



trained as an architect, vermont artist alisa dworsky blends the language of design with her personal vision in both her large-scale installations and her graphic aquatints and drawings.

POETRY IN PICTURES

TEXT BY LOUIS POSTEL | PORTRAIT BY JOHN HESSION

The visual poetry of Alisa Dworsky's *Luminous Fields: Longitude in Time* highway installation scanned perfectly, even at fifty-five miles an hour at 10 p.m. through Vermont's drowsy hills. A thousand blue and green reflectors mounted on metal stakes glowed in the headlights, creating bisecting lines north to south and grid patterns east to west. The poem's vocabulary borrowed heavily



TOP TO BOTTOM: Four scenes from *Luminous Fields: Longitude in Time* (2001), a temporary installation of one thousand green and blue reflectors on steel posts along one mile of Route 4 in Castleton, Vermont



before working as an artist.

Her challenge is to stay fluent in both languages, combining personal vision, her dreams and intuition with her universal and classical design vocabulary. The results have often been stunning, earning her the attention of a national audience. Drivers on Route 4 found themselves lighting up a beautifully defined, quietly sacred space in *Luminous Fields*, an experience that will be hard to forget in this conflicted world. Strollers through trees wrapped in yellow nylon cord (*A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew*) found sequence, hierarchy, pattern and all sorts of other intriguing design references—and a rare moment of connection and peace as well.

Route 4 leads to Tunbridge, Vermont, where Dworsky shares her studio/home with her husband, architect Danny Sagan, and their two daughters. Clad in corrugated metal with sides in the same bright yellow hue as Dworsky's nylon ropes, this modern-looking structure is remarkably composed and comfortable in a fold of the gentle hills.

On a recent weekend, tranquility has temporarily reasserted itself in the wake of a series of solo shows at the Chaffee

from classical design: universal ideas about scale, sequence and symmetry imposed themselves flickeringly on the grids of outlying farms. And at the same time, it became apparent that the rhyme and rhythm of Dworsky's work was distinctly her own, an imaginative riff on these time-honored architectural principles.

"At Yale they really wanted you to learn the universal design language, which was hard for me at first. I'd come from the Bay Area and Stanford where it was all about first developing your own personal vision and feeling comfortable that the universal part would inevitably follow," says Dworsky, who earned her architecture degree from Yale in 1992



Art Center in Rutland, the Brattleboro Museum and the Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont in Burlington. In Dworsky's studio, large aquatints and graphite drawings line the walls, which are painted in colors matching the blood-orange, copper, deep teal and polypropylene yellow of the framed art.

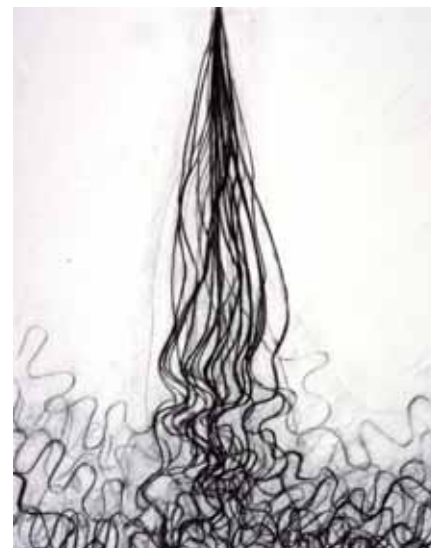
In the kitchen, Dworsky's children tag merrily after a black puppy, running through the legs of the table where their mother sits unperturbed. She admits to loving almost any kind of "cross-pollination": adult talk mixed with children's play, West Coast individualism with East Coast high culture, industrial materials with old wood, art with archi-

ABOVE AND LEFT: *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* (2007), hand-crocheted polypropylene rope
FACING PAGE: *Fils de Cuivre II* (2007), graphite on paper, 22" x 15"

ecture. The contradictory and incongruous lead to new insights, hidden beauties just under the surface.

Inspiration can come from the most mundane activities. "The dirty secret about living in the country is that you have to drive everywhere," the artist says. "That's how I got the idea for *Luminous Fields*. I was driving and it was monotonous but I started seeing all these patterns, these rhythms as things went by. I loved the parallax view of cornfields. I thought, 'This doesn't have to be monotonous; it can be beautiful.'"

It was then a matter of convincing the state arts commission, the highway department and grants groups that installing five hundred metal rods and one thousand reflectors along the highway would be good for taxpayers. "One of the great things about architectural training is that it forces you to think verbally as well as visually," Dworsky says. "You have to be able to defend your



ideas with words. And this comes in very handy. I can explain in words all the practical parameters: the proposed site, budget, time frame, structure, materials, codes and audience needs."

Like an architect working with a homeowner, Dworsky has learned to embrace these practical constraints rather than shun them. The constraints force her to discover solutions to problems she never would have found on her own, and often lead her to a fresher, more robust approach.

She encountered one miniature, but telling, example of such a constraint in the trunk of a tree. The tree, which

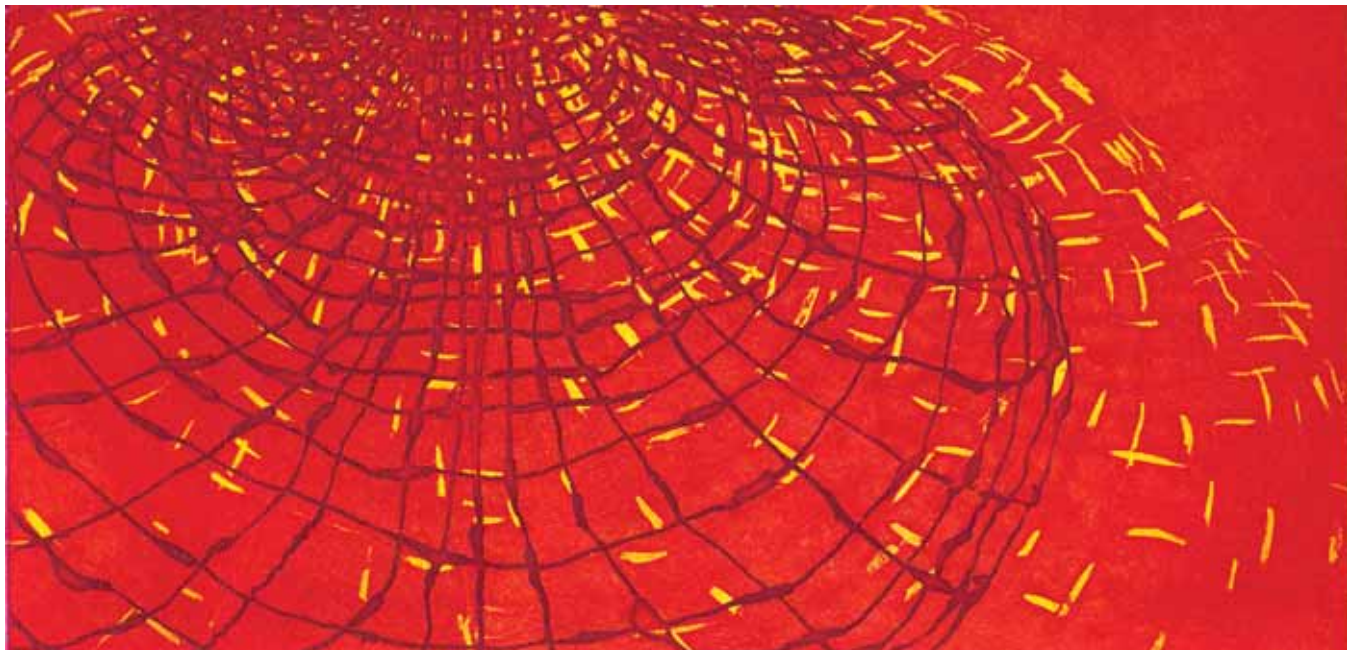


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RIGHT: Tunbridge, Vermont, home and studio designed and built by Alisa Dworsky and Danny Sagan
FACING PAGE: *Indeterminacy II* (2006), multiplate aquatint, 11" x 15"

had a terrible scar from lightning, sat on the site of Dworsky's *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* installation for the Fleming Museum. She wrapped it with bright yellow cord like the others, but she left the scar open to the air "to heal" rather than sticking to her program and wrapping it. She discovered

afterward that the open scar faced a hospital. As museumgoers walked from tree to tree experiencing all the wonders of design—pattern, sequence, hierarchy, symmetry—there was also the moment of symbolic healing, a moment sprung from this one small constraint alone.

Dworsky's vision was on equal footing with her universal design language in the project, which started with a dream in which she was knitting in the woods. She had no idea how to knit but was convinced she had to follow through and create something based on the dream. She hastened to the Tun-

bridge town library where she found a book on crocheting, whose circular nature she thought would work better around trees than traditional knitting. And crochet she did: five miles of rope and six or seven hours a day listening to books on tape. The use of a familiar material in an unfamiliar way delighted her, and the repurposing of materials recalls two of her West Coast heroes, the designers Ray and Charles Eames and their use of furniture materials originally developed for bombers during World War II.

Dworsky anticipates her next project will be on an even larger scale than *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* and *Luminous Fields*. "One of my ambitions is to do twenty miles of a highway in the Midwest," she says. A Midwestern landscape is almost the definition of monot-



ony, especially to a New Englander. But such monotony presents an irresistibly blank canvas for Dworsky. Woven into the universal language of design will surely be brilliant strands of her own dreams and visions. If everything goes right, she will create a transcendent experience, helping tired drivers journey

well beyond habitual ways of seeing. An everyday landscape that may have gone unseen and unacknowledged for years will become a transcendent space, a lyric poem in the timeless language of design. **NEH**

EDITOR'S NOTE To see more of Alisa Dworsky's work, go to www.alisadworsky.com.

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