

DeLong, Lea Rosson. "Taking the Art Out of the Museum." Iowa Architect, vol.

TAKING THE ART OUT OF THE MUSEUM

A View of the Des Moines Art Center Sculpture Park

Museums have literally opened their doors to the possibilities of creating site-specific pieces of art as part of their permanent collections. The Des Moines Art Center exemplifies a contemporary art museum creating environmental art outside the building walls.

(Right) Master plan of the Sculpture Park. Area 1 is the Mary Miss project and Area 2 is the site for the Fleischner piece. Other numbered areas indicate future sites for additional pieces. Photo by King Au.

(Opposite page)
Asiatic Pyramid
Bruce Nauman
 Bronze, 12 x 7 x 4 feet
 Commissioned for the Des Moines Art Center's Permanent Collection by Anonymous Donors and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1990
 Photo by Jim Kascoffas

It isn't enough to have art in the museum; today many museums exhibit beyond the confines of their walls. Contemporary art museums such as the Des Moines Art Center often use the surrounding landscape to display and support environmental art, or site-specific sculpture. Acquiring at least one example of this important, if nontraditional, type of work has become a must-have for any serious contemporary art museum.

The Des Moines Art Center has kept pace with current with recent developments in the art world, including environmental art. Acquiring environmental art fits into the Art Center's commitment to public outreach and offers a chance to see art without entering the museum itself. When the Art Center is closed, the environmental sculptures are always open, and during admission charge hours, these works are always free. They are as accessible as the nearby picnic tables and as thought-provoking as the art displayed behind the museum doors.

All the environmental works are found in Greenwood Park, a 81-acre city park surrounding the Des Moines Art Center. Two pieces, one by Richard Serra and the other by Bruce Nauman, are already in place, and two more, by Mary Miss and Richard Fleischner, are in the development stage. As many as eight works, each by a different artist, will eventually comprise the sculpture park. Other artists contracted for proposals include Siah Annajani and Robert Irwin. All of the artists are of international repute and already represented in some way in the Art Center's permanent collection.

Part of the funding for the sculptures comes from a \$350,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which requires another \$1,050,000 to be raised from private contributions. But cost is only one aspect of the sculpture park creation. The public response must be positive not only to pay for it, but to make possible the very construction. Site-specific sculptures like those in the sculpture park cannot be produced in isolation, because unlike the solitary artist, working in isolation, environmental artists must actively involve others at nearly every stage of their work. Whether it's obtaining government permits for construction, public support and good will, or contributions from private individuals, environmental art ties itself to society. From the beginning, it is integrated into public as well as private processes.

The City of Des Moines and the Des Moines Art Center are the main partners in the project, joined on specific works by organizations such as the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, The Science Center of Iowa, the Polk County Conservation Board, and the Des Moines Founders Garden Club. These groups have come together in the common goal of preserving or recreating the natural environment.

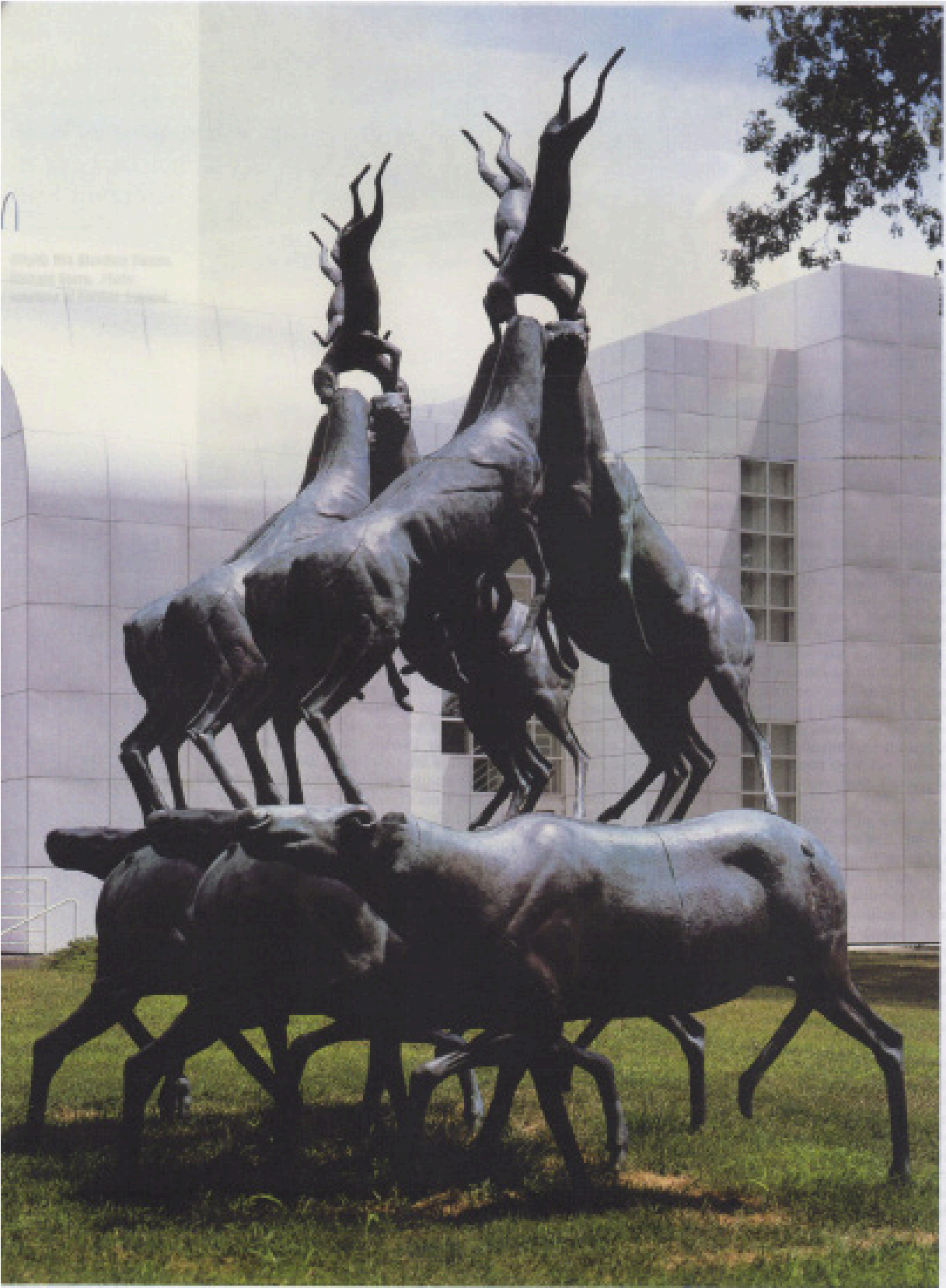
For all the artists involved in the sculpture program, nature is both an inspiration and a participant in their work. The ideas for sculpture are provoked by the land surrounding the Art Center. The works shape, direct or enhance the experience of nature for the park visitors. Each artist considered for a commission has spent much of his or her time walking through the park, examining things as they are now. Some features are man-made, such as the rose garden or amphitheater, but the main considerations are still the natural elements: trees, ground contour, water and light.

None of the present works or those planned for the future require any significant change to the

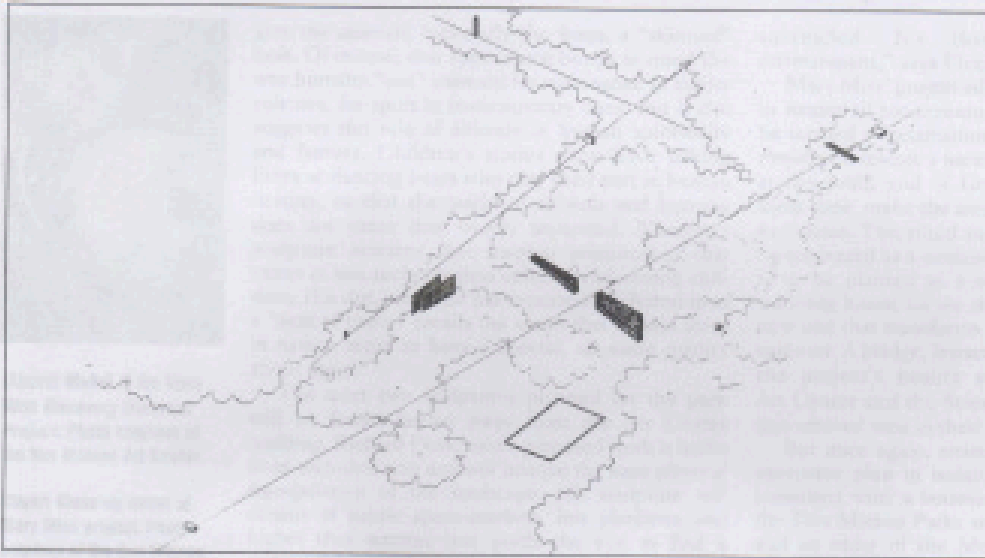


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"Now the hill is very well defined and the configuration makes you see not only the pieces in their location but also the landscape between them. So I think people will be more inclined to look into this hill where they haven't before ... [My pieces involve] the idea of time: walking, looking, observing, anticipation, memory ... If I've had any contribution, I think it's by making the moving observer

the content, that the work really resides not in the sculpture but in the land in relation to the sculpture and the observer in relation to the field."¹⁹
 Bruce Nauman's *Animal Pyramid*, the most recent sculpture to be installed, deals with another aspect of nature: the relationship between humans and animals. A pyramid of balancing caribou, elk and foxes, the forms are based on taxidermy models that

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(Left and below) The artist's drawing and rendering of the future Fleischner piece.
 Photo by Kling Liu.

unpublished in 1974, the artist's drawing and rendering of the future Fleischner piece. The drawing shows a hillside with a path leading up to a structure. The structure is a dark, rectangular form with a jagged, irregular top edge, resembling a series of stacked logs or a primitive architectural form. The path is a simple line leading up the hill. The background shows a landscape with trees and a sky. The drawing is a pencil or light ink sketch on a light-colored background. The text is overlaid on the drawing in a small, sans-serif font.

19. Richard Fleischner and Bruce Nauman are both represented by the artist Bruce Nauman. They are both represented by the artist Bruce Nauman. They are both represented by the artist Bruce Nauman.

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succeeded. It's that integrated into the environment," says Fleischner.¹⁰

Mary Miss' project addresses a different situation in nature all too common today. Her project might be termed a reclamation project. *Discovery Wetlands Project* will restore a natural ecobalance to the lagoon at the south end of Greenwood Park and, at the same time, make the area more attractive and useful to visitors. The silted and weed-choked lagoon will be recovered as a wetland, while an adjacent section is to be planted as a natural prairie. An existing warming house for ice skaters will be replaced by a new one that transforms into an open air pavilion in summer. A bridge, terraces and walkways will add to the project's beauty and usefulness. Both the Art Center and the Science Center plan to include this revived area in their educational programs.

But once again, artists cannot carry out such an extensive plan in isolation. In this case, Miss has consulted with a botanist at Iowa State University, the Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department, and an elder of the Mesquakie Indian tribe. Her successful collaborations with architects, engineers, contractors, planners and managers of both parks and buildings have earned her the Medal of Honor from the American Institute of Architects. *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith has written that Miss "runs through a veritable encyclopedia of vernacular carpentry and architectural forms which can stimulate an amazing assortment of associations, both collective and private."¹¹ Miss has also spoken often of the layers of meaning that can emerge from her work. Her aim, she says, is to create "places that function in the public domain but allow private experience - spiritual places that allow reflection."¹²

Miss' goal is shared by all the artists whose works are installed or planned for the sculpture park, though they accomplish it in a variety of very distinct ways. The richness of interpretation, not just for the artists but for the viewer, is one of the enduring attractions of the proposal for Greenwood Park. None of the artists have seen nature in the same way and, for the visitor, this diversity of experience expands and intensifies the encounter. The park will be both livelier and more contemplative when the artists finish.

In discussing his project, Richard Fleischner described what could be a central accomplishment for the park. He says, "There's a quote I love from Guy Davenport: 'Art is the replacing of indifference with attention.' I think that the strength in the work is that a great deal of attention has been paid to almost every facet, with every part contributing something to the whole. And whether everybody agrees with it or not, it's been considered."¹³ The

give the animals, especially the foxes, a "skinned" look. Of course, that appearance brings to mind the way humans "use" animals: for sustenance in earlier cultures, for sport in contemporary ones. But it also suggests the role of animals in human spirituality and fantasy. Children's stories often have talking foxes or dancing bears who play their part in human destiny, so that the world of animals and humans does not seem that widely separated. Nauman's sculpture restores that magical relationship that exists in less technological cultures and among children. His site, which he has repeatedly referred to as a "nest of trees," recalls the sense that certain areas in nature seem to have a special, set-aside quality about them.

The next two sculptures planned for the park will be found farther away from the Art Center building. Richard Fleischner's proposed work is in the most secluded area and will involve the least physical manipulation of the landscape. His sculpture will consist of subtle space-markers, low platforms and higher thin screens that guide the eye to find a natural "place within a place," as Fleischner terms it. His role as the artist is to look at these places with a care and scrutiny not usually brought to them and then, by means of his "composition," shape a distinctive spatial experience.

Fleischner says, "The most important things to me," he explains, "are the elevations and shifts in planes. I see a site in a sculptural sense: ... the physical qualities of existing interrelationships and what I believe I can do in that context." He admits that such concerns have a strong architectural tone because he is "concerned with making places and understanding how a place feels." Says Fleischner, "A lot of work I do addresses issues that have traditionally been dealt with in architecture. So, it is not art in a conventional sense, but it's not architecture. I draw from a tradition which shares some of the same values that were important to architects like Le Corbusier, Wright, Mies van Der Rohe, and Louis Kahn."¹⁴

But unlike architecture, Fleischner's sculpture is devoted entirely to an aesthetic experience, one that sharpens the perception of nature. "This," he says about his site in Greenwood park, "is an especially beautiful spot and this sculpture won't take anything away from that."¹⁵ Fleischner has an unusual but telling way of deciding whether his sculpture is successful or not. If the viewer fails to see a separate form intruding into the landscape but notices only the character of the natural area itself, Fleischner is pleased. "A common expression from somebody is 'This is a great place but I don't really see the art.' ... that's when you know you have



(Above) Model of the Mary Miss Discovery Wetlands Project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.

(Right) Close-up detail of Mary Miss project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.

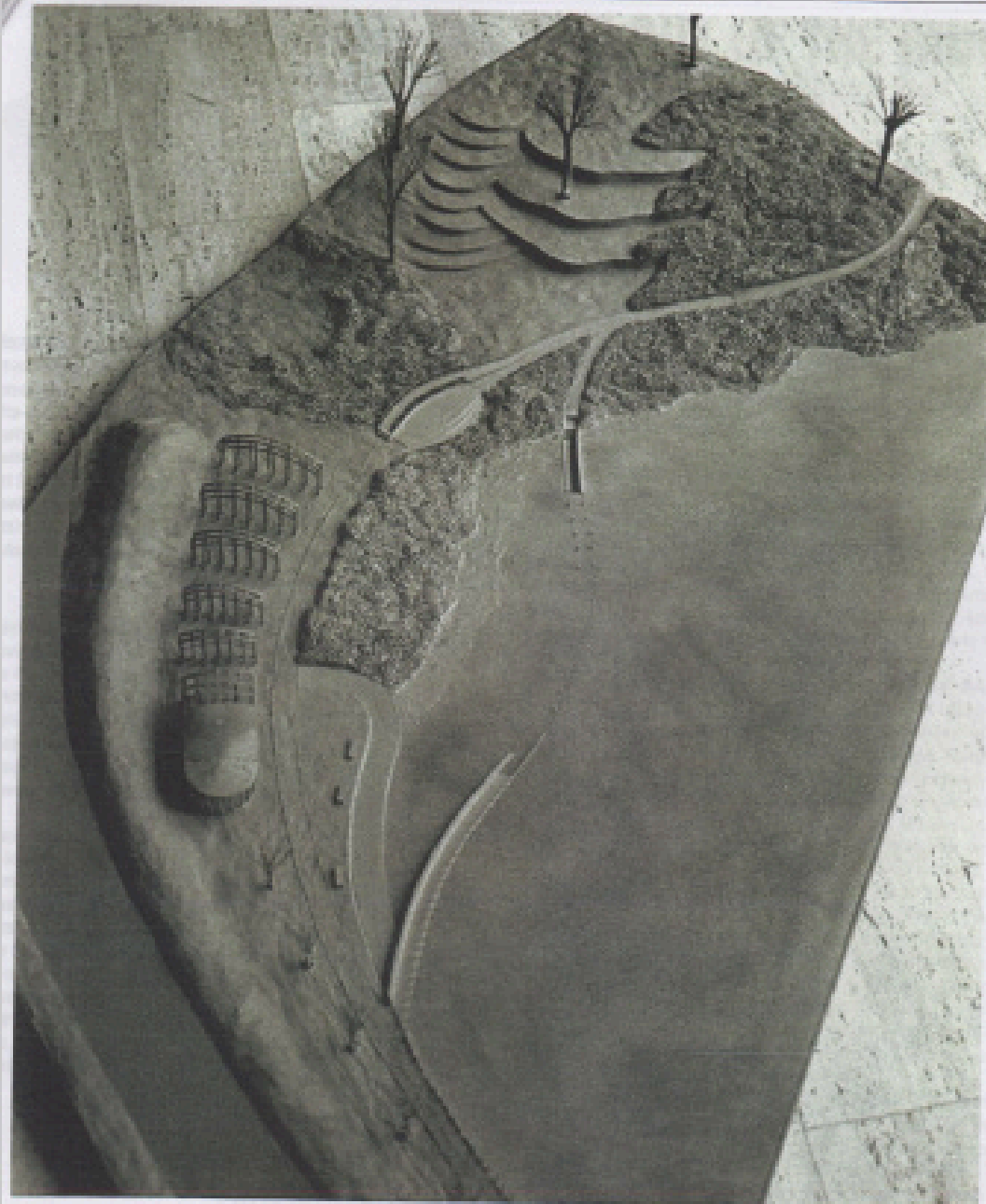


(Left) Close-up detail of Richard Fleischner project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.

(Middle) Close-up detail of Bruce Nauman project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.

(Right) Close-up detail of Richard Serra project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.

(Bottom) Close-up detail of Richard Serra project. Photo courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center.



consideration that each artist brings to his or her examination of the park and the development of a specific sculpture for it can be extended to all who visit the park.

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1. Rubiner, Betsy, "Art in the Park," *The Des Moines Register*, July 21, 1990, page 1T.
2. *Ibid.*, page 2T.
3. DeLong, Lee Rossen, "Interview with Richard Serra," *Des Moines Art Center News*, January/February 1990, page 5.
4. "Interview with Bruce Nauman," *Des Moines Art Center News*, November/December 1990, page 6.
5. "Serra," *Des Moines Art Center News*, November/December 1990, page 6.

6. Rowe, M. Jessica, "Richard Fleischner: Critical Distance," *Gallery Guide*, Des Moines Art Center, 1992.
7. Noshbaum, Elicia, "Sculpture park's master plan overlaps historic landmark," *The Des Moines Register*, October 14, 1992, page 3M.
8. Rubiner, page 2T.
9. Roberta Smith, quoted in De Ferrari, Gabriella, "Space Sculptor," *Arabella*, January 1993, page 42.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Rowe.