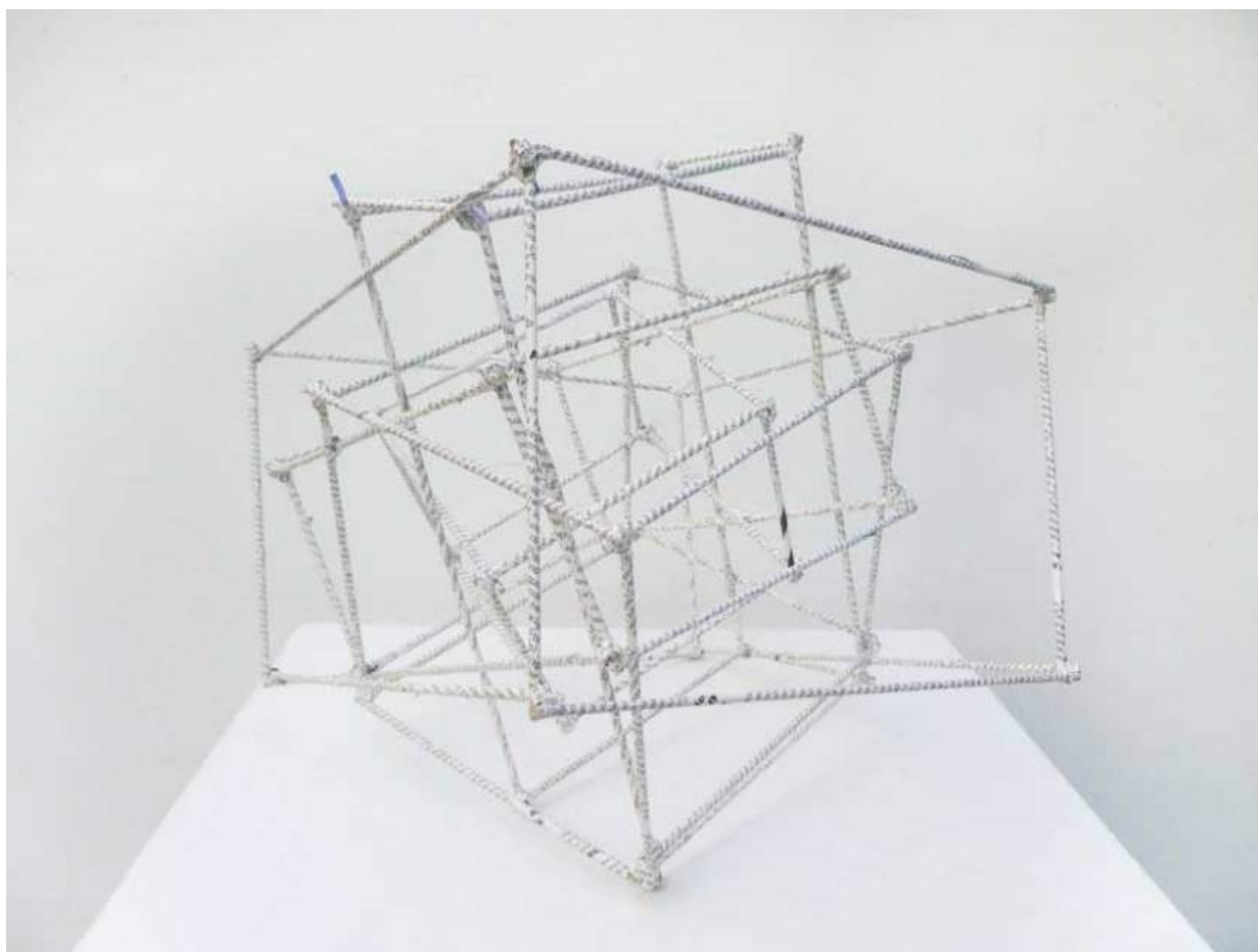


Art Review: 'Nature and the Metaphysical' at Gallerie Chiz



"Light Falls" by Caroline Bagenal

By [Kurt Shaw](#)

Published: Wednesday, May 14, 2014 9:00 p.m.

From the fractal patterns found in snowflakes to the Fibonacci sequence of a snail's shell, many mathematical principles can be found in our natural world. Those principles are seen in the abstract artworks in "Nature and the Metaphysical," the current exhibit at Gallerie Chiz in Shadyside.

About Kurt Shaw



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Details

The exhibit features nature-inspired geometric sculptures by Caroline Bagenal and abstract drawings by Don Dugal.

An associate professor of art at Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Mass., Bagenal creates sculptures from reeds she finds walking along the marshes near her home in Newburyport, a small, coastal city just 35 miles northeast of Boston.

Newburyport is at the edge of the Newbury Marsh, made famous by Martin Johnson Heade's painting "Sunlight and Shadow: The Newbury Marshes" (c. 1871-1875). Like Heade, who painted more than 100 canvases depicting wetlands, Bagenal draws inspiration from what she finds in nature, as well as man's impression on it.

"I'm interested in the kind of architecture you find in the countryside, bird blinds, scaffolding, haystacks, fish traps and fences that are built by ordinary people, not architects," she says.

Hence, pieces like "Composition" evoke everything from man-made fencing to bird-built nests.

Even the most casual viewer will notice that the reeds Bagenal constructs her sculptures out of are covered in newspaper.

"I wrap them in newspaper, partly as a homage to the printed word because I am just very much attached to books, newspapers and magazines," she says.

She takes this affinity for books even further with the piece "Klee." She made this homage to the book, which features an art book of the same title propped up on stilts like a marshland shack, because, she says, "I like handling them, and each book has its own individual character."

Bagenal says she thinks of her pieces as "drawings in space." Pointing to her piece "Light Falls," she says, "This one can cast a shadow." And indeed, properly lit as it is here in the gallery, the shadow cast is as delightful to look at as the sculpture itself.

With its geometric shapes awash in dark, expressive swirls of charcoal, Dugal's drawings seem to be a perfect pairing with Bagenal's sculptures, offering a nice balance between solid shapes and organic forms.

Dugal recently moved to the North Side from Honolulu, and most of the drawings on display were completed in Hawaii, where he had lived since the late 1960s and worked as an art professor at University of Hawaii at Manoa.

"I dearly love the physical beauty of Hawaii, having explored many of its curious byways for more than 20 years," he says. "My work, both drawings and paintings, extolled those features. In the last 20 years, my works have turned more philosophical and reflective of the human condition — how we pass through this Earthly existence, how we influence it and the lives of others."

"Shorebird Flightplans" is a quintessential piece, displaying a certain balance between nature and the metaphysical — the exhibit's title for good reason.

"I firmly believe in 'aesthetic experience,' both of the maker (artist) and the consumer (audience)," Dugal says. "One doesn't hear that term being used much anymore. I guess it is 'uncool' and not easily measurable or detectable. My drawings attempt to involve their presence, either as a creative response to a perception or by presenting a result of artistic manufacture in which that kind of experience has occurred. I'm quite 'serious' about my work. 'Fun' isn't what it's about."

Dugal says he strongly believes in "the artistic independence of the art object."

"By that, I mean that with careful observation, a work should be able to explain, convey, inspire, transmit its message or purpose," he says. "I abhor long text 'messages' attached to visual artwork. I have worked with drawing media for most of my life and, especially in this age of techno-computer hype, enjoy attempting to make something that 'moves' people with the most humble of materials — carbon and paper."

He says he works in a variety of media, but "I've always been drawn to charcoal and drawing in general."

With its solid spheres, rectangular forms and interlocking tubes, which harken to the simple geometry contained in Bagenal's sculptures, Dugal's drawing "Vantongerloo at Wilmerding" is more grounded in geometry. But here, they appear as if cast among clouds, creating a more ethereal, larger space.

This mix of solid forms with flowing ones is intentional. "I like the idea that art has some amount conscious and unconscious, rather than it be all deliberate and didactic."

'Nature and the Metaphysical'

What: Nature-inspired geometric sculptures by Caroline Bagenal and abstract drawings by Don Dugal

When: Through May 31; 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
Tuesdays-Fridays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Saturdays

Admission: Free

Where: Gallerie Chiz, 5831 Ellsworth Ave.,
Shadyside.

Details: 412-441-6005 or
www.galleriechiz.com

Dugal says the charcoal medium provides an extreme range of value — the blackest of blacks to the palest of grays — while retaining the possibility of “recording the most delicate kinesthetic movements.”

“Sometimes my drawings are initiated in response to my immediate environment, sometimes by contemplation of the sublime, and sometimes by wordplay.”

Whatever their impetus, the results are breathtaking.

Kurt Shaw is the art critic for Trib Total Media. He can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com.

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