



NORTHERN  
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# CHICAGO READER

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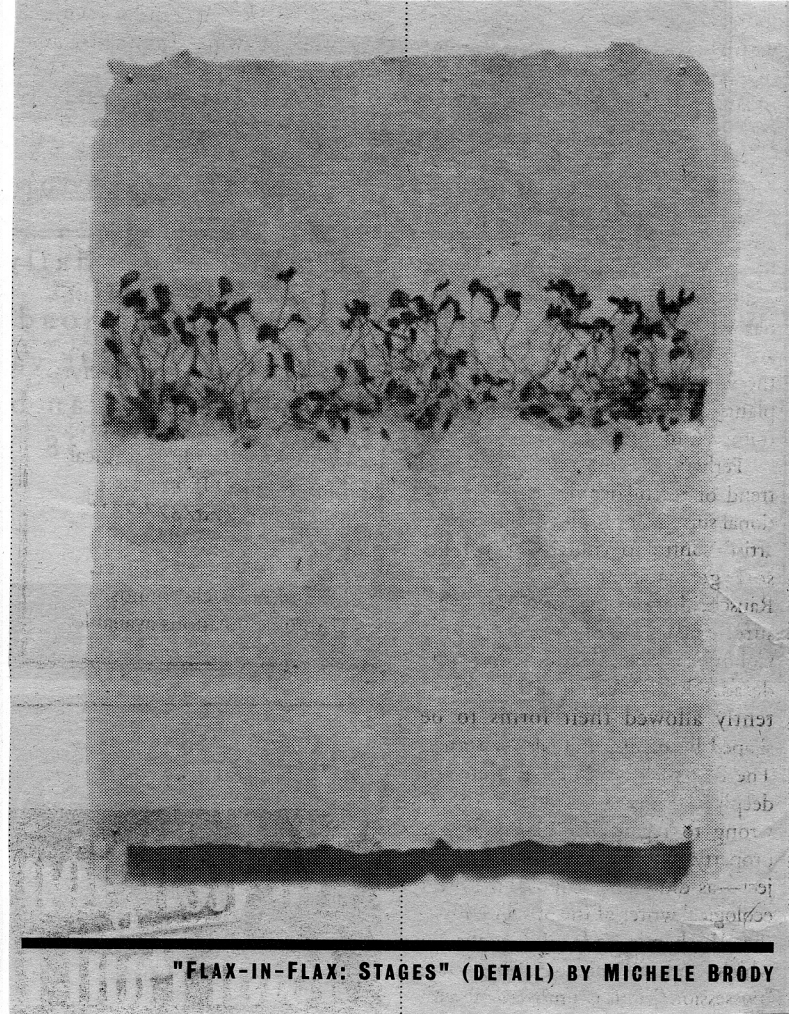
**NATURAL RESOURCES**  
at Northern Illinois University Art  
Gallery, through June 5

By Fred Camper

Perhaps the most underreported trend of recent decades is the intentional surrender of at least some of the artist's control to nature. Works of this sort go back at least as far as Rauschenberg in the early 50s, to be sure, and arguably even to pre-Columbian times. But only in recent decades have Western artists consistently allowed their forms to be shaped by plants, animals, or stones. The best such artists do so from the deeply held moral position that we're wrong to regard the planet as our property. Ultimately these artists reject—as did Aldo Leopold, the great ecological writer of the 30s and 40s—the Abrahamic code of Genesis, in which land was said to be a human “possession.” This is a movement with particularly strong roots in the midwest; most of the five artists in the excellent show “Natural Resources,” at Northern Illinois University Art Gallery, have some ties to Chicago.

In *Sleep of Leaves*, Barbara Kendrick, perhaps owing a debt to Holzer, inscribes single words (“desire,” “fear”) on the leaves of a potted ficus tree. But these words also wound the leaves, destroying small portions of them. Here the work's dimensions are determined by the shape of the plant, but Kendrick's intervention seems intended to suggest that human culture, and human emotions, are damaging to nature. And while Holzer's works can presumably survive indefinitely—LEDs can be replaced—Kendrick's piece has a lifetime limited to the plant's.

The idea that nature and culture are at odds is eloquently expressed in several other works. In *500 Belted Stones*, Palli Davene Davis has wrapped each of hundreds of stones on three shelves with one or more thin strips of wood, curved around the bottom and secured by a wooden clasp above the stone. Though loosely “fastened,” the belts struck me as symbolic frames, metaphors for the act of collecting and for the way human perception isolates, encircles, quantifies, and catalogs natural objects.



"FLAX-IN-FLAX: STAGES" (DETAIL) BY MICHELE BRODY

If Davis sets up a dynamic contrast between the irregular stones and the more regular belts, Karen McCoy in *Childhood* offers an even starker contrast: she's compacted burs into five shapes that read as solid rectangles from a distance but actually have nary a straight line—they're full of holes and prickers. The piece is a study in the tension between two kinds of energy: that of the minimalist box and that of natural, almost chaotic forms.

The majority of eco-artists seem to be women, but men have also done good work in this area; the one male artist here, however, doesn't really make eco-art, though his pieces do show the principles of physics at work. Mark Arcander's nine “Firework Drawings” are the records of fireworks explosions, made on larger pieces of paper that were cut down. Charming in their own way, these circles and straight, curved, and interrupted lines have neither the intentionality of Jackson Pollock—though surely they are “action paintings”—nor the mindlessness of his worst imitators.

Michele Brody offers the show's most beguiling work in two *Flax-in-Flax: Stages* pieces, which mount flax seeds on sheets of flax paper. The one with the most material is the most impressive: in the first of 12 panels, the seeds are inert; as one moves to the right, they sprout more and more. In the last five or so sheets of paper, the horizontal line of seeds and stems of earlier panels, suggesting the horizon in a landscape painting, appears to be the origin of a veritable garden of sprouts and leaves. Indeed, Brody placed the seeds on her handmade paper while it was still wet; the ones left on the paper longest sprouted the most. The way the “story” of seeds sprouting to make a garden is presented as successive stages of the same view, almost like a little movie, engages the viewer in that story's unfolding. Her pairing of flax seeds with flax paper and her placement of the gardens at the center of the rectangular paper both suggest an attempt to heal the split between art making and nature that Kendrick, Davis, and McCoy articulate so well. ■

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