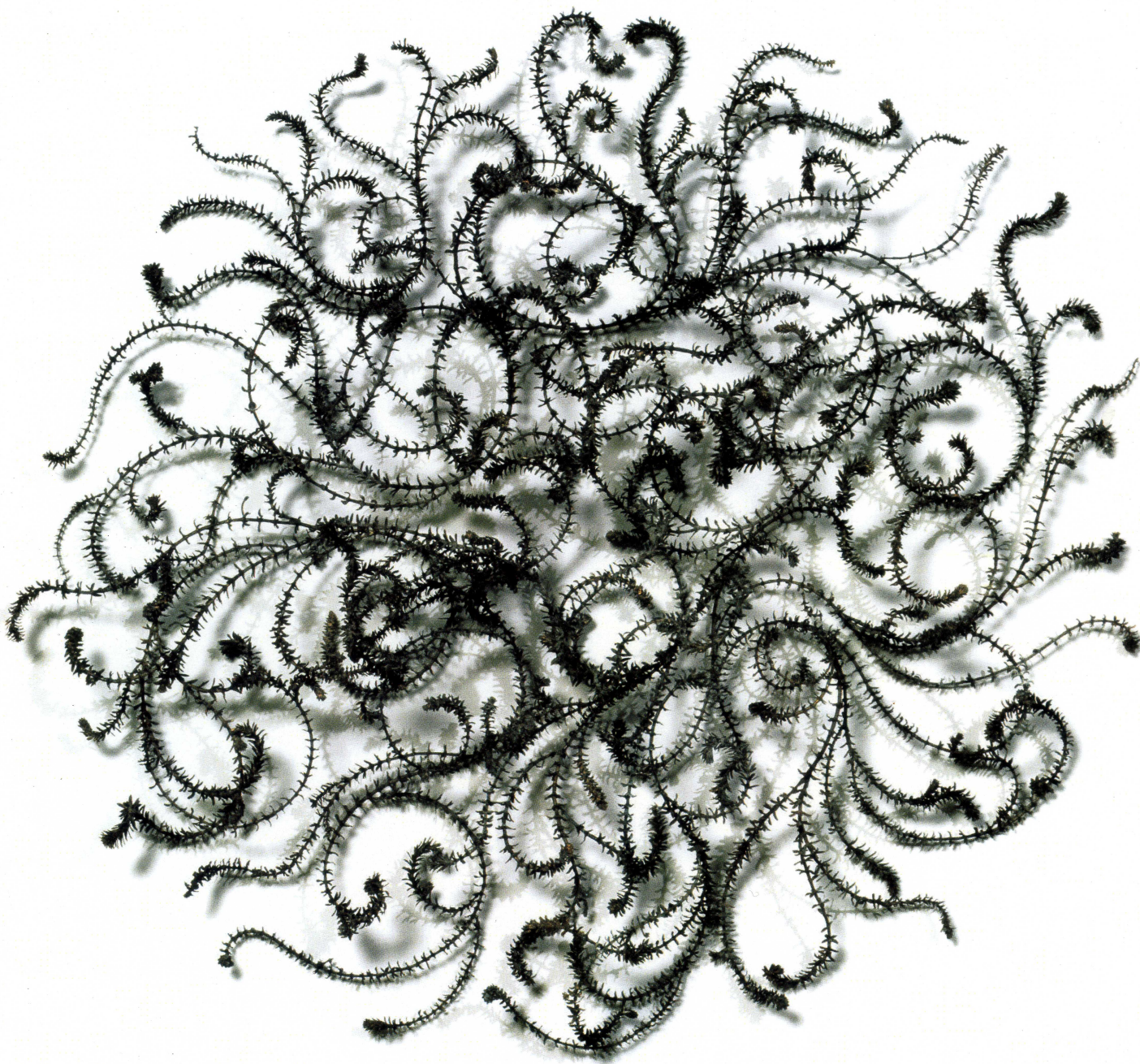


TEXAS FLORA

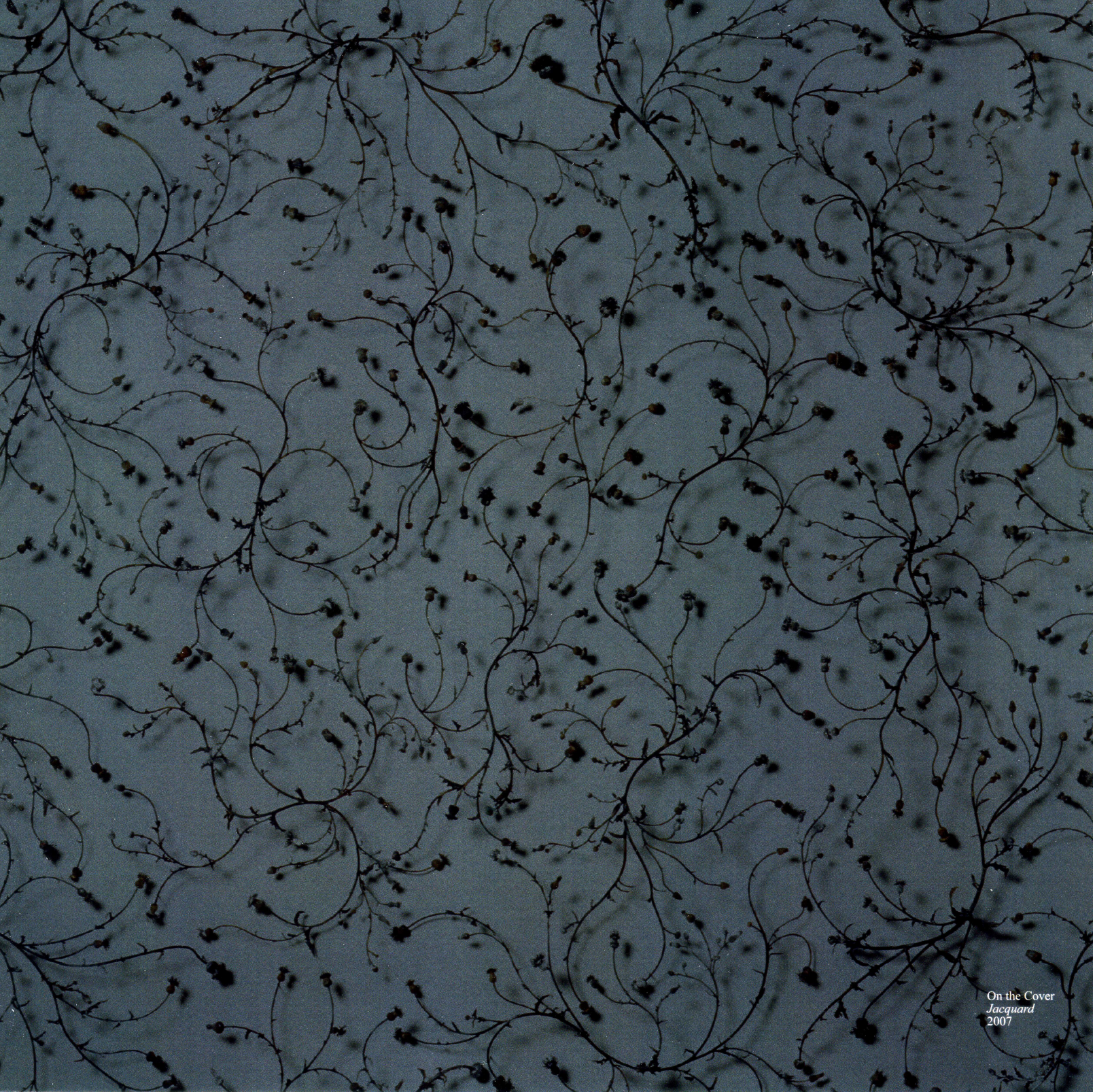
STILL NATURE: THE SCULPTURE OF BEVERLY PENN

SEPTEMBER 17, 2010 - JANUARY 15, 2011



THE GRACE MUSEUM





On the Cover  
*Jacquard*  
2007



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MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SPONSORSHIP OF STILL WATER FOUNDATION

THE GRACE MUSEUM

*bpenn*



## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Francine Carraro, Ph.D., Executive Director**

The Grace Museum is pleased to present *Still Nature: The Sculpture of Beverly Penn*, a small retrospective of Beverly Penn's work of the last decade. As an art historian, I have had the pleasure of observing her grow as an artist. I have watched with interest as her art has evolved and made new connections while remaining grounded in natural form and human design.

Still Nature aptly describes Penn's continued fruitful search of the last decade to reconcile, through sculptural form, elements of landscape and the built environment. There are landmark pieces in Penn's journey of self discovery as an artist, and this exhibition brings together those works, although they should not be read as a visual sequence. Like nature, her work is about unfoldment, not accretion.

I have also been interested in Penn's use of natural elements of her own environment of the rolling hills of south central Texas. She locates the universal in the specific while her sculptures have become larger in scale, more complicated in meaning, and more succinct in aesthetic. Recently she arranges delicate metal casts of leaves, branches, and wildflowers from the Texas landscape into large decorative patterns and strong forms that float above the wall surface. There is something quite remarkable about how such simple, yet complicated, forms connect both physical and metaphysical worlds.

My special thanks goes to curator Judy Deaton for curating *Still Nature: The Sculpture of Beverly Penn*. This exhibition was produced in conjunction with two other exhibitions focused on Texas Flora; *Full Bloom: The Art of Ann Ekstrom* and *Alice's Garden: The Photography of Alice Wright*. All three Texas Flora exhibitions were made possible by the generous sponsorship of Still Water Foundation.



## ARTIST STATEMENT

### Beverly Penn

The place of my work is the Garden, a space in which nature and human design negotiate a mutual existence along an indistinct boundary. As a cultivated border between civilization and wilderness, the Garden is a surreal expression of nature tamed, a transformative buffer zone with potential for mystery, exaggeration, and fantasy. The Garden is a hybrid construction of nature, science and architecture - it is a place that allows for the exchange of one reality for another. Within the Garden, comparisons between urban development and panoramic vision; suburban sprawl and paradise lost; and genetic engineering and natural selection can be articulated.

Posing elements from landscape against human constructions is one means of articulating both the tragic and humorous complexities of contemporary culture. As the constructed environment steadily eclipses the natural world, mediated experience gradually replaces our direct interaction with our surroundings. This changes who we are and likewise reconstructs our sense of place in the world.

Within the Garden environment is the potential for memory and expectation as well as idealization and reality. I use contemporary materials such as metal and glass as a means of connecting my work with the technological present rather than the archeological past. Underlying the process of creating each piece is the intention to depict forms in an ambiguous stage of dormancy so as to suggest both potential and promise as well as quiescence and decay. Contrasting objective reality with idealized narratives provides a stark, yet poetic backdrop for understanding the mixed blessings of contemporary life.

*Twin*  
2006  
(detail)





## FROM THE CURATOR

### Judy Tedford Deaton, Chief Curator

Beverly Penn's sculpture captures a literal snapshot of plants at the moment of cutting, frozen as though fresh on the vine, existing as a non-natural double of the living specimen, an enduring memorial in place of the ephemeral original. The word specimen is derived from the Latin term *specere*, meaning to look at or observe. In biology, a specimen is an individual animal, plant or microorganism that represents the properties of a particular species. In botany, a specimen plant is grown in relatively open ground with little competition and often develops an unnaturally broad spread and dramatic form. Thoughtful observation, classification, organization and dramatic form are words that characterize the sculpture of Beverly Penn.

Penn's process begins with the selection and study of cultivated and native plant specimens gathered from fields, roadsides and her own garden in Austin, Texas. The details are all there; each leaf, stem and bud are replicated in detail, but look carefully and you will see that all is not as idyllic as it first appears. The fragile array of plants have been cast, controlled and arranged not solely for aesthetic purpose, but also to acknowledge the precarious synergy that has long existed between plants and humans. By artificially replicating the original, Penn champions nature's struggle with escalating human population that encroaches on forests and plant habitats. Natural science, art history, art theory and environmental concerns continue to inspire Beverly Penn to create sculpture laden with metaphor, personal meaning and intellectual device.

The artist's study of botany extends beyond scientific interest to examine the long-standing tension between the human desire to control, categorize and harvest plants and the plant kingdom's opposing agenda for survival on its own terms. In each sculpture, specific plants carry specific messages. *The Weeds Project* assesses the classification of undesirable plants exemplifying the nature versus culture conflict. The sculpture *Damascene* visually references Victorian textile patterns but it is composed of thistles, a plant that thrives in the most hostile conditions. *Twin*, pairs invasive hydrilla from the San Marcos River with thistle from the same riverbank. Echoes of ornamental device give way to more serious concerns of coexistence.

*The Marking Time, Plotting Place Project* incorporates ideas of scientific classification, grafting, cross-pollination, hybridization and various types of genetic manipulation of





Cluster  
2000  
(detail)

plants. Science and nature also collide in *The Time Line Series*, a study of the life cycle of specific plant specimens arranged in sequence attached to quartz “wafer carriers” used in the silicon chip industry. Similarly, in *Vector*, *Taxon* and *Ligase*, Penn pairs botanical specimens with UPC codes to create an artificial taxonomy for the cast plants. The actual bar codes are taken from artist’s tools and materials. The realistic appearance of the plant specimens against the clinical device highlights the tension between science and nature. In *The Arcadia Project*, Penn explores changing attitudes about nature that have evolved over time and their contradictions.

Coincidentally, the medium of metal is comprised of many of the same earth elements plants require as nutrients for survival. Copper, zinc, iron and nickel are also components of metal alloys such as bronze and brass. Mastering the chemistry, physics and timing of working with alloys is necessary for the artist to forge the elements into the artist’s vision. The irony of the protector harnessing and controlling nature is part of the paradox of coexistence. The crucible that destroys also creates. Minute details evident in the castings are replicated by centrifugal pressure forcing molten metal into the smallest crevices of the mold. Live plants are consumed in the process of creating enduring doubles. Patinas created with heat and chemicals add subtle surface color to the metal, rendering the object all the more life-like. The process is repeated and the separate castings are then soldered into pattern clusters. Each work with multiple components is assembled on site by Penn who installs the sculpture directly on the wall in response to the exhibition space and artistic objectives.

Using her considerable skills as a sculptor, Penn continues to examine the complex relationship between humans and nature. This exhibition features major works from important projects created by the artist during the last decade. Fire and furnace, order and chaos, visions of an Eden with a twist on the disastrous outcome and dangerous daydreams of dominance are intertwined in the artifice Penn prepares for us to contemplate in *Still Nature: The Sculpture of Beverly Penn*.

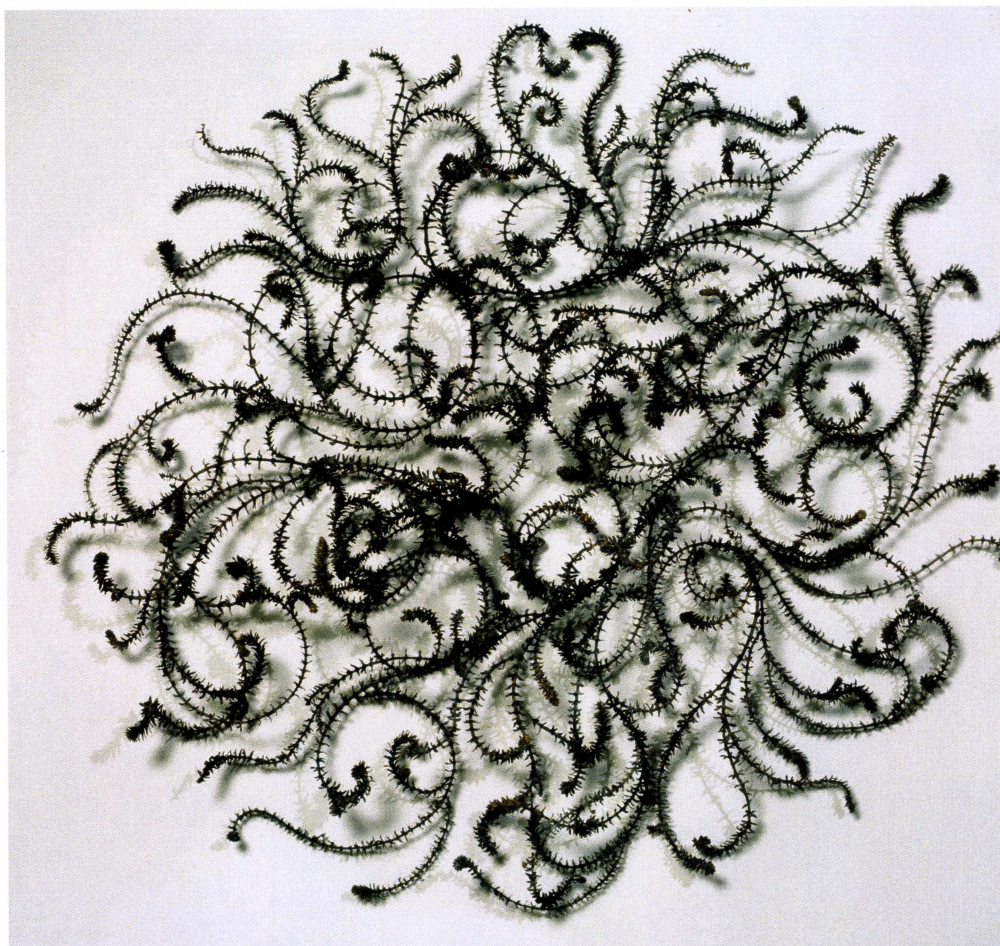


## THE WEEDS PROJECT

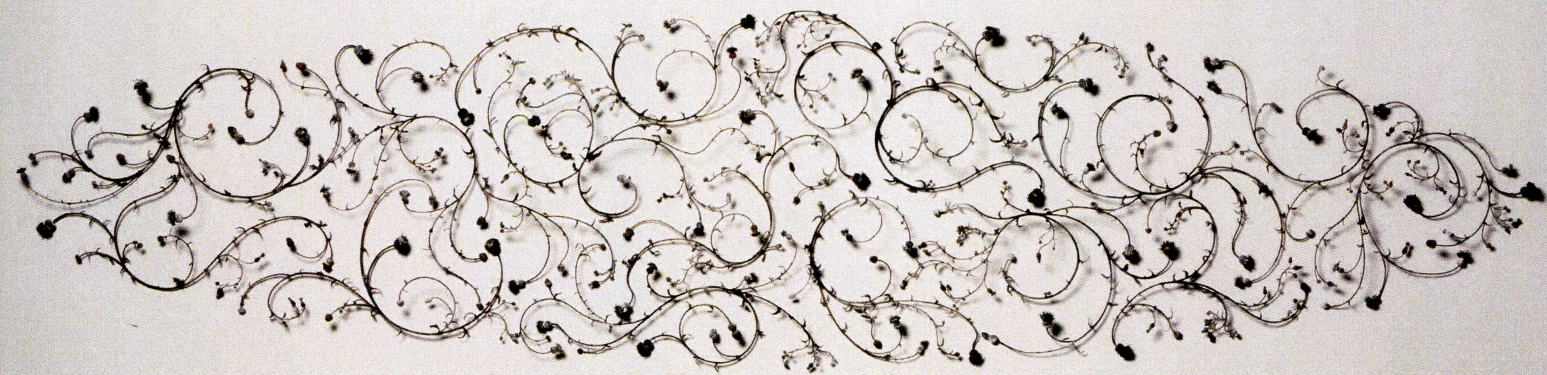
*The Weeds Project* explores a group of plants with which people have had to contend for places, and attempts to reveal the deeper cultural significances of the contest itself. "In the Western world weeds have been defined and redefined according to the cultural ideas and outlooks of peoples who have tried to compete with them for open places, over many millennia. Somewhere along the way 'weed' emerged as a concept, and became embedded in and expressed through language." <sup>1</sup>

Clayton, Neil, "Weeds, People and Contested Places", *Environment and History*, White Horse Press, Vol. 9, No. 3, August 2003

Thatch  
2010



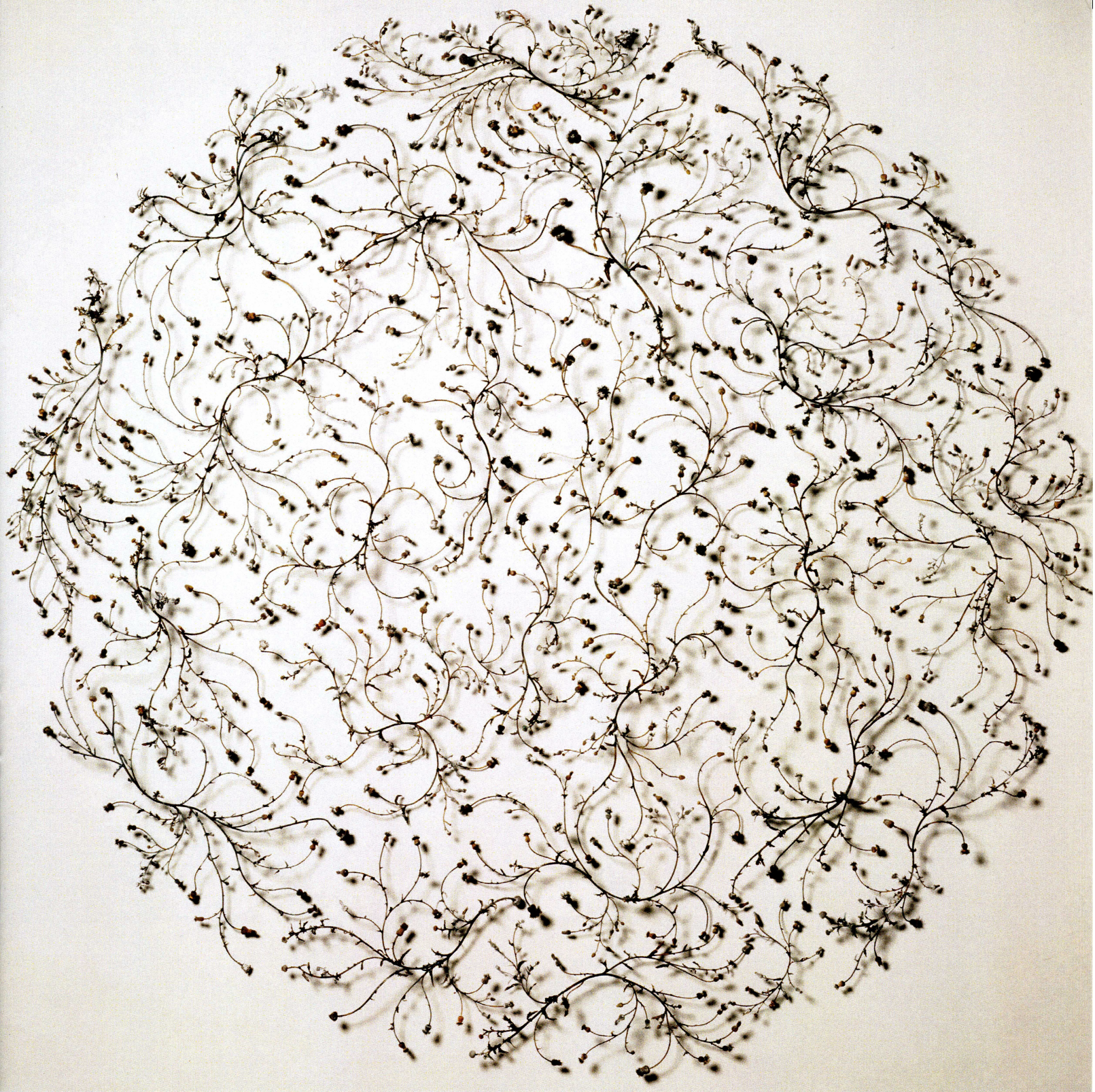




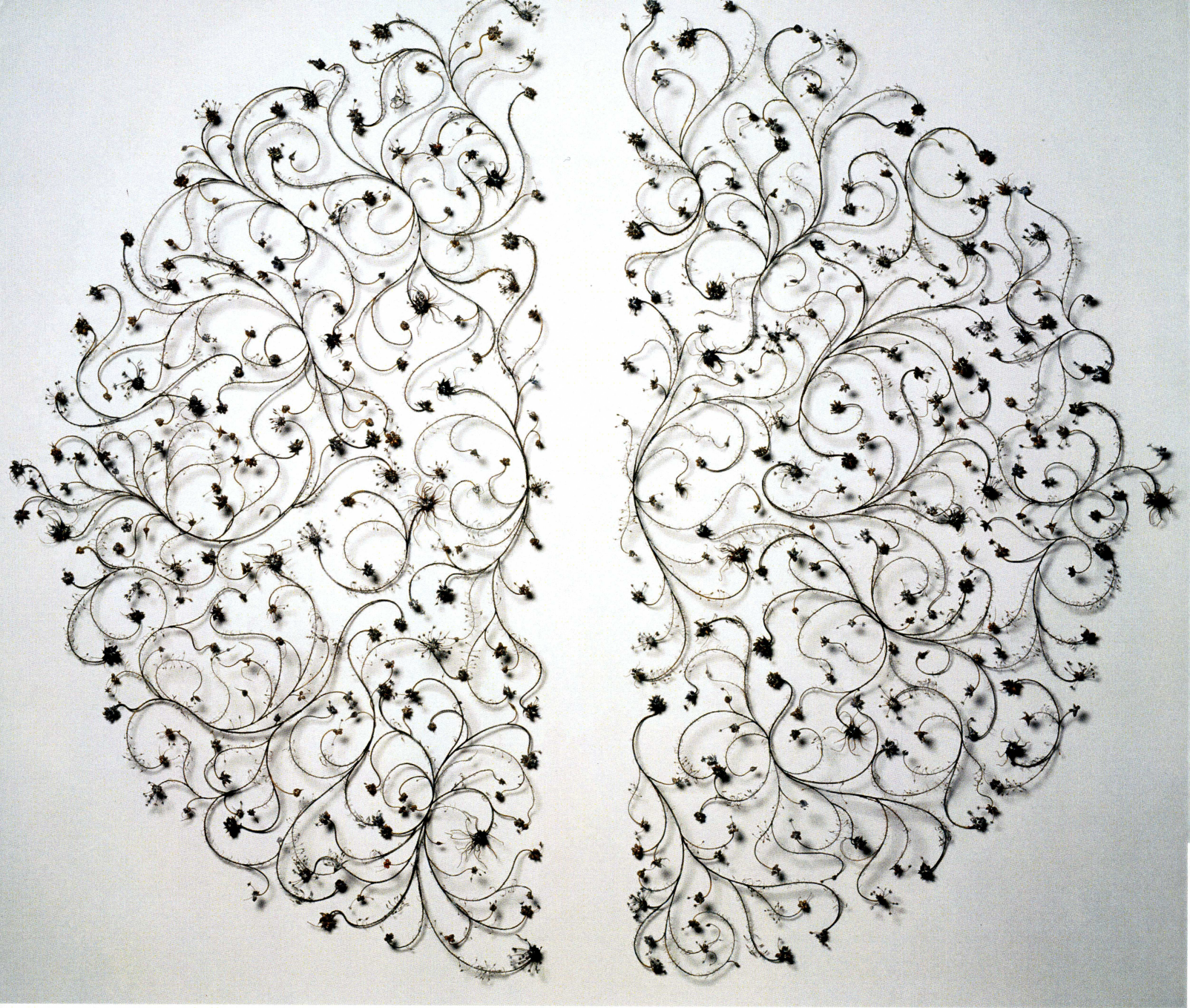
*Rhizome*  
2009

*Damascene*  
2005









*Genius Loci: Villa*  
2007



*Topo I*  
2007

