

# Patterns of Place



Andrea Wasserman (left) and Elizabeth Billings with their work "Gathering Contours: Rural" for the Philadelphia International Airport Terminal.

# The unique public art of Elizabeth Billings and Andrea Wasserman is finding an audience outside of their home state.

**H**igh in the sky above Billings Farm, a racket of geese explode in calls that ricochet off the low clouds. Several people on the ground stop to look up. The black apostrophes of their bodies shift and realign as they fly south-east. Their calls are the only sound for several moments, and their shifting “V” echoes the pine needles that undulate in weaver Elizabeth Billings’ textiles.

It is mid-October, and inside a tidy white cottage on the farm below, Billings is nearing the end of her time as an artist-in-residence at the park. The artist sits perched on a chair, whittling away the bark of two-foot-long apple twigs with a box cutter. Shavings fall to a wrinkled, white drop cloth beneath her feet, and the exposed wood resembles smooth expanses of bone.

The sides of the room are hung with square, black canvases strung with black cotton that are in turn adorned with lines of tiny pine needles bound to the cloth by thin, black threads. Billings has woven them horizontally across the canvas from left to right, and at varying heights, so that they resemble the waves of a seismograph.

Billings wears a thick black wool sweater, her light brown hair pinned back loosely so strands fall around her face. A small pair of glasses is balanced on the end of her nose as she works.

The apple branches she is whittling were trimmed at the end of winter by the staff of Billings Farm, and saved for her to use. “The first year [I asked for them] they thought I was off my rocker,” she laughs. She notes that apple trees are enthusiastic growers. “This is only one year’s growth!” she says of the stick-straight, three-foot-long branches.

By CORIN HIRSCH

Photography by JUSTIN CASH

The twigs are destined for an installation, called “Intersection”, at the old National Life Building at 133 State Street in Montpelier, Vt. Together with her longtime collaborator, Andrea Wasserman, Billings will install 128 feet of friezes and tapestries on several floors of the building in the state capitol complex.

Six weeks later, dozens of people mill around at the opening of 133 State Street, resisting the urge to touch the delicate friezes that fill the hallways. On the ground floor, branches are placed in front of pale green and blue panels, as if growing out of the canvas. They are layered with Wasserman’s drawings of trees, and printed with poems from Robert Frost and Grace Paley:

the tree not really dying living  
less widely green head high  
above the other leaf-crowded  
trees a terrible stretch to sun  
just to stay alive but if you’ve  
liked life you do it

On the second floor, the silhouettes of faces are sandblasted into slate — profiles of the faces of each of the building’s employees. One floor up, tapestries from Billings are woven with spiral images that resemble ferns or seashells; on another floor, their work is interspersed with paintings from fellow Vermonters Eric Aho, Emily Mason and Nick DeFriez.

“We look at spaces and we figure out how we can make more of what they are. How can we make them sing?” says



Slate, phragmite reeds and apple tree sticks are some of the materials used by the artists.

Billings. “It’s not necessarily limited by the techniques that we already know.” For “Face/Slate”, the artists learned how to sandblast.

Both artists call themselves pattern makers, and at 133 State Street, the hallmarks of Billings’ and Wasserman’s work are on display: natural materials married to Eastern minimalism. An intense meditation on place expressed through layering of materials, ideas, words and imagery. A gentle physicality that makes one want to touch the work.

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“I think we’re very much influenced by the environment of a place, the people of a place, more than thoughts that came before,” says Andrea Wasserman. With chin-length dark hair, square-framed glasses and overflowing ideas, her effect is kinetic and slightly urban. “It’s about an inner dialogue, a dialogue between Liz, myself and the environment.”

**THE BIRTH OF A COLLABORATION**

Andrea Wasserman and Elizabeth Billings first met over lunch in Vermont 18 years ago, but their paths had been intersecting in wide circles for years. Both studied weaving at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan — “Elizabeth left quite the legacy behind her,” says Wasserman, who attended after Billings — and both had travelled to Japan to continue their study of weaving.

Billings’ roots are deep in Vermont: her grandfather, Franklin Swift Billings, was governor of Vermont in the mid-1920s; her father, Franklin S. Billings, Jr., was Chief Justice of the Vermont

Supreme Court, and her mother, Pauline, ran F.H. Gillingham & Sons in Woodstock. Her brothers still run the store.

During college, Billings took a semester off to apprentice with renowned weaver Norman Kennedy, who “taught me the foundation of all of my weaving. It wasn’t precious — just functional.” In Japan, Billings apprenticed for a year with an ikat weaver, learning the time intensive process of dying fabric before it is woven. “It was the rhythm of weaving and the rhythms of nature that I was drawn to. And I think my work still comes from that place,” she says.

Wasserman grew up in New York City, but spent most weekends in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. She spent much of her 20s working in the textile industry in New York, and studied weaving in northern Japan as well as produced textiles in Kyoto.

“How the Japanese think about filling space is much different than Western culture,” says Wasserman. “There is a simplicity that is not inherent



Billings and Wasserman assemble the final panels for the Philadelphia International Airport Terminal commission.

here, a minimalism. Even when speaking Japanese, the quiet is important — the space in language. It influences us very much.”

After Cranbrook, Wasserman followed a boyfriend to Vermont, married and found herself moving gradually from weaving into drawing and sculpture. “I wanted things to have structure, in a way. Cloth was very refined and beautiful — it had many layers, but it felt too precious to me,” she says. “There is a physicality in working

with wood and stone that I was missing. Carving and drawing allow me to be free; because I'm off the grid, I'm allowed an exuberance with the work."

As the two became friends and colleagues, they considered collaboration. Public art "is a wonderful venue for us, because on some level we both have a sense of service to the world," says Wasserman. So they began applying for public art commissions. The first that they won — for the Emery Hebbard State Office Building in Newport, Vt. — was a collaboration with five other artists. They created enormous beech-and-copper leaves suspended from the ceiling, etched glass panels, a granite trout and a copper weathervane in the shape of a salmon. It was completed in 1999.

Two years later, they installed "Maple, Apple Birch" along two walls of a new terminal at Burlington Airport. Near a security checkpoint, whittled apple twigs form dark and light patterns that undulate across a wall; inside the waiting area, 24 maple and birch panels line a corridor, carved with images of trees; alternating between them are bamboo panels adorned with stanzas from Vermont poets Cora Vail Brooks and Harriet Warren Vail.

Michele Bailey, program director for the Vermont Arts Council, has worked with the artists on several projects, including Burlington Airport and 133 State Street.

"We often try to create site-specific works of art that relate to the community, the building or the people who work there," says Bailey. "They really make work that's responsive to place. Time and again, we choose their proposals."

Momentum built on their organic approach to public art. They designed sculpture for a bike path on Isle La Motte, a piece for the Marriott hotel lobby in Burlington, and a nautilus-like amphitheater — an outdoor classroom — for South Royalton's Vermont Law School, completed in fall 2007.

"Creating the amphitheatre was

pretty neat, but it was a challenge," says Will Machin, a sculptor and stonemason from Washington, Vt., who worked with the artists on the outdoor classroom. "It needed to fit the hill and hold up over time, while maintaining the sense of lightness and not getting too monumental, and also feeling very natural — like it was growing out of the hill."

In the last two years, the artists' conceptual response to place began to resonate outside of New England. In

2006, the artists won a commission for the lobby of the new Proton Therapy Institute at the University of Florida in Jacksonville.

It was the first time they had collaborated outside of New England, and they were excited to explore a new topography. The artists traveled to Florida to study the local flora, creating drawings of native plants in a 1,000-acre nursery. They shipped bamboo home

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for the piece. Wasserman cleared the furniture out of her living room, where they assembled panels for the University of Florida — and eventually moved the work to a classroom that Vermont Law School offered for their use.

“Generally, we love thinking about places,” says Wasserman. “It was so fun to be in Florida. It was like going to a foreign country — like learning a whole new language.”

Compared to the muted tones of much of their work, the blues and reds they used in Florida “felt fluorescent to us,” according to Wasserman. “But to them, they didn’t seem bright. They were totally at home with those colors.”

Oaklianna Brown, the coordinator for Florida’s Art in State Buildings, said that Billings’ and Wasserman’s proposal really stood out. “The building itself is special and unique, because cancer has touched so many,” she says. “It came down to the proposal that was most healing and gentle and aesthetically beautiful.” During the opening, many people were moved to touch the piece “as if it was a harp.”

When they were working on the University of Florida commission, the artists landed another big contract: an installation for two new terminals at Philadelphia International Airport.

**PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER**

Andrea Wasserman lives in a rambling house on a hilltop in Vershire, Vt., with her two sons, and works in an airy studio off the kitchen. Tacked to one wall are children’s drawings, and on the

opposite wall, blueprints of the new terminals mingle with an oversized topographic map of Philadelphia. Wasserman traces her finger a few inches over sandblasted panels etched with the topography along the Delaware River. “We conceived that one terminal would feel more urban, and the other would feel more rural,” says Wasserman. Neighborhoods and fossil forms are emerging from the stone that will form Wasserman’s half of the piece. A quote from Ben Franklin — “Dost thou love life?” — is etched into a piece of glass.

Sometimes, however, the components of a work — saplings, drawings, pieces of glass and stone — spread to other parts of the house. On her porch, a few tables are covered in enormous slabs of slate, trucked in by Wasserman from a nearby slate yard. Two horses and a pony graze in a field nearby. The sound of crickets fill the air. This is where the stone is stenciled and sandblasted. “We’re both blessed with big porches,” says Billings.

Billings lives about 30 minutes away, in Tunbridge, with her husband, Michael



Sacca, and their three children. In her studio there, she is assembling apple twigs and reeds for her half of the Philadelphia piece.

"Liz and I sit and we talk, we conceive of everything jointly in the beginning," says Wasserman, sometimes emailing drafts back and forth to each other. "Then we branch off like a 'y,' or a parallel line, and we move back and forth. Our sketches build upon each other."

"Then it all comes back together again," says Billings. For their current project, that "coming together" will happen in a barn near Billings' home, generously offered by a neighbor who is not using it right now. "It's amazing how community helps."

As work on the Philadelphia installation heats up, the artists visit each other's studios frequently. They spend so much time together when they are working on a project that "my daughter calls Andy's boys 'my brothers by the other mother,'" Billings says, and they both laugh.

"The thing about this piece is it's one continuous puzzle," says Wasserman, citing the difficulty of designing something for a wall that is not yet built. "There's a lot more engineering and structural management than you could ever imagine."

"It's two thoughts on the same subject," says Billings, almost imperceptibly.

They are so immersed in the Philadelphia job "that it's kind of hard to see the other end," says Wasserman. But last November, they trucked their new work to the City of Brotherly Love and married it to the angles, lines and light of a new space.


Both artists still create their own work, and Wasserman teaches one day a week at a local Waldorf school. But they find the collaboration a precious, and integral, part of their artistic lives.

"Every day I am so blessed to be making this work, and every day I am blessed to be making it with Liz," says Wasserman. "I feel incredibly grateful that I'm able to support my life and do this work. That's why I can give all that I have to it." **UVL**

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