

## Emilie Brzezinski: Respecting Nature

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Number 90, Winter 2009–2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/63006ac>

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### Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

### ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this document

Grande, J. K. (2009). Emilie Brzezinski: Respecting Nature. *Espace Sculpture*, (90), 34–35.

## Emilie BRZEZINSKI: Respecting Nature

Interview with John K. GRANDE

Born in 1932, Emilie Brzezinski started a serious art career in the 1970s with a series of solo shows in Washington DC and in New York. Working in a variety of media, including resin, latex, wood fibre, and wood, her expressive themes always relate to nature. Eventually she focused entirely on monumental wood sculpture, using chain saw and axe to carve forms that took inspiration from the wood she found at mills, gardens and development sites. Very important to her formation as a sculptor was her involvement in site-specific installations and alternative spaces, as well as her participation in residencies and symposia in the United States and abroad. In these broadening experiences, she was freed from the constraints of gallery, museum and marketplace, and was able to find her personal statement. In the 90s, she found her voice in the dialogue between the wood medium and her tools. During the last decade, she has had museum installations in the United States and completed a tour of her installation *Forest* through the capitals of Eastern Europe from where her family originates.

*JKG: Emilie, you like to work on a large scale and that is quite unusual.*

EB: My experience in the 80s with three site-specific shows that I organized for sculptors in the area, called *Spring Hill Site Project*, had a lot to do with my working in a larger size. Nature is a very challenging space, which encourages the creation of large forms that can stand up to the distractions of outdoor spaces. Once I started to work larger it was hard to turn back. From a different point of view, size has something to do with attitude. As an artist, I like to look up at my work, I like to be overwhelmed by it as I approach it. I like my statement to be heard.

*JKG: When you assemble these collectivities of trees in your recent work as you did for the Vancouver Biennale (2007), you are assembling a bunch of personalities and putting them in relation to each other. You have commented that each tree trunk has its own personality, its own structure and its own response to the environment, to the weather conditions it grew up with...*

EB: Like people, each tree has its own series of events to deal with. A branch broken by a neighbour that pushes it aside. I like to include these aberrations of nature, using natural surfaces and forms, natural occurrences of the tree as it grows: I am trying to find its character. These works are testaments to the trees' life and survival. I do not spend my time cleaning or standardizing them.

*JKG: Do you have any favourites among your sculptures? Is there one that stands out?*

EB: Probably *Titans* were my favourite subject. For these I needed "wolf oaks," huge oaks that grow out in the open, not in a

forest where they would have to grow straight up for light. Wolf oaks have a strong attenuation, and have major branches growing outward, and grown over branches. In making *Titans*, each trunk was a tremendous challenge, but the process of mastering the wood was a great experience.

*JKG: Is working with wood a struggle?*

EB: Working with wood is a delight if the wood is fresh and it has grown up in good conditions. But occasionally I work with stressed wood, (wood that has grown under adverse conditions), especially if it has dried out, then it is a terrible struggle, an unforgiving work. I found the key piece for a sculpture called *Lament*—a monumental work representing mothers of war—on top of a pile of discarded timbers about to be burned. I "saved" it. It was a grand piece of wood, with just the sort of twist and contortion that I needed, but it was the toughest job I ever did.

Nature has a grand design and its manifestations unfold in imperfection and specificity. Respect for this persistent individuality







Emilie BRZEZINSKI,  
*Prague Titans*, 2003.  
Permanent installation.  
Oak. H. 15 3/4". Photo:  
Courtesy of the artist.

in natural form is the underpinning of my work. My dialogue with nature has its careful balance. As I carve the trunk, I retain the essential outline and gesture of the tree, uncovering a symbol of its history in its form. The final iconic shapes enshrine this existential cycle and act as metaphors of human experience as well.

*JKG: And how did you find sculpting with willow at the Royal Botanical Gardens near Hamilton?*

EB: At the Royal Botanical Gardens I found Corkscrew Willow, a tree that not only has corkscrew shaped branches but also a tree that, as it ages, is covered with small outgrowths (probably for storing water) that give a very joyful tactile effect to the trunk. I decided to strip off the bark and feature the joyful texture of the trunks, in effect, letting the material speak for itself. The stripping of the bark was tedious but worth the trouble. I then balanced the uprights so that they interacted with each other like a troupe of dancers.

*JKG: The Apotheosis project at the Corcoran Gallery was a huge installation. Can you tell me more?*

EB: In total, 45 tree trunks were involved in *Apotheosis*, a work I later called *Forest*, and each trunk has its history. One of them came from Maine, where I found the log hung up on the rocks on an island. I remember I went up to it and banged it. It resounded with a loud Bong, and I knew it was sound wood.

The watermen brought it in for me. I worked on it the next summer and brought it down by U-Haul to Virginia, the location of my studio. Some tree trunks were given to me, and for some I paid outrageous sums. And a year later, 35 of these same trunks went to five capitals in Central Europe and came back, to be shown in this country again. *Forest* is my iconic show. It speaks of material, process and nature. Ten species of tree are represented. The composition is made up of verticals suggesting growth and survival, but within the vertical structure is nature-based diversity of form.

*JKG: And you have cast a few works in bronze? How do you feel about that?*

EB: Bronze has its clear advantages as a permanent material to be used outside. With today's techniques one can get incredible detail in that medium. Cast bronze is very pleasing and in my experience, my work comes out extremely well in bronze. An artist who started off with natural materials (fibre) is Magdalena Abakanowicz: she has many installations in bronze, and now in iron. Natural materials and bronze are two different mediums, and must be appreciated as such. My hope is that one of my sculptures will be cast for an urban environment; I think it could have stunning effect.

*JKG: Your work is more naturalistic than say Giuseppe Penone with his Cedar of Versailles (2002-2003). The Versailles tree reveals the disguised branch growth forms from within*

*the tree's trunk. Penone broaches land art with Arte Povere quite beautifully but the intention is so much more conceptual...*

EB: I am the opposite of conceptual. I just don't think that way. My work is earthy, instinctive, up front, hands on and process oriented. Penone's *Cedar of Versailles* and *Passage* are in such contrast even though both expose the inner structure of a tree. Penone is careful, polished and cerebral. In my dialogue with nature, the human input of carving with chisels, axes and chainsaws leaves signs of process in the symbolic form that I uncover. Care is taken to retain the memories of incidents in the tree's struggle for life. A peculiar grain structure, or an invasion of ants, broken branches grown over, rotten areas or an unusual way the tree sought light reveal challenges to the survival of the tree. These elements are retained in the carved trunks as enhancements to the statement about the material. ←

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Emilie BRZEZINSKI,  
*Forest*, 2005. Various  
woods. H. 16". Katzen  
Arts Center. Photo:  
Chan Chao.