

Art park's works aim to heal a wounded planet

BY SHERRY CHAYAT
Contributing Writer

Those who think of sculpture as a constructed, modeled, carved or welded object will have a hard time finding any at an exhibition called "Re-Claiming Land."

The six site installations in this outdoor show, heralding the opening of Stone Quarry Hill Art Park in Cazenovia, are directly involved with the land. Disintegrating twigs, woven grasses, discarded slate tiles, agricultural hedgerows — these are among the materials used in these works.

The artists will be present at an opening reception from 3 to 6 p.m. Saturday at the new art park, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to work in the natural environment.

THE SHOW WAS curated by Sylvia de Swaan, director of Sculpture Space in Utica, and Terry LeVeque, a landscape planner in Hamilton. They and Stone Quarry Hill Art Park board members Judy Grunert, a local artist; Ronald A. Kuchta, director of the Everson Museum of Art; and I selected an international group of artists to create works for "Re-Claiming Land."

The artists are: Alan Sonfist of New York City, who is working in collaboration with Matthew Potteiger of New Woodstock; Karen McCoy of Williamstown, Mass.; Simon Lee of Manchester, England; Dariusz Lipski of Grass Valley, Calif., a native of Poland; Jeanne Flanagan of Albany; and Wendy Klemperer of Brooklyn.

"Re-Claiming Land" joins a global chorus of voices calling for healing a wounded and scarred planet, for pushing aside boundaries and for restoring the environment to creative endeavor," deSwaan said.

"The intent of the show," LeVeque said, "is to look beyond interpretations of land as a physical object, a legal possession or a political boundary, and to encourage discourse about the representation of land/nature in its various guises."

ONE OF THE first to begin creating her site-installation at Stone Quarry Hill Art Park was Karen McCoy, who has titled her expansive piece "Considering Mother's Mantle."

McCoy spent the better part of a week doing research about the art park land, 75 acres of rolling fields, woods, ponds and gardens on a hilltop just outside the village of Cazenovia. The property is owned by Dorothy and Robert Riester, who are donating it "as a permanent facility for the creation, understanding and enjoyment of contemporary art and to protect an environmentally significant site," as Robert Riester puts it.

"I always try to let my sense of place shape my work," McCoy said, leading me through a rain-soaked garden to one of the ponds.

"I looked at this pond, with its grasses growing out of glacial grooves oriented north and south, and then I looked out at the distant

countryside, with its grid of farmlands. Then I went over to the town hall and studied a soil survey, and found out that the appearance of the land was based on the shape of the bedrock; the soil was referred to as the 'soil mantle.'"

OF THIS was intriguing to McCoy. She decided to begin in the pond.

"There were spiky arrowhead plants growing in the water, and lots of frogs; it was an incredibly vital microcosm."

McCoy took a compass and staked and strung lines over a north-south grid that echoed that of the distant fields.

"The plants were growing haphazardly," she said. "I transplanted them, scooting them over through the silt and weighting their roots with stones until they got re-established in a grid formation. So now there are also lines of stone in the pond, taken from the stockpiles left over from the bedrock that was leveled in places when the Riesters built their house. So I'm giving the bedrock back."

The artist talked to countless Cazenovia residents about the area and was assisted by many of them, particularly painter Ollie Diefendorf.

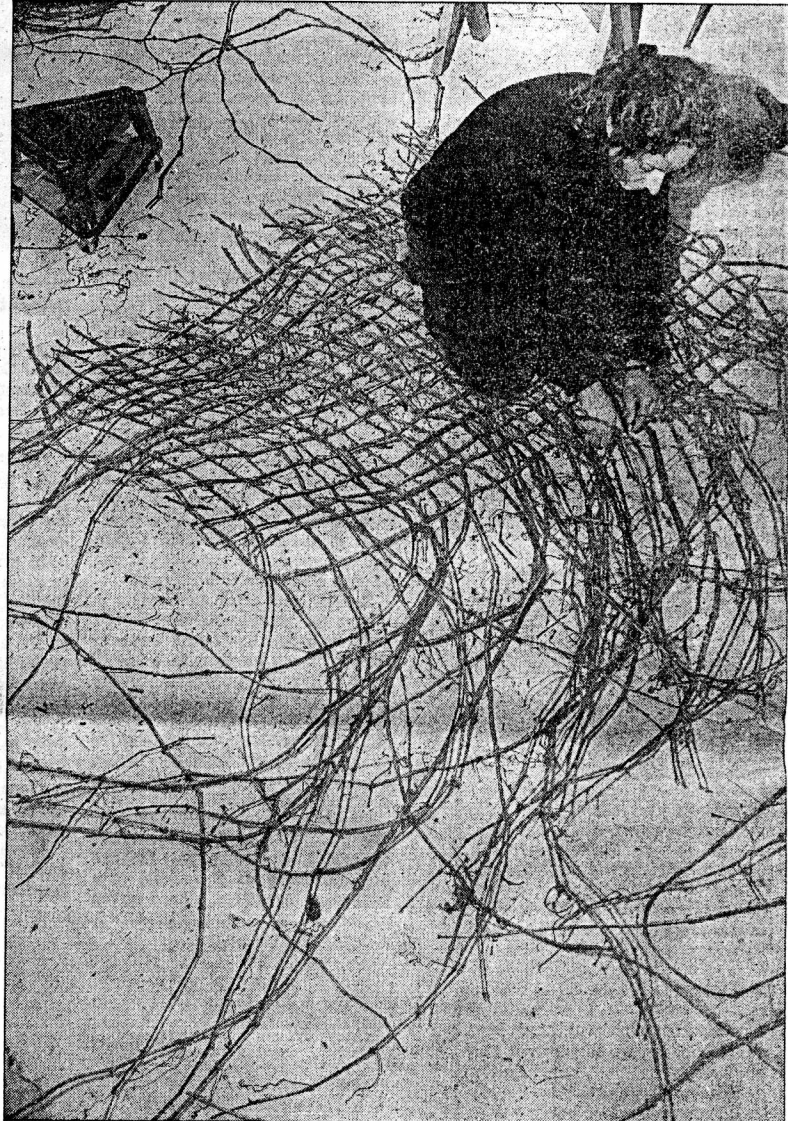
"When I asked people in the community about environmental change, they felt development to be the principal threat. Working in the pond, standing in my water-logged boots, I thought about all the deer who were accustomed to roaming through free and open space, and who now had to deal with fences and other human-made boundaries."

MCCOY FOUND OUT the land had first been divided by the Holland Land Co., and was told by Oren Lyons, a leader of the Onondaga Indian Nation, that the Iroquois Indians owned it before that, until New York State stole it from them.

She learned from Russell Grills, the manager at Lorenzo State Historic Site in Cazenovia, that the art park land was originally owned by "the widow Mary Hackley," who purchased it in 1803 for \$309 — one of the very few local women to own property in her day.

"She paid for everything with her weaving," McCoy said. "I love the fact that she was a weaver and that Dorothy Riester is a sculptor."

McCoy decided to create a north-south sight line from the Riesters' home and studio to the site of the Hackley farmstead down the hill. And she began extending other lines out from the pond onto pathways through the fields, making dead-end incursions and cul-de-sacs by braiding the long grasses — "Mother Earth's hair."



FRANK ORDOÑEZ/STARS

Karen McCoy works with nature's materials to produce a unique kind of art for the "Re-Claiming Land" exhibit in Cazenovia.

"The braiding is a reference to Hackley's weaving, the ordering of the grid, Iroquois corn masks. The work, which includes a good long walk down the sight line to the old farmstead, is more demanding of the viewer than looking at a Rodin," she noted. "It involves a process of remembering, imagining and contemplating historical and present-day uses of the land."

PARTWAYDOWN the sight line to the Hackley farm is a pathway McCoy has made that leads to yet another pond. Here, she has placed a canoe that she has woven of grape vines, another reference to local history: Long ago, an Indian dugout was sunk in Cazenovia Lake by a young couple from two different tribes who ran off together. It was raised in 1912, then submerged again at the Native Americans' request.

Still another sight line in the McCoy installation interacts with the site-sculpture of Sonfist and Potteiger.

Pointing to a row of hawthornes, McCoy said, "When you stop farming a field, these trees are the first to come up along the old hedgerows. If you follow this line down into the woods, you can see where the barbed wire of the fencing has scarred the trees. And it leads to an old split-rail fence. Matt and Alan were following that contour, and we discovered that our thinking merged at certain points. Here was this fence, originally a boundary marking a field, and now hidden in the forest."

POTTEIGER AND SONFIST had planned to install a grid of dead pine trees as

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