of climate change, Beverly Penn breaks the boundary of strict geometry and responds to the patterns and structures of phenomenon in nature's systems, such as atmospheric conditions. Some sculptures specifically explore Swarm Intelligence, which describes the collective behavior of decentralized systems such as flocks of birds in swirling flight. Other sculptures are inspired by Redundancy Theory, which argues that pattern has the paradoxical proclivity for creating newness out of consistency, with repetition as a primary means. These organizing principles are the language of Nature, but they are languages which we can only hear with our eyes, and which we can only interpret theoretically. Thus, the usual responses of our human senses, grounded in time and space, are out of synch with these communications and disconnected from nature's lived experience.

Penn's sculptures are a reminder that we are intricately connected to the natural continuum. They are not faithful representations of nature but are created to have a plan of their own. Depicted in an ambiguous stage of dormancy, the cast bronze botanical forms suggest potential and promise, as well as quiescence and death. This dichotomy reveals a precarious balance of contraries and makes analogies to both the commonly visible world that

shapes our lives, as well as to the ordinarily unseen and more perfectly imagined worlds that haunt our dreams.