

Ars longa, vita brevis.

—Hippocrates, *Aphorismi*

Ephemerality—the condition of being fleeting, impermanent, or transitory—is both a theme and a deliberate strategy within contemporary art. In keeping with the temporary installation by sculptor Patrick Dougherty erected outside the Greater Reston Arts Center, *Ephemeral* presents selected works by members of the Washington Sculptors Group exploring the subject of ephemerality either conceptually, through site-specific works, or through the nature of the materials employed.

Life is short, but art is long. At the core of the concept of ephemerality is that nothing lasts forever. It is a theme that has a long pedigree in art history—from the memento mori (“remember your death”) still lifes of seventeenth-century Dutch artists, with their fleeting blooms and decaying fruit, to the vanishing earthworks of contemporary artists like Andy Goldsworthy. While the transitory nature of human life and organic matter is self-evident, for much of western history, art itself has striven to defy mortality: to outlive the artist, and his or her time and culture—and to become immortal and universal. Certainly there are great works of art that have achieved such status, but as the deliberate destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan reminds us, permanence is never guaranteed. War, natural disasters, vandalism, shifting cultural values—all can lead to the destruction of a great artwork that has exerted cultural influence for centuries.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, artists embraced the concept of ephemerality in a way unprecedented in prior centuries. Ephemerality—from the Greek word *ephemeros*, literally meaning something that lasts only a day—has in fact become a hallmark of contemporary art. Contemporary artists have utilized a variety of new materials and techniques to produce objects that alter rapidly in appearance, or simply disappear, by design. Art as a non-permanent experience gained increasing traction with the advent of performance art. The “happenings” of the 1960s were an ephemeral form of art, based entirely in temporal experience. Artists began to create work designed for destruction—Jean Tinguely’s famous *Homage to New York* (1960), an elaborate sculptural assemblage created to self-destruct—is just one such example. As the century progressed, artists produced work out of light, air, smoke, beeswax, flowers, or even the impressions of their own bodies, imprinted onto the shifting earth.

Ephemeral Materials

The duration of any artwork is dependent in part on the materials used in its creation. Several of the artists in *Ephemeral* have interpreted the theme through their choice of natural, organic materials that have an intrinsic lifespan.

Elizabeth Burger fashions her suspended pods out of milkweed fluff—a light, airy material that embodies the fragility of life. Grapevines are the primary material for **Gil Narro Garcia**, who creates openwork “nature spheres” that live in the landscape, and are intended to age and decay in the natural environment over time. **Millicent Young** utilizes grapevine as a support for an ethereal “garment” of horsehair—materials that are drawn directly from, and will ultimately return to, nature.

The spherical forms presented by **Artemis Herber** are fashioned out of wood-based cardboard as well as twigs and roots, a conflation of mass-produced and raw natural materials, all bound to deteriorate. Wood itself is the primary vehicle of expression in the work of **Mike Shaffer**, who, in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, presents a decomposing, insect-ridden piece of wood as a readymade act of creativity. **May Britton** utilizes a tree downed in a storm, artfully slicing and rearranging its form to resurrect a life cut short.

Other artists have used materials based in nature, but once removed from it, by processing. **Gloria Chapa** created a mattress form topped with a blanket composed of potato chips—greasy junk food on the one hand; fragile, airy visual forms on the other. **Tom Greaves’** heart sculptures, fashioned out of beet sugar candy, or covered in fur and festooned with ballchains, utilize materials that suggest the transience and vagaries of human emotions.

The use of detritus or commonplace materials challenges the notion of the precious, inviolate artwork, intended to endure for centuries. **Elsabé Loubser Dixon** constructs exuberant wall-mounted forms created with repurposed rubber and the detritus produced by once-living silkworms. **Iris Posner’s** work is literally composed of a week’s worth of common bathroom trash, artfully compressed into an empty mouthwash bottle—a kind of memento mori to consumer culture. **Annie Farrar** produces sculptural assemblages from cast off objects, intended as a meditation on time, entropy, and decay.

Some artists have used materials traditionally associated with permanence to suggest concepts less enduring. **Jeff Chyatte’s** *Anguished*, constructed primarily in carbon steel, is crafted in the truncated form of an obelisk, evoking an archetype of strength and stability—except the form is damaged. Gashes in the top, side and bottom of the work clearly convey the inevitability of destruction, and the return of earthly materials to the earth. **Diane Szczepaniak’s** sleek, steel form also conveys an initial impression of permanence, but its highly polished surface essentially acts as a mirror for shifting light and color—highlighting transience and change rather than permanence. The steel frame in **Emily Piccirillo’s** *Fugue* similarly contrasts with the lightness of the imagery it contains—a horizonless expanse of blue sky punctuated by fleeting, wispy clouds. Color fields painted on the reverse of the canvas cast an ambient, shifting light in this “sculptural painting.”

Site-Specific Works

Site-specific works are, by definition, unique to a given space, and cannot be replicated exactly the same way twice. **Marco Rando** utilizes sand to create compelling compositions, contained within the sculptural form of a human hand. The shifting nature of sand underpins the ephemeral qualities of this piece, which must be created and destroyed within the lifespan of the exhibition. **Marilyn Stanek Geldzahler's** work, *Ethereal I*, suggests impermanence because of the insubstantial nature of the materials, but also reflects the site-specific, ever-changing nature of this installation.

Mortality

The concept of mortality is also central to ephemerality. **Carol Gellner Levin's** meditation on this theme is captured in *Aging*, a portrayal of three figures bound in cocoon-like forms, seemingly floating aloft on the clouds, unable to escape their fate. **Elissa Farrow-Savos** presents a bust of a youthful figure atop a stack of suitcases in *she could not bear to leave anything behind (but you can't take it with you)*—a comment upon our cultural attachment to temporal material objects. **Liz Lescault's** *Cocoon* explores temporality through an amorphous sculptural mass that encases a suspended, luminescent light, suggesting a glowing lifeform enveloped within the porous, forbidding exterior. The cyclical processes of birth, transformation, and death are all implied by the cocoon form.

Pam Rogers' Small Subjects are created from plant materials that have been bound and placed on bier-like glass slides for viewing. Resembling scientific specimens to be examined, the bundles also function as tiny organic mummies that remind us of the fleeting nature of nature itself. **Jessica Beels' Bycatch I** is an installation composed of layered nets anchored by plastic water bottles. The work's title and attendant imagery suggest environmental concerns, particularly for the “bycatch”—marine life inadvertently caught and killed in fishing industry nets. Taken as a whole, the work suggests the struggle for survival and the tenuous balance of biodiversity.

Erosion and Devolution

Although erosion as a process connotes a lengthier timespan, it shares with ephemerality the core theme of eradication. **Raymonde van Santen** presents a video of a clay head, abandoned and tottering in the surf, slowly eroding—perhaps a meditation on nature's ability to consume all that is manmade. **Maggie Gourlay's** plywood box, partially encased in drywall and crochet, is an elegant reflection upon deconstruction, and the ultimate ephemerality of all human structures. **Nizette Brennan's** sculpture,

titled *Ephemerality*, investigates the concept of diminishment by degree, and the slow inevitability of that process. **Billy Friebele**'s process-oriented "fire drawings" also engage the elements as a creative/destructive force. The artist constructed an apparatus to selectively burn paper sculptures, resulting in unique works that record near-destruction in seared marks.

The invocation of things past—places, people, objects—underpins other works. **Ruth Lozner**'s assembled sculptures utilize found objects and ephemera to address the issue of obsolescence, of presence that becomes absence over time. Her dictionary of obsolete words is a reminder that language itself can be ephemeral; and her *Devolution of Place* folding screen is a memorial to her grandparents and their history in Baltimore. A similar bittersweet sensibility is manifested in **Kathleen Carlson**'s *Life is not all chocolate and roses*, a panel featuring a decorative profusion of porcelain roses, clustered atop a background of chocolate forms—a three-dimensional translation of life's transient pleasures, rendered less fleeting.

Whether through the use of materials, conceptual exploration, or site-specificity, the Washington Sculptors Group members featured in *Ephemeral* explore the concept in a variety of individual ways. Collectively, these works heighten our awareness of the passage of time. They remind us that although art is not always long, its ability to provoke reflection and communicate complex ideas enriches our own transitory existence.

Holly Koons McCullough

Executive Director/Curator