

SUSAN RAND BROWN

Rebecca S. Hutchinson

Some artists discover their rhythm in urban spaces; Rebecca Hutchinson's practice is rooted in the natural world. The multi-media artist uses handmade paper and ceramic to create sculptures and installations, hanging ecosystems of wild plant life, abstracted avian and insect-inspired nests and more. A keen observer, Hutchinson stays close to the meadows and flower gardens that fuel her imagination and provide raw materials, such as the willow she harvests from her yard to support her crafted blooms.

Hutchinson's studio, which occupies a wing of her Rochester, MA, 1828 colonial-style home, functions as showroom and workspace. It is not far from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, where she is a professor of art and design. In all seasons, the studio pays homage to nature and its representations. Pink pansies and red geraniums blossom in early winter. Stacked storage bins hold paper cones, or "leaves," sorted by shape and color. Some are coated with clay; each is made with organic materials and no two are exactly alike. This is Hutchinson's palette. Had she been a pointillist, each cone would be a dab of color—blues, grays, mauves, rosy pinks, whites. "For me, nature is source," she says.

Hutchinson's wall-mounted works evoke the espalier of French horticulture: floral cones made from a mix of paper and clay, or only paper, are bunched to suggest blooms and then "woven" within lattice-like framing elements. The goal is not symmetry, but rather unity between distinct grid-based structures, as colors and shapes highlight the crinkles and torn edges of the material. Some blooms curl tightly while others are loosely bunched. The work looks soft and fragile, yet the construction is strong. Kiln-fired clay leaves are stiff to the touch; leaves of paper are blanket soft.

Hutchinson's in the midst of building

Midnight Bloom, a floor installation consisting of six vertical structures framed with brown clay, some as tall as seven feet. A Lincoln Logs-style of scaffolding is used for bloom attachment, as growth winds around the construction. "No different from what a swallow or hummingbird would use," she says. Trumpet-shaped blooms of deep grays and midnight blues are attached to the branched clay trees that make up this chocolate forest, their misty



Rebecca Hutchinson working on her *Night Bloom* (2012) installation at the Racine Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist.

colors inspired by Hutchinson's own foxglove and hollyhock when viewed under moonlight.

Her recent floor-mounted series of floral clusters was inspired by Persian rug-makers' use of bloom imagery, as well as observing the ecosystems growing upward from ocean floors. There is also ceiling-mounted work, curling in and around its willow trellis in a hide and seek fashion. "Bloom interacting with shadow" is how Hutchinson describes these minimalist ceiling installations as they project ghost-like reflections onto adjacent walls.

Hutchinson studied ceramics at Kentucky's Berea College, esteemed for crafts instruction. At the University of Georgia, where she received an MFA, Hutchinson apprenticed with a paper-maker. An epiphany struck not long after, dur-

ing a residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, MT, where she now maintains a summer studio. "Look at the birds," she says today. "They collect grass and clay to build a nest. Both are of the earth. That's when I started blending paper and clay, building the environment in ways that species do."

What doesn't come from her gardens, she "up-cycles" from rummage sales and thrift shops. Garments are boiled and fibers broken down in a Hollander beater; the resulting mash is pulled up through a screen. Moisture drips through, and what remains is pressed and dried. No two sheets of paper are exactly alike.

Hutchinson exhibits nationally and internationally and has received numerous residencies, commissions and awards, including a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Society of Arts and Crafts Artist of the Year award. In 2015, she was selected to represent Massachusetts for the National Museum of Women in the Arts *Women to Watch* exhibition.

Hutchinson talks about the slowly disappearing prejudice that separates the world of craft from that of fine art. "We need to eliminate marginalized categories," she says. "I am making

authentically, using craft practices and materials I handle with mastery, with hopes of revealing the human condition." Unapologetically rooted in earth-based sources traditionally used for domestic object-making, Rebecca Hutchinson's singular art forms restore beauty and solace to a fractured world.

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