

# CERAMICS

IRELAND



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*Green Bloom*

# REBECCA HUTCHINSON

DON WILKINSON



The studio of American artist Rebecca Hutchinson in bucolic Rochester, Massachusetts is a multifaceted workspace that includes a small and simple woodworking shop, printmaking and papermaking gear, as well as kilns and ceramics production equipment. Hutchinson, who has been a professor of ceramics at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth since 2001, clearly uses it all. Sometimes, the equipment functions as the tools of a solitary craft, but more often than not she combines the elements of the various disciplines to create complex and ornate three-dimensional works.

Clay is the featured star in the sculptures or structures formulated as components of large site-specific installations. Paper and wood are supporting players, and Hutchinson deftly unites them admirably, as if those combinations were always meant to exist as singular entities.

Her work is largely botanical in appearance and she notes that 'there are states of existence' that she continues to observe and study. They include the structure of nature, the interaction of various, competing (yet sometimes complementary) forces of nature, biological diversity and the resilience of life itself manifested as the struggle to grow, expand, reproduce and nurture.

There is a common tendency to create great divides between big disciplines such as art and science. But Hutchinson is having none of that. As the daughter of scientists, she has a raging curiosity and a learned point of view. Her works are the result of careful observation of the natural world, informed decisions and a meticulous handling of materials. She digs into the muck, both figuratively and literally. She physically and spiritually embraces the Mother Earth herself as a personal muse.

In works collectively called the *Determinate Growth* series, she takes inspiration from root systems, rock outcroppings, moss, the forest floor, and invasive species and the species that fight back against them. She finds poetry in the strength that arises from the fragility of small scale and large scale ecosystems, floral beauty and ferocity and plant formations of all kinds. The tree trunk that insistently grows right through a chain link fence is an apt metaphor for her work, in which life refuses to give up. Hutchinson's work is highly detailed with great respect for the traditions (vessel ceramics, papermaking, figurative sculpture) that make up the sum of her whole, but it is a respect that is not overly pious. For example, she is influenced by Persian rugs and Islamic pattern making but she is not beholden to unnecessary flourishes nor burdened down by a tendency toward decoration.

The sculptures are made primarily from but a few elements. There is, of course, clay, some which is 'site-dug', some which is purchased. There are lengths of harvested willow branches that form a skeletal substructure in the works; an undercarriage of sorts, put together with wooden pegs. They are the bones that the flesh of clay adheres to, forming a unified body. And there are delicate, fibrous florets of handmade paper,



Racine Museum Installation

Turman Larison Gallery Installation



made pink, powder blue, apricot or seagreen by the addition of fragments of rags, table linens, or repurposed clothing (from family members or thrift stores), blended into the pulp in the papermaking process. Some of the florets are pure paper, others are blended with clay to create 'paperclay'. Some of the florets are fired to give a hard edge (cone 6), while others are underfired and stabilized with white glue. All are interconnected. They are flowery tatterdemalions transformed into something that manages to be both earthbound and ethereal.

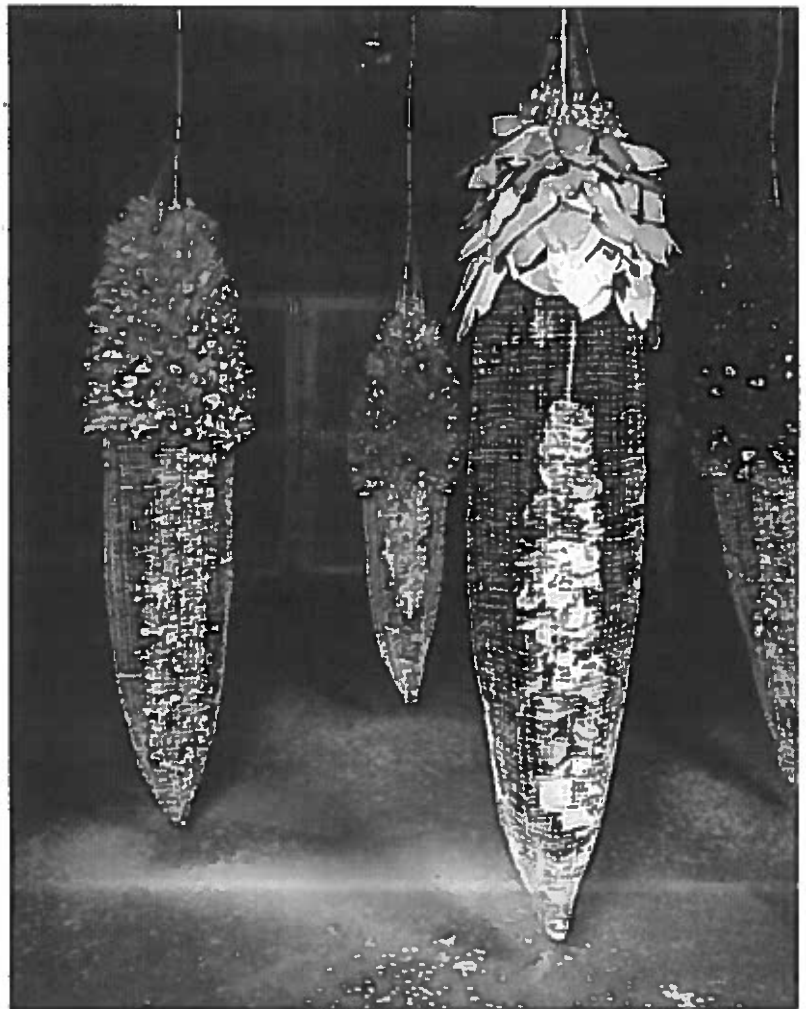
Sometimes the pulp itself is made from garden materials (Hutchinson grows much of her family's food) or from industrial

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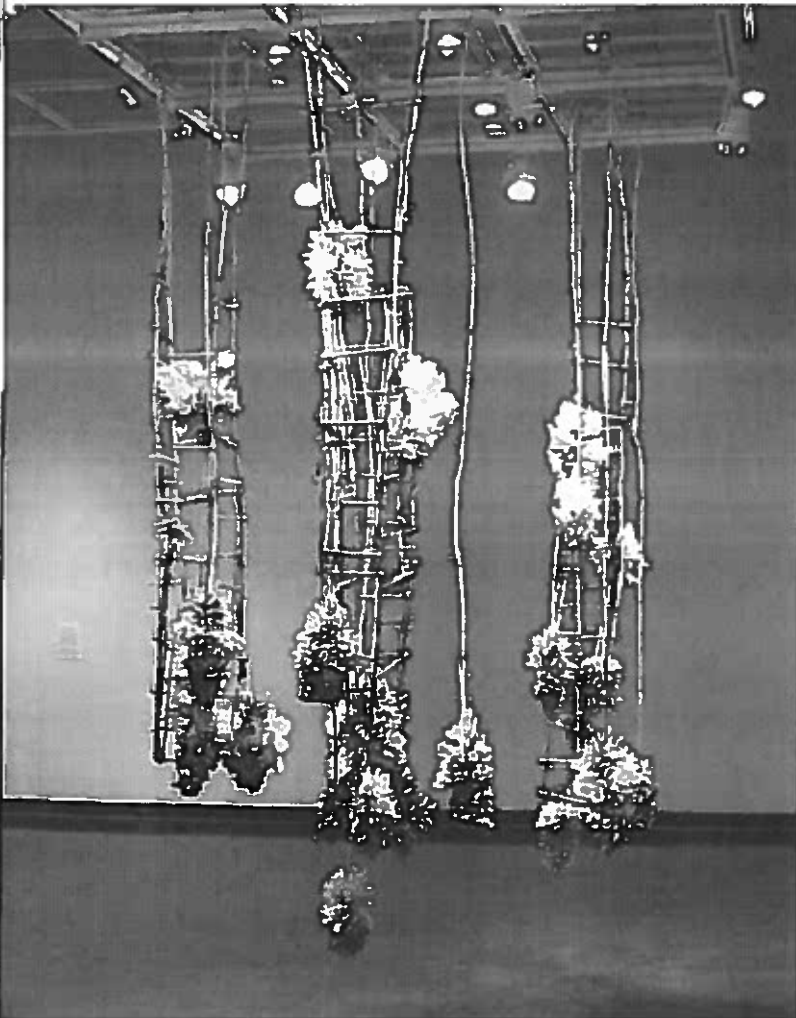
surplus goods, such as sisal hemp, used in the manufacture of rugs, rope and burlap bags. Hutchinson constructs her complex sculptures by combining the clay and paper elements in such a manner that they always seemed to have coexisted in that form. The individual components maintain their distinct identities even when brought together in a composite harmony. She facilitates the marriage of media with the application of a mixture of paper pulp and clay, as seemingly thick as peanut butter and it acts as a nearly indestructible bonding agent as it hardens.

Her *Orange Burst* is a wall hanging that appears oh-so delicate but like nature itself, appearance can belie the truth. It is an elegant work of peach tones, pale yellow and lavender transformed into funnel-like shapes and carnations. There are elements of floral sensuality that could rival any of Georgia O'Keeffe's naughtier work. *Green Bloom* is quieter and cooler, rich with periwinkle blue, ecru and faded veridian. Both works balance hard against soft and glossy against matte, while harnessed to a trellis of willow, harvested by the artist. The concept of equilibrium is manifested throughout her structures. Dichotomies emerge - nature and culture, the feminine and the masculine, the rigid and the acquiescent - and then they merge with an aesthetic ease.

*Pearlman Museum Installation*



*Racine Museum Installa*



There is a term known as 'bloom dynamics', which is defined 'the ability of botanical forms to grow despite boundaries to point in which additional growth is accommodated and separate individual structures appear to be unified from the graceful growth patterns.' That definition is also applicable to Hutchinson's dynamic sculptural ceramic and paper hybrids, whether they suspended from the ceiling, hung upon the wall, erupting from floor like an encroaching forest or providing a lush deep carpet of botanical beauty.

Her work can be understood as an artistic ecophysiology (which the biological discipline that studies the adaptation of an organism's physiology.) Her organisms are of clay, paper and willow, which she adeptly manages to do (with the sculptures and installations which arise from them) is to get the viewer to understand what all means. Without the need for the wordy extrapolation of a critic, Hutchinson's impressive artistry is mingled with deep-sea devotion to bigger forces. Her work is not only a symbol for necessary and dynamic interwovenness of nature but it serves as a sweet and not-so-subtle metaphor for society.

Rebecca Hutchinson is a Professor of ceramics at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

Don Wikinson is a Massachusetts-based art critic, cultural commentator and painter.

Photography: *Pearlman Museum Installation* - Pearlman Museum; *Turman Larison Gallery Installation*, *Green Bloom* - Kurt Keiser; *Artist hands* - Jeff Van Tine; other images courtesy of the artist.