

Out of Eden: The Sculptural Work of Harry Geffert

By Amy V. Grimm

When the mythologist Joseph Campbell was asked who could interpret the divinity inherent in nature or the unseen he stated, "It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn't simply a sociologist with a program..." Harry Geffert is one such artist who communicates the divine and the sublime aspects of the natural world through his sculpture. His foundry and estate combine to form a kind of paradise and from this Eden he creates sculptural works inspired by nature, by literature, and beyond. Some of his major sources include: Fantasy, the Renaissance, Greco-Roman antiquity, early 20th century Regionalism and Botany.

Works included in the exhibition date from 1988 to the present. The forty-two sculptures are linked together by their recurring elements: water, eggs, trees, abstractions of nature and human forms. Geffert creates visual and literary riddles through the use of complex compositions, self-references, and titles with implied narratives. He imbues his sculptures with intelligence and humor, allowing the viewer to explore the work visually and intellectually. Despite the literary features of his work, Geffert often abstracts and isolates elements that do not have a direct narrative. Regardless of recurring elements or visual echoes in his sculptures, each piece in *Out of Eden: The Sculptural Work of Harry Geffert* deserves to be viewed and considered independently.

Geffert's command over the sculpting process is impressive, and he simply acknowledges this mastery as part of being a sculptor. Using both the lost-wax method and direct casting, he has achieved some of the greatest details and refinement possible in bronze casting and paper casting. His most recent paper-cast sculptures use toilet paper as the basis for the media, to which Geffert adds other ingredients in order to achieve his desired aesthetic. Not only is he an accomplished bronze sculptor, Geffert also creates unique patinas with a vitality born of texture and color. He respects the interest

others show in his craft although he is not a technician. He is an artist and his ideas are the driving force behind his work.

In his recent work, Geffert's manifestations have grown increasingly abstract as he explores concepts without narrative. Recognizing that the artist views art and life as a single entity is important in order to understand his work, his use of materials, conceptual choices, and artistic function. Geffert's sculptures entice the viewer to linger, allowing them time to examine and experience each work intimately.

Geffert's stylistic pluralism delivers consistently satisfying compositions. Some works have a Bosch -like-quality---tormented figures withering in an underworld---and contain metaphors for birth and transformation within the context of the natural world. Other works are more compact in their visual economy. Geffert's recent experiments in casting paper allow him to continue exploring these conceptual and aesthetic themes. Similar ideas are addressed in William Blake's poetry:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

A Place Beside the Road is a pivotal work that incorporates several of Geffert's ongoing thematic elements - personal experience and collective memory - while revealing many of the artist's aesthetic interests (Plate 1). Here is a vision of the world, both macro and micro in scale, that can be universally understood. This unique sculptural composition integrates elements found in nature: the arch of water, the tree, its root formation and vine-like twine. Although these forms were elements recalled from a road trip the artist took to Colorado, they speak volumes about Geffert's wider interests.

While traveling, Geffert wanted to find a place where he could pull the car over and rest. Doing so, he discovered a beautiful spot near a stream with a delicate evergreen stubbornly growing in the midst of rushing water. Geffert translates this in a balanced composition. A particular focus is on the sculptural kinetic tree and root element. This tree structure appears suspended in a stream and he created this element of the sculpture to move in the wind or rain. He observed evidence that other people had been in the area in the form of the detritus they left behind. The rope represents both the people and the objects. On a later trip he came upon this exact same location - perhaps this was more than a coincidence.

Geffert often goes beyond reflections of personal experiences and entangles them with art history. This is wonderfully demonstrated in *American Gothic* (PLATE 2). Here we see the obvious reference to Grant Wood's painting of the same name by Geffert makes the iconic image his own by incorporating other moments in time. The male figure, for example, is a nod to Greco-Roman antiquity and the female figure is a bust representing idolatry. A figure looking inward at the framed couple is Geffert himself, wearing a foundry apron, protective coverings for his feet and holding a founder's ring - a tool used to create such a work. The life-size sculpture creates a sense of realism but with a Geffert twist. Geffert makes another appearance in the sculpture as the figure represented in a cameo worn by the woman, which is not only self-referential but is also a pun.

Elements outside the frame, comment on the nature of the sculpture itself and meander into the view's space. Some elements such as corn stalks seem in keeping with Grant Wood's idealized depiction of wholesome Midwestern frame culture. Others relate more to Geffert's aesthetics and penchant for metaphysical play, like the tiny staircase to the side of the figures that implies how a much smaller female figure was able to climb into the scene and dance between the frame. Past and present, personal and universal, literal and metaphorical, serious and irreverent: all the elements that make Geffert's work so compelling are readily evident.

This Season, a beautiful white paper cast sculpture, is in low relief (PLATE 4). This wall-mounted work is created in a manner quite different from American Gothic; Geffert takes the corn stalk element from that work and gives it its own life. Upturned leaves appear to be reaching for the sun, and the solitary ear of corn- husk removed- reveals each individual kernel of corn. As with the corn stalks in American Gothic, we see an interest in the harvest and, by extension, the cycles of life with a completely different intent. Here we have a sense of the passage of time and the very basic needs of life. What Geffert achieves is visual awareness and a visceral response to the ordinary. We see something as familiar as a stalk of corn as if we are seeing it for the first time.

Devil's Eggs is a pun enveloped in a warning (PLATE 10). Geffert combines sculptural elements position is somewhat unsettling, but disparities in scale make the piece feel jocular in tone. The temptations and dangers of everyday life are taken to heart with humor. Geffert portrays himself as the tiny figures moving ahead, moving through the thorns that represent the struggle of life, despite temptation and danger.

Pitchforks, objects we might otherwise associate with the devil, in this context do not seem inherently menacing- they are intriguing. We can imagine giants using them as skewers to consume Geffert's egg appetizers. But if we look at the anthropological and metaphorical symbol of the egg as the progenitor of life, we also see there are implications of danger and death here. Geffert's use of proportion and juxtaposing of objects cause the meaning to shift according to the viewer's distance from the piece, leaving open many narrative possibilities.

In Downside-Up, Geffert makes fun of a world that seems upside-down in a poignant semiotic play (PLATE 7). The universe has been reduced to two large, rock-like structures with reddish-orange patina. Given the complex texture of the rocks, we have to remind ourselves that this is, in fact, a work in bronze.

We see a story unfolding that is self-reflective and the challenges awaiting the figure poised to traverse this terrain seem enormous. The figure (the artist) is carrying a large egg on his back and is followed by his beloved dog Hieronyma in a Sisyphus-like visual parable. The egg could be a symbol of responsibilities we carry - burdens or something the artist cares about deeply and is struggling to move forward with. The sculpture sits on what appears to be a much smaller version of his sculpture Expansion. Houses stacked on top represents Geffert and his home approached from far below. This work portrays a precariously balanced world and implies that despite all obstacles, the human spirit can prevail.

Gold Coast is a work informed by Geffert's travels along the California coastline (PLATE 8). The word gold, in the title could be a reference to the gold rush or to the constant sunshine associated with the state. This is a complex work, held within a utilitarian cart. Geffert notes the cart's importance to the piece was tremendous: he used it not only to move the cast-paper sculpture, but as a worktable and an easel. The cart, however, ultimately took on greater importance than these utilitarian functions. The subject is both the cart and the symbolic coast- the beach, tides and the rocks of the surrounding terrain. These elements become specimens removed from their natural context.

While the artist often makes references to his own work, rarely do we get a glimpse of objects associated with his process such as the founder's ring in American Gothic and Gold Coast's utilitarian cart. By incorporating these elements, Geffert reminds us that this is not a work isolated in his own specific experience. He melds memories to create objects for us to reflect upon. This dichotomy- the representation of nature and the creative process- is left exposed. This openness creates a unique visual tension and reminds us of the artist- the person making the choices that determine the work.

Three Rivers is a continuation of Geffert's interest in elements of water (PLATE 6). The title comes from the name of a small town south of San Antonio where Geffert was born. The artist affectionately jokes about his

nickname for the town: Two Creeks and a Mud-Hole. Geffert's love of nature and concern for the environment sneaks into some of the visual conversations, which are informed by an acute awareness of both conservations and preservation. The technique he employs to create some of his water sculptures involves creating mock riverbeds across long tables. Tilting them slightly, the artist pours hot wax into channels from different vessels and at different developed a beautiful green patina over time—an intentional effect of an artist who possesses a deep understanding of his medium.

Conservatory also demonstrates Geffert's love of nature and fondness for experimentation (PLATE 5). This cast paper sculpture of a vegetable shows us, in dizzying detail, a cabbage with thick, leather-like leaves and raised veins. It is white and elegant; one can see shapes and patterns with more clarity than if the piece were a realistic green color. Rendered at true scale we look at the form –a portrait of vegetable –with renewed interest. Its veins remind us of our own veins, providing essential elements for life similar to the nutrients pulled through the roots and veins of an ordinary garden staple. Geffert brings us down to earth, quite literally, in this examination of the ordinary. The artist regularly breaks down barriers between humankind and nature. The work, placed under Plexiglas, emphasizes the subject: it is more than an object and demands evaluation.

On his own estate, Geffert's appreciation for nature is obvious. In harmony with the environment, he built for structures, one of which is a greenhouse. In it is a heavenly assortment of plants that include: a giant banana left palm and small seedling. Geffert is working with nature while nature works at reclaiming his spaces. His interest with plants in his greenhouse provides him with an opportunity to study the structures of plant material. In this space, Geffert can imagine future casting projects while absorbing a rich assortment of visual influences.

In Slice of Life, Wisdom Two we see apples as metaphors for wisdom and purity (PLATE 3). Apples are of course, also Judeo-Christian symbols of

temptation –the fall from grace back in the Garden of Eden. This piece is beautiful in its simplicity –a concise visual experience. Often, painters are referred to as great colorists but Geffert’s sculptures are some of the best examples of such mastery. Color and patina create a sense of realism. Combined with a realistic portrayal, Geffert’s ability to play with reality reminds the viewer that these works are more than they appear to be. His sculptures open a door for viewers to enter into a dialog with the art and each other. What if there had been two apples in the Garden of Eden? What if there were greater implications of gender equality in religion? If the view takes a moment to look carefully, multiple interpretations emerge, reminding us that there are many ways of seeing.

Geffert’s use of color is evident in other sculptures. To achieve a white patina Geffert applies nitrates to the surface of bronze at a high temperature. This is a slow process and the results are extraordinary. White Water is a subtle wall mounted sculpture resembling a water sample (PLATE 9). In this abstraction of nature, we see the movement of liquid state. Interestingly, as it is wall mounted, we see water –or an element that mimics water –without a visible source. This reminds the viewer that something inspired by nature doesn’t have to conform to the realities of nature.

Geffert’s recurring interest in tress –the details of tree bark and forests- are interpreted in a unique way in the cast paper installation Forest, (PLATE 11). Geffert isolates and studies elements in nature in much the same way the Hudson River School artists examined, rocks, trees, broken branches and pieced them together to create fictionalized compositions. Geffert’s sculptures, however, are not idealized ways to look at the world; they are his own unique visions. Individual elements, down to the smallest indentations and patterns in the cast bark, are greater than the sum of their parts. Forest reveals both the elegance and restraint of Geffert’s recent work. It has a sparse feel, sharply focused on essential elements of structure and form. Geffert achieves his desired affect b placing multiple cast paper structures in an assemblage. There is a quiet, poetic quality to this work –philosophically archaic but visually contemporary.

Mantime is a dynamic work, full of narrative potential and exploratory qualities, beguiling the viewer with layers of composition and meaning (PLATE 12). From afar, individual elements are evident and as one moves closer, crouches down and circles the sculpture, a smaller important cast of characters appears: we witness the magical earth/plant bound birth of humankind. Predominately male figures (with the exception of four female figures) are nestled in giant pea pods; some are climbing out of small cocoons; some are crawling. A solitary figure reaches the water in the center of the scene.

The patina of the plant life is shown in an array of browns, reds, greens, yellows, the figures have a slightly peach tinge. The color and complexities of this underworld has a surreal dreamlike and fantastical quality.

As we move behind the sculpture, we see trails left in the “dirt.” Moving up the sphere/world, we see another group of small figures –perhaps concerned citizens trying to take control of the world or their lives. Grappling serious questions in his own tree-filled Eden, a solitary man –one who remembers how to let go seizes the world and lives freely. He is life-sized; we can even see the details of his skin in his footprints. The large figure descends the front of the world, forgoing any attempt to control it. Instead, by letting go, the world is his to discover.

Geffert’s works are like sonnets of Shakespeare: core issues repeated, and in this case, the core is a spiritual awakening. Another work in the exhibition, Awakening, is closely—both visually and conceptually—linked to Mantime. In this two-part wall sculpture, we see a huddled figure enveloped by vegetation and roots in bronze next to a photograph of the sculptural element of the piece. Play, freedom and joy –the things we want and wish to give our children – we often forget to give ourselves. Geffert, perhaps unconsciously, gives us these gifts.

Expansion is a graceful composition that incorporates large natural elements with much smaller human references that suggest the expansion and development of land by people, as well as their imprint on the landscape (PLATE 13). In a large, solitary tree trunk rest an enormous egg, nestled in the tree's limbs. Along the cream colored egg are seven identical structures -tract houses.

Interestingly, Geffert includes a figure carrying an egg (again, the artist) followed by his dog Hieronyma. They appear to be standing out on a limb - one that has been severed, the route or passage cut off. This self-referential work, similar to Downside-Up, reveals a kind of human vulnerability within the natural work. Perhaps as humans we think we are in control, since we can often manipulate nature to our advantage. This sculpture questions that relationship. Geffert expresses concern for the land, holes drilled into the earth to mine raw materials that are left unsealed like wounds. Pointing out these issues, the artist allows us to visually contemplate and possibly understand what we hear in passing on the news. He translates the careless nature of development -encroachment, which concerns us all.

We can see Geffert's visual grace in the work In the Field 2 as he creates a paper-cast sculpture of a singular husk of corn (PLATE14). Similar to This Season, we see an interest in the harvest and the cycles of life. The solitary nature of the composition is striking, and allows us to look at the humble eternal ear of corn. While many can readily see the spiritual questions that Geffert raises in his work, his eternal questioning and love of nature seems to be equal does of Albert Einstein (logic) and Henry David Thoreau (poetics). Some of this dichotomy can be seen in Geffert's technical experimentation and interest in complex visual puzzles. On the other hand, he is an artist who quietly contemplates our role in nature and harbors an abundant reverence for the natural world.

Tired is a complex and balanced composition (PLATE15). Geffert reveals duality in a single element -a rope -that shows both the ingenious hand of man and the frayed ends, which represent our vulnerability. Other, seemingly

disparate elements such as rebar and forms representing trees and water are grouped to create a dynamic composition. This sculpture is like a three-dimensional still life painting. Each element is carefully chosen and arranged. It has the timelessness of ancient wall painting and the visual and technical prowess of a modern portrait.

At the top of the sculpture is a rose; with its earthen patina, it materialized gently. The symbolism of roses in Geffert's work is complex and, as the saying goes, no two are the same. What is known is that Geffert has fond memories of his Great Aunt Liddy's garden, which was filled with roses and vegetables. He created an entire series of sculptures that include roses in honor of her. It seems like that positive experience in the country -on his family farm and in gardens -are major influences. Everything isn't always as it appears and the title, tied, gives us a hint. The pervasive notion exist that people like to tie up loose ends, whether at work or with family. In reality, do we have such control? Geffert reminds us that few things can be neatly resolved. Much about his explores the tension between humankind's need for control -or having a sense of control, false or not, as well as where that drive can lead us. He reminds us what is better, how we can be better and how we can see the beauty around us, just like he transcends ephemera into sculpture.

Geffert is an artist who has earned the respect his peers, art-historians, collectors and countless students he has both taught and inspired. When Geffert left teaching after almost thirty years at Texas Christian University, he already created his foundry. Having balanced teaching with casting for himself and others at the Green Mountain Foundry for years, he is now able to dedicate himself full-time to his own artistic pursuits. At Green Mountain, Geffert has worked with many artists including Frances Bagley, Clyde Connell, Vernon Fisher, Virgil Grotfeldt, Joseph Harvel, Ken Little, Lucas Johnson, Linda Ridgway and James Surls.

To say that Geffert developed an appreciation for nature growing up on a farm seems likely, but to fully realize the life-long impact of nature on the artist, we must turn to the artist himself. He comments, "Art is part of life, I

want it to be real. We've lost track of that in the art world. Art has become cold and corporate. Then it's not art anymore. The plants are me."

From the 1980s to today, Geffert has created a large and complex body of work and increasingly pursued creative and complex casting techniques, producing renderings that are personal, universal and timeless. While many of his sculptures contain narrative content, Geffert has, over time, moved away from direct storytelling. This allows the viewers to complete his potential narratives. His work is an invitation to imagine and to make shared dreams a reality.