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Number 70, Winter 2004–2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/10215ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

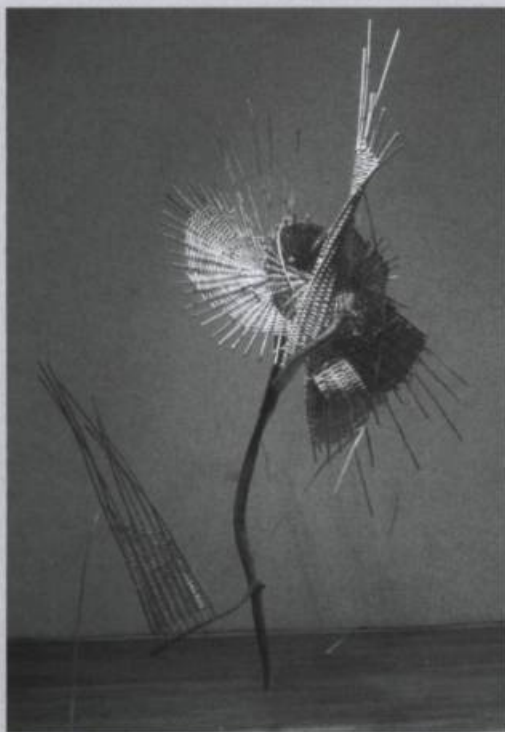
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Cite this document

Blassingame, T. (2004). Sticks ans Shingles: In conversation with Lucy Hodgson. *Espace Sculpture*, (70), 45–45.

STICKS AND SHINGLES: In Conversation with LUCY HODGSON

TIA BLASSINGAME



Lucy HODGSON, *You Can Count on Me*, 2004. Plywood. H.: 2.4 m. Photo: Cervin Robinson.

Lucy HODGSON, *La Pensée Sauvage*, 1989. Rhododendron, kudzu, and cane. H.: 1.5 m. Photo: Cervin Robinson.

American sculptor Lucy Hodgson employs seemingly rigid building materials to create pieces that appear to curve and crawl across landscapes and up walls. Hodgson took time out from bending wood shingles in Maine to converse about how her anthropology background and early New England architecture shape her sculptural expression.

How would you characterize your work?

It is work made primarily of organic materials — logs, sticks, fibres — that addresses environmental concerns and the relationship of man to nature. It uses anthropomorphic forms found in trees and architectural elements salvaged from demolition sites. I aim for ironic effects, juxtapositions of elements that don't normally coincide, and I title the work accordingly.

Your titles are pretty eccentric. How do you formulate them?

Titles come to me after the work has made its appearance. I thought of *A Lady Is Never Wrong* when it was finished, because it reminded me of seemingly subservient female posturing — rather like a Geisha, but really with a mind of her own.

How does your regional location shape your work?

In New England, there's a lot of old architecture being torn down. It gives me material and food for thought. My family has been in New England since the mid-seventeenth century, so I feel pretty attached to those structures.

What are some influences on your style of expression or on material choices?

My woven pieces of the eighties were influenced by the South Pacific cultures: in ancient Tahiti, an abstract and unprepossessing bunch of string carried the most symbolic weight; Tapa cloth was wealth; in Samoa, grass mats recorded lineage, property rights. Globally, fabric conveys cultural information.

The little stick assemblages that the Dani of New Guinea leave to convey information to other members of their tribe along trails; Gypsy "patterns," which do the same thing; and phenomena like the fabled "Green Man" in pre-Christian Britain,

a giant figure made of saplings filled with human sacrifices and set on fire — these are fibrous sculptural forms that convey specific meaning to those who are informed.

How would you describe your design process?

Sometimes I see a piece fully formed in my mind's eye; sometimes it evolves as I work. I work very directly with the materials. What the materials will do dictates what I make. With *A Lady Is Never Wrong*, for example, the shape was dictated by the piece of rhododendron that worked as a spine. *You Can Count on Me* was a happy accident that occurred when I was making the underlying structure for a piece that was actually supposed to run along the floor. I stood it up on its end to get a better look at something, and there it was, a completely unreliable ladder; I liked the joke.

*Your stick works, like *La Pensée Sauvage*, involve an apparent unravelling or fraying.*

Ravelling and unravelling is a poetic concept, and suggests philosophical issues, emotional states and more. I admire what can be done with a single strand of flexible material.

What initially attracted you to materials such as kudzu and raffia?

Their utilization in pre-literate culture. They are flexible, versatile, cheap, durable, and renewable.

*Your shingle work like *Bore* and wall-mounted pieces like *Undercurrents* appear to undulate quite precariously. Do you work within the logic of architecture (structural analysis, load, weight, etc.) as you re-appropriate architectural elements/materials?*

I work intuitively. The point of what I'm doing is that these pieces work even though it looks as though they should not.

Is it your principal intention to reintroduce architectural elements in organic forms?

The anthropomorphic tree boles and branches with shingled boxes and window frames are certainly in that category. Pieces that have no man-made architectural elements — the woven sticks — were my first attempts at anti-technology statements, though many took the shape of little shelters, towers. Now I have left behind the organic materials, and comment on technology itself.

Are you concerned about the permanence of your outdoor installations? A lot of my work is supposed to weather, rot, and disappear. I was moved by certain pre-literate cultures that go to great lengths to carve huge, elaborate sculpture for one particular ritual or event, and then discard it, letting it decompose.

I like reminding people in our culture, which denies death, that they are here for a short time. I also like the look of the weathering process. Things go grey, bleach out, sprout mushrooms, house squirrels, etc. Weathering is important, from both a conceptual viewpoint and an aesthetic one.

How does the setting inform your work?

On a specific site, like the one I had recently in the Netherlands, I looked to the history of the place and then took the topography into account. The site had been an island in danger of disappearing under the rising Zuider Zee water but is now a bump on a vast area of reclaimed land that the Dutch call "polders." I used the concept of flood waters as a starting point. I was thinking of a play on "wave lengths." I ended up with the long undulating shingle pieces — *Surge*, *Bore*, *Rip* — and some chunky waves — *Hunger* — that looked as though they were eating away at the island.

*What significance does the interplay of light and shadows have in pieces like *You Can Count On Me*, *Alewives*, *Scale Damariscotta Run*, and *Many Stags Ago*?*

I always present a photograph with the piece to show how the light should be placed so that the shadow creates the desired dialogue with it. If it isn't properly lit, it isn't the piece I intended it to be.

For outdoor work, the shadow is important, but less integral. The Dutch pieces had great shadows. In that low country of vast skies and rolling clouds, the changing light is especially apparent, like a film.

One perceives motion in your works despite their bulky, rigid components.

Yes, the sculptures imply motion. It's something to which I myself respond in a rather visceral way. ←