



ROY STAAB

Suspended in Time



Cover: Roy Staab repairing *Nature Belle*, 2006; reeds and willow; Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photograph by Eddee Daniel.

Left: *Wheel of Time*, 2012; bamboo; Garrison Institute, Garrison, New York. Photograph courtesy of Garrison Institute, a 501c3 nonprofit that provides a platform for artists who address environmental issues.

Right: At Villa Terrace, Staab installing *Shadow Dance*, 2016; attaching rings to willow supports. Photograph by Susan Barnett.



VILLA TERRACE
DECORATIVE
ARTS MUSEUM

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Essay by Susan Floyd Barnett



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Left: *Rising Spiral*, 2001; locally harvested reeds and jute; Fresh Pond, Amagansett, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Above: Roy Staab working on *Chaise Île*, 2011; Bayou Bienvenue, Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans, Louisiana (associated with A Studio in the Woods residency). Photograph by Cammie Hill-Prewitt.

Right: *Big Round*, 2008; footprints in the mud at low tide; in the tidal estuary at Marbaek Beach near Esbjerg, Denmark. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Suspended in Time

Roy Staab and his works are a shifting mass of contradictions, an endless dichotomy of irreconcilable opposites that somehow arrive at a delicate balance.¹ His earth-sensitive, site-specific installations are made from local materials and constructed on site. He prefers to place his precise, structural designs in nature: forests, estuaries, lakes, and meadows. Although monumental in scale, Staab's installations are transitory. Depending on weather and materials, they may last a day, a season, sometimes a year. Eschewing paper and pencil for preliminary drawings, Staab lays out the work directly on the ground using string and sticks. His building materials, usually saplings and reeds, contribute variations and impose limitations of flexion, size, and strength. Staab's designs are based on reductive geometry, maintaining sparse simplicity or complicated by repetition, depending on the artist's concept and his interaction with the site.

Staab refers to his practice as environmental site installation; it also falls within curator and author Ben Tufnell's broad definition of land art:

*Land art is characterized by an immediate and visceral interaction with landscape, nature and the environment. . . . It is not simply sculpture placed in the landscape but encompasses an attitude to site and experience that goes beyond the object, emphasizing the landscape in which it is sited, often bringing it within the compass of the work and so rendering it an active component rather than merely a setting.*²

Staab's influences include contemporary culture, Platonic philosophy, classical music, ancient land art, Japanese basketry, the ethos of environmental art, the clarity and logic of minimalism, and the physicality of abstract expressionism. He adamantly distinguishes

himself from the Earth artists who gained recognition in the 1960s.³ Unlike their massive interventions made with bulldozers and cranes, Staab's work leaves no scars on the land.⁴ In his words, "The most perfect environmental art is transparent and blends into the environment. . . . Sculpture is the manmade imprint, and nature just grabs it and pulls it into its vortex."⁵

While traditional landscape paintings represent nature in art, Staab's installations present art within nature. They serve as lenses to view and experience the site, stimulating "a mode of thinking in which the landscape is rendered visible by objects."⁶ Bridging land and sky, the scope of his work reflects Staab's upward reach, his stride and strength.⁷ He often inserts branches into the ground or lake bottom, creating an armature from which to suspend horizontal forms made from bundled grasses or saplings. These shapes interact with the surrounding space and the land or water



below. Shadows or reflections multiply and complicate the floating lines, changing with passing clouds and the angle of the sun. His most modest works are simple arrangements of stones or shells laid into shallow linear channels, or patterns drawn by marching through mud or snow. Site specificity is central to Staab's practice. "If you try to be in tune with the land, it tells you where the art is supposed to be."⁸ The work is a dance in a particular place, a joyful performance of temporary marks.

Like most artists who create ephemeral work, Staab photographs his completed installations for documentation and future exhibitions. His still images suspend a moment in time, balancing the geometry and chaos of the sculpture and its setting. The work is framed by lapis skies, lush greenery, or monochromatic winter branches, emerging from thick fog or glowing golden at dusk. Shadows or reflections dance beneath. His videos use panning shots to suggest an element of time. Despite their beauty, photographs and videos of these site-specific sculptures are two-dimensional shadows of experience. While the installation frames and focuses the surrounding land, water, and sky, still images capture only the formal structure of the installation within its frame.⁹ They cannot convey the smell of wet earth, the warmth and chill of sun and passing clouds, the sound of birds and traffic, lapsing time, changing light, or the physical interaction and changing perspectives of moving toward, around, and within the structure.

While environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy often records the decay of his work, Staab does not embrace entropy as part of his creative process. He explains, "Disintegration is part of the environment

but not part of the work. An artist's work has to be perfect. When it falls apart, the artist no longer controls it, and nature takes over."¹⁰ He photographs his installations shortly after completion, returning before they decompose to capture memories in varying lights, sometimes through changing seasons.

One of Staab's many contradictions is that despite his romantic love for nature, the crux of his work is logic, structure, and pattern. He explains, "I try to be in total control of what I am making, which is why I use mathematics," adding, "I try to stay as close to nature as I can. I am looking for a purity."¹¹ In a 2009 interview, he compared his work to the dialogue and structure of a play: "The dialogue is the figurative part, but the structure of the dialogue is like what my artwork is about. My work is all about structure and the form."¹² Blending mathematics and craft, Staab seeks a sublime union of art and culture. The work is at once material and spiritual, object and verb, lens and container.

At 74, Staab shows no signs of slowing. Recently having returned from India and Poland, he is planning summer residencies while locating reeds for his current project and negotiating the next commission. Staab's most recent installation in Milwaukee is one of a handful there over the past decade. These included a retrospective at Inova in 2009, a summer residency and installation at the Lynden Sculpture Garden in 2012, and *Nature Belle*, a 35-foot-diameter woven bell installed in a traffic circle (detail pictured on the cover), which was commissioned by the Hank Aaron Trail in 2006.¹³ The *Nature in Three Parts* exhibition at Villa Terrace, on display through the summer of 2016, enables Staab's hometown friends, artists, and neighbors to see his work.





Left: Three views of *Becomes a Star*, 2014; Big Cedar Lake, West Bend, Wisconsin. Staab photographed this installation at different times of day and as the leaves turned. Photographs courtesy of the artist.

Right: *Chiral Formation*, 2012; buckthorn harvested onsite; Lynden Sculpture Garden's Little Lake, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photograph courtesy of the artist.





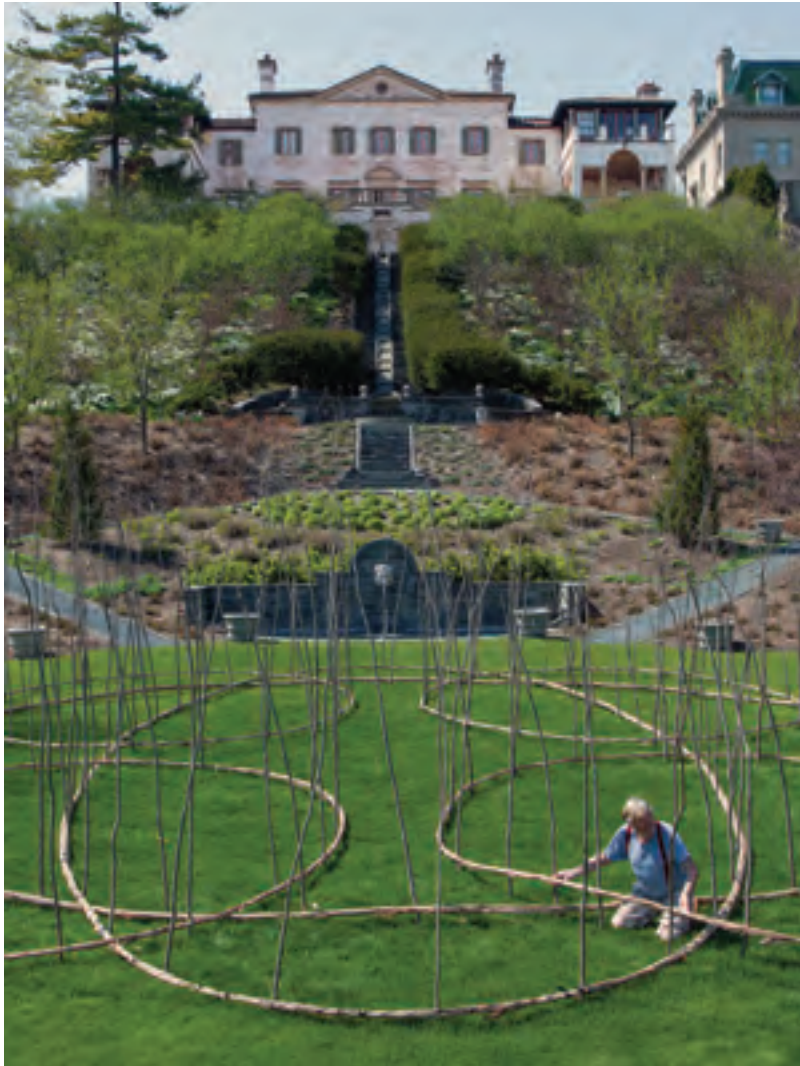
Left: Roy Staab building *Storm King*, 1989; reeds and jute; Hudson River north of West Point, New York. Photograph by Kristin Long.

Top: *Erection*, 2015; Khari River Gorge, Bhju, Gujarat, India. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: *Salt Zen Ring*, 2015; White Desert of Kutch, Gujarat, India. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Above: *Ladies of the Lake*, 2013; prairie grass coreopsis; Big Cedar Lake, near West Bend, Wisconsin. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Clockwise from left: Roy Staab lifting ring for *Shadow Dance*, 2016; looking down at the Renaissance Garden with *Shadow Dance* in process; Staab installing a willow sapling. Photographs by Susan Barnett.

Right: Staab harvesting reeds. Photograph by Susan Barnett.

Shadow Dance

Shadow Dance is the first sculpture to be commissioned by the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum, an Italian-Renaissance-style mansion overlooking Lake Michigan. The Villa's formal gardens sweep down a steep bluff to lush grass bordered by symmetrical beds of trees and shrubs. At one time the property included private lake access; it is now separated from the shore by the Demmer *Neptune Gate* and Lincoln Memorial Drive. The sculpture is sited between an obelisk that marks the center of the lawn and the base of the bluff.

The concept of paradise in the West, the Middle East, and India is based on the paradigm of an enclosed garden; the word's derivation combines "around" and "to make, form (a wall)."¹⁴ The controlled space of a garden defines inside and out, registers the passing seasons with crescendos and decrescendos, is defensible, and thus defended. It encompasses birth, sex, life, and death.¹⁵

Although Staab is an artist, not a garden designer, there are similarities between the formal landscape design of the Villa Terrace and his installation. Like the garden, the work is based on repeating geometries, incorporates the passing of time, and serves as a frame for the natural world and its processes. The garden and the sculpture share a primary, privileged viewing point from the center of the Villa's upper terrace as well as a vocabulary of structure, control, and symmetry.

Mirroring the central axis of the Renaissance Garden, this temporary installation consists of horizontal lines made from reeds, which are suspended from vertical willow supports. *Shadow Dance* consists of four ovals divided by paths and unified by a larger oval and circle. The circular motifs contrast with the commanding linear structure of the tree rows edging the property.



Staab filled the entire space as if it were a painter's canvas, using the work's span to overpower the central focal point of the garden's obelisk. Suspended in three parallel planes, the relationships of the forms and their shadows shift with the movement of the viewer. From the perspective of the terrace overlook, the ovals appear circular and the circle ovoid.

Staab's vision for the installation evolved during the process of its making. Even before gathering materials, while snow still covered the ground, he decided the design would be based on circular motifs and sited between the waterfall staircase and the central obelisk. Staab resolved to build the structure from willows, which are strong enough to last through the four-month exhibition (they may even root). He chose the title in homage to Matisse's dancers, imagining a circle of graceful figures cavorting on the sunny lawn.

The concept germinated as Staab located, harvested, and stockpiled materials. He prefers to use plants that are native to the site when possible, but they also must be pliable, tall, and strong. His favorites are hardy (and sometimes invasive) plants that re-establish after harvest such as bamboo, willow, and reeds. Staab was granted permission to gather willows from the Milwaukee parks. He selected only the tallest, straightest saplings, cutting them at the base and aligning them around his work area as a printmaker might arrange stacks of paper.

Staab stays in the moment, responding to the immediate needs of his work throughout its making. In his words, "I meditate to the work and to the site and become quiet to the work."¹⁶ Gleaning materials requires negotiating for unwanted but possibly invasive plants. Tall stands of reeds on private land may be deemed protected, while urban foresters worry that moving invasive species from parkland could spread seeds. Weather determines the final schedule. In late April, the temperatures dipped into the thirties with wind and rain. Construction paused while Staab edited photographs, located materials, and waited for the skies to clear.

(continued)





Once the willow saplings were stacked onsite, Staab pruned the side branches and steeply angled their bases to make long, sharp poles. He stretched string to define the central pathway and the work's overall footprint. Then he drew a large circle and smaller ovals with a compass line and marked the position of the willow supports with twigs. After he and a volunteer spent an exhausting day pounding holes with a steel bar and sledgehammer, they switched to an electric auger and the work progressed more quickly. At the end of the second day, an armature of upright willow shoots outlined his design. Only after installing the armature did Staab begin locating and harvesting reeds.



Staab's go-to material for horizontal linear elements is the common reed *phragmites australis*, an invasive grass that grows up to eighteen feet tall and can be found in wetlands throughout the world.¹⁷ He has used this material in Finland, Japan, Poland, the Eastern seaboard, Taiwan, and the Midwest. Staab selects the tallest, straightest stalks from the previous year's growth, soaks them to make them pliable, and then binds them with twine. Staab initially thought the fluffy seed heads were "frou-frou" but has learned

to embrace the natural character of the reeds.¹⁸ They soften and slightly blur the lines of his three-dimensional drawings.

Staab arranges overlapping bundles of wet reeds around the armature, lashing them to the base of the willows to mold the ropes into curves. "Not fat enough," he decides, unbinding the small ovals and adding another layer of reeds. The final bundles are as thick as a man's arm. Staab binds the stems every few inches, kneeling on the damp ground. His knots resemble blanket stitch, secured by an extra loop in case the twine breaks. The process is slow and repetitive. His hands bleed from pulling taut the rough jute.

When the six rings are bound, the sculpture exists as a two-dimensional drawing on the ground. It does not dance. Using a laser level, Staab marks the plane for the small ovals near his eye level, raises them to the marks, and secures them to the willow uprights. He fastens the large oval a few inches lower. Finally he attaches the circle. Children approach cautiously, fascinated by the elfin figure weaving art from straw on the lawn. As Staab binds the reeds, they ask: Is it going to be a house? A playhouse? A basket? A kind of a maze? Yes, he answers.

The entire design is structural: the uprights suspend the horizontal elements, and they, in turn, stabilize the verticals. The work balances, not only as an integral structure but within the geometry of the formal gardens, poised between land and sky. The willow supports reach upward with crooked fingers while the horizontal ellipses ripple toward the edges of the garden, casting shadows below. The repeated ovals and circles suggest the infinite space beyond the garden gate. The sculpture dances.¹⁹



Previous spread, this page, and back cover:
Shadow Dance, 2016; willow, phragmite reeds and jute twine;
Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
Approximately 12 x 55 x 40 feet. Photographs by Jim Brozek.

Notes

Suspended in Time

1. Polly Morris et al., *Roy Staab: Four Seasons / Four Corners* (Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Peck School of the Arts, 2009), 5. Nicholas Frank discusses Staab's contradictions at length.
 2. Ben Tufnell, *Land Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 15-16.
 3. John K. Grande, "In Tune with Nature: A Conversation with Roy Staab," *Sculpture* 23, no. 6 (July/August 2004): 50.
 4. Tufnell, *Land Art* 54. "Heizer's work in particular—due to the sheer scale of the alterations he wrought upon the land, as well as his outspoken attitudes—was controversial."
 5. Grande, "In Tune with Nature," 49.
 6. Kate Linker, "Michael Singer: A position In, and On, Nature," in *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, ed. Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983), 184. This observation applies equally to Staab's site-specific work.
 7. Kat Murrell, "VIDEO: An Interview with Roy Staab," (Transcript) *Urban Milwaukee*, posted July 10, 2009, <http://urbanmilwaukee.com/2009/07/10/video-an-interview-with-roy-staab/> (accessed April 20, 2016). "I'm like the paintbrush or the [stylus] when I'm making the work. That's as big as I am and the gesture I can make."
 8. Andrea M. Coutour, "The Earth Art of Roy F. Staab," *Orion Magazine* (Winter 1993): 45.
 9. Elizabeth C. Baker, "Artworks on the Land," in *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, ed. Alan Sonfist (New York: Dutton, 1983), 75.
 10. Grande, "In Tune with Nature," 50.
 11. *Ibid.*, 48.
 12. Murrell, "Interview with Roy Staab."
 13. Roy Staab, interview by author, Milwaukee, WI, April, 2016
- ## Shadow Dance
14. Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 10.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. Grande, "In Tune with Nature," 50.
 17. Cornell University Ecology and Management of Invasive Plants Program, "Phragmites Australis," Cornell University, <http://www.invasiveplants.net/phragmites/> (accessed April 25, 2016).
 18. Grande, "In Tune with Nature," 50.
 19. Staab, interview by author. Much of this section was based on conversations with the artist and observing his process.

The Villa Terrace Decorative Art Museum is part of the Charles Allis & Villa Terrace Art Museums (CAVT).

Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum was designed and built in the style of an Italian Renaissance villa by architect David Adler in 1923. The building was the residence of former A.O. Smith president, Lloyd Smith, and his family. The museum features fine and decorative arts dating from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, wrought-iron masterpieces by Cyril Colnik, and changing exhibitions. Villa Terrace welcomes visitors through a courtyard with a fountain and distinctive marble figure, and treats them to a high and broad terrace that overlooks the Renaissance Garden and Lake Michigan.

It is in the Renaissance Garden that Roy Staab built *Shadow Dance*, the first commissioned sculpture on the grounds of the Villa Terrace. *Shadow Dance*, a monumental site-specific environmental sculpture, is the first of three exhibitions that are part of the museum-wide summer show *Nature in Three Parts*.

The second exhibition is *Suspended in Time*, which features photographs and videos of Staab's earlier sculptural installations in North America, Europe, and Asia. *Shadow Dance* and *Suspended in Time* are the subjects of this catalog.

The third exhibition is *Beyond Baskets*, guest curated by Roy Staab, which showcases contemporary baskets from the collection of Jan Serr and John Shannon. This exhibition, initially suggested by Timothy Cobb, gallerist, emphasizes the structural similarities of these baskets to Staab's larger environmental work.

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Roy Staab: Suspended in Time

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This catalog is set in Optima, a font designed by Hermann Zapf (November 8, 1918–June 4, 2015) and released in 1952. While Optima is a sans serif font, it has a modulated-stroke, with thick and thin strokes, which we feel is appropriate for the work of Roy Staab, who gathers willow and reeds, thick and thin.





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Shadow Dance at Villa Terrace
Environmental Site Installation



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