MARCH 2, 2021 BY ETTY YANIV

Babs Reingold: Palette of Materials

From left to right: Babs Reingold in the studio with Hair Nest '01, Hair Nest '16, Hair Nest '15, photo courtesy of the artist

In her multi layered installations Babs Reingold's brings together drawing, sculpture, found objects, and at times video, to create potent environments alluding to the body, the environment, and the passage of time. Equipped with a fine tuned sensibility to materiality and an imaginative approach to spatiality, Babs Reingold's installations inhabit spaces as an alternate force of nature and take a life of their own.

You were born in Venezuela and reside in Florida. Tell me a bit about yourself and what brought you to art.

Although my studio and residence are now in St. Petersburg Florida, I had exotic beginnings. My parents lived in Caracas Venezuela for 8 years and I was born there. We then lived in Barbados for a year before my parents along with five children moved back to the United States.

I have been making objects and drawing since I was a young child, I guess one could say it began with my father. He was a photographer though this was not his livelihood. I remember his tiny closet dark room where I watched him develop photos. Being in the dark room with him and seeing images emerge in the photo solution was magic. When I was 10, my father became ill with MS. By age 15, we were living in a housing project in Cleveland's inner city. The only good thing about that period was my high school art teacher. He was fantastic and essentially the reason for me going to the Cleveland Institute of Art.

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Your earlier installations seem to explore different materials, such as fabric and light and thematically they seem to be related directly to social issues, such as in *Hung Out in the Projects*. Can you tell me about that installation work?

Because of my life circumstances of a young Jewish girl growing up in a tough and unsafe environment in a project on the east side of Cleveland, my main concern at childhood was survival. *Hung Out In The Projects* relates to this experience. I must confess, however, that decades later, my thoughts on poverty are more complex, more subtle and although totally personal, more universal.

Babs Reingold, Hung Out in the Projects, 2008-2010, Scaffold, Pieces on clothesline and floor made of rust and tea stained silk organza, encaustic, animal skins, canvas, and human hair. Old windows, old pails, and cages. Light control box fades lights on and off. A sound piece of city noises and other sounds by the artist Lin Culbertson plays continuously on a Boombox inside of an old trash can. Projected text on wall – thoughts and statistics on poverty – scroll, zoom and fade, 19w x 40d x 14h Feet photo courtesy of the artist

Poverty was the 900-pound bag in my life. One exists concealed, fearful of exposure, trapped in a project culture that turns inward on itself to survive, propagating the very issues from which one hopes to escape. It, in turn, engenders shame and secrecy. Skin and hair are the exterior layers of humanity, a fragile boundary between what exists to the outside and what hides away. Clothing further reinforces the boundary, and distances what is truly inside.

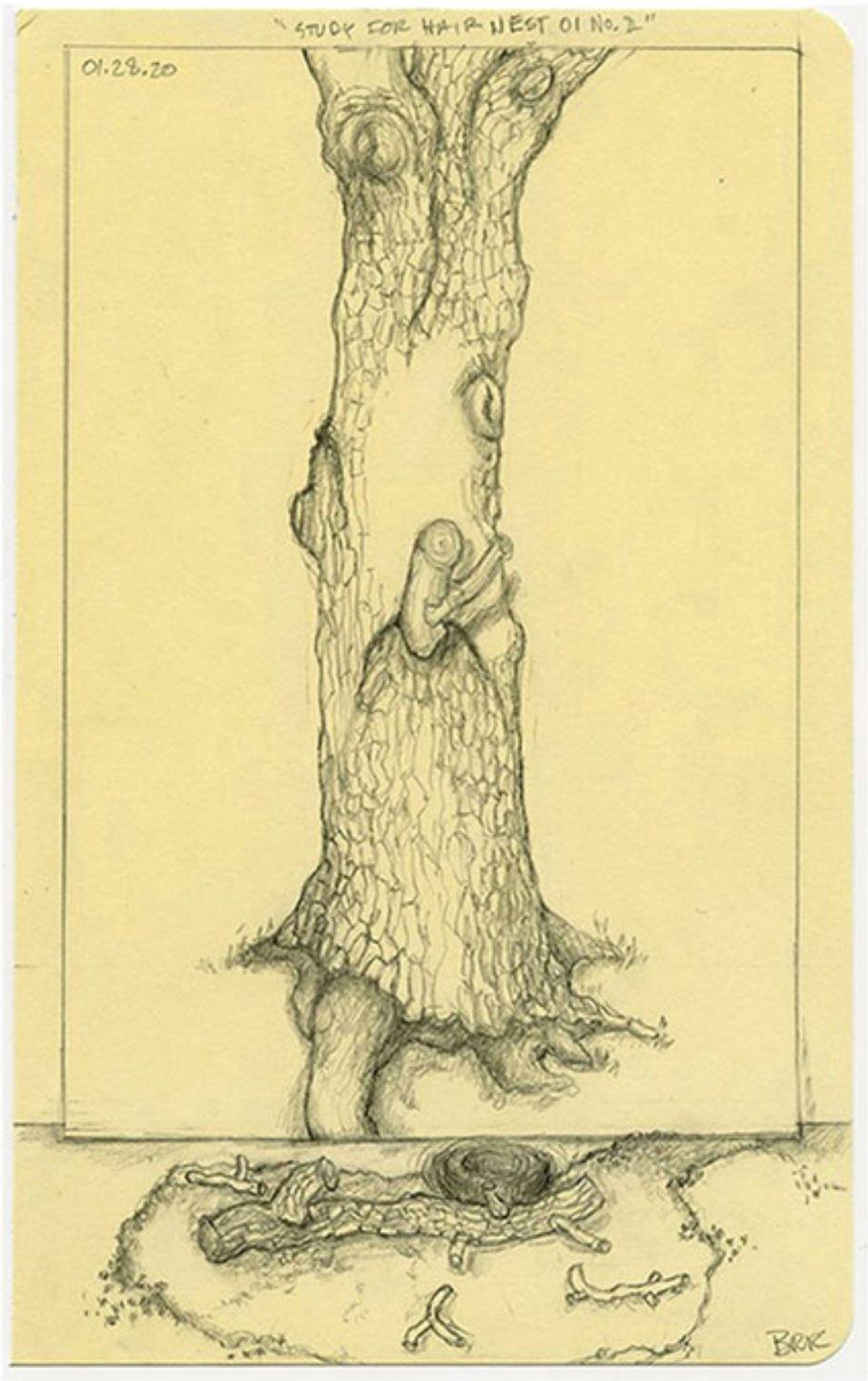
In the *Hung Out In The Projects* installation, clotheslines are strung between structures and populated with odd shapes made from rust and tea stained silk organza and skins, some of which are stuffed with hair. Many resemble everyday apparel, but misshapen and distorted. Washing on the line may bring forth nostalgia for days long past, but here the washing is a semaphoric path to a secret interior. The floor is littered with old pails and objects found and made. Along one wall a video of text crawls across with words of statistics of poverty and project life.

Viewers observe *Hung Out In the Projects* from a scaffold platform, in essence, a societal vantage point of superiority and security, where exiting an uncomfortable situation is always an option. Additionally, I invited sound artist Lin Culbertson to create an audio track to present an inescapable in-your-face discordant resonance of urban culture and eerie sounds, which contributes yet another fabric to the experience. The soundtrack is played on a boombox inside an old trashcan.

Your latest series, *Hair Nest*, is made of 10 works incorporating 10 years of hair loss, bringing together drawings of tree parts, fabricated 3-D or actual branches, a field of stones and other materials — fusing themes you have been dealing with, of beauty and the environment. Can you elaborate on that?

I have always loved drawing, the mark making. But it was not until 2005 that drawing took a central role in my work with the series *Fallout: Beauty Lost and Found*, which is related to The *Hair Nest* series — out of which three are completed: *Hair Nest '01*, *Hair Nest '15*, and *Hair Nest '16*. I like the idea of documenting a decade of hair loss, what I thought of personally as my lost beauty. It's a way of marking time and its passage. The series fuses my themes of beauty and environment.

Each contains one 7-foot high drawing of a tree part, a cast or fabricated 3-D branch or actual branch. The branches are cast of glass wax, or bronze and fabricated of silk organza over wire mesh or paper. Each work contains a nest constructed from a year of my daily hair loss. It either sits on the branch or in a field of stones and other materials at the base of the drawing.



Babs Reingold, Study For Hair Nest '01 No.2, 2020, Graphite on moleskin, 5×8 inches

Aside from the aesthetic beauty of trees you may be interested to know scientists record twenty-two benefits, encompassing air quality, climate change, erosion and food as well as numerous other comforts. Tree markings —scars and burns — and tree-ring dating, provide yearly climate history. The markings speak of an existence affected by elements beyond their control, such as drought, fire, disease, and of course humans. Yet, they endure. It is hardly a reach to blend tree drawings and limb sculptures with my signature component, human hair. Hair contains our complete DNA and lives beyond death. The perseverance of trees and the permanency of hair inspire the work and carry it forward.

Babs Reingold, Hair Nest '01 No.2, 2020, mixed medium, photo courtesy of the artist

Let's dwell a bit longer on hair as it seems to be central in your work and you have been working with it since early on. How do you think the use of this material has evolved for you — from early sculptures such as *Elizabeth* (1998) to *Hair Nest* (2020)?

The use of hair began in 1995. I was looking for a way to simulate skin and came up with the concept of stuffing human hair into forms constructed of encaustic-coated silk organza. The hair protruded through the mesh of the organza, simulating the tiny hairs on the skin's surface. Around the same time, I came upon a catalog for a wonderful exhibition on hair. Something about the pieces in that show inspired the box portrait series. *Elizabeth* is one piece from that series. The stuffed objects became larger, more complicated, and the staining process of the silk organza changed over the years as well.

I first began collecting my hair in 1998 because I was experiencing an unusual amount of hair loss due to a thyroid condition. At that time I had no idea how I would use it in my art, but that didn't matter. Hair is a signature in my work and I use it to signify a number of ideas, including its intrinsic link to DNA. I think you'll agree, hair is personal, endearing and we identify with it.

Babs Reingold, Elizabeth, Hair, encaustic, silk organza, wood, plywood, copper wire mesh, 8d x 9h x 4w inches, photo courtesy of the artist

Babs Reingold, Hair Nest '16, (detail) 2018-2020, 60 w x 84 h x 52 d inches, photo courtesy of the artist

Tell me more about the process of working on this series and how do you see the relationship between the pieces?

I like to work in series. Although concept to completion takes years, the pieces interact with each other and I am always thinking how I can make each piece distinct. I go back and forth and fix parts of previous pieces over time. For example: *Hair Nest '16*, the first one in the series had begun in 2018 and finished in 2020. Additionally, I like seeing the series emerge in my studio as a unit. It's interaction on an ongoing basis as previous pieces influence the one I'm working on. And while each is an individual work, the series is really dramatic together.

Babs Reingold, Left to right: Hair Nest '01, 2020), Hair Nest '16, 2018-2020, and Hair Nest '15, 2019, mixed medium, photo courtesy of the artist

You combine many forms of representation in your work which carry multiple layers of symbolism — tree stumps, roots stuffed with human hair. Curator Midori Yoshimoto stated that your work is "a cautionary requiem for humanity." Let's take a closer look at your installation *The Last Tree* from that material-symbolism perspective.

The stumps in this installation are a symbiotic link to hair living beyond death and perhaps, a collective binder for mortality. The stumps are scarred and stitched and contain multiple textures. They are made of transformed silk organza stained with rust and tea and stuffed with human hair. Metaphorically, surfaces mimic faults, whether human or natures.

The 193 pails holding the stumps are the recognized countries in the world. The lone tree among the enclosed stumps stands tall, but will it survive? That is the question facing us, isn't it?

Babs Reingold, The Last Tree, 2013- 2016, Silk organza, cheesecloth, chiffon, rust, tea, human hair, encaustic, wool, string, thread, 194 pails, and a video of tree chopped by ax and chain saw with an original soundtrack by Lin Culbertson. Image: Installed at Burchfield Penney Art Center Buffalo NY, 40L x 25D x 15H feet, photo courtesy of the artist.

Babs Reingold, The Last Sea, 2018, wood boat coated with paper mache and modeling paste, graphite, and rust and tea stains. Animals and ladder: rust and tea stained silk organza stuffed with human hair, cheesecloth, leather, thread, yarns, and nails, plastic trash, About 144 w x 36h x 168L inches, photo courtesy of the artist

You mention that concerns about the environment have turned you from primarily painting to owning space via installations. Can you tell me more about that transition?

I am concerned about issues that focus on poverty as well as the environment. Both drove my work toward installation. My first room size installation was *La Longue Durée* at the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2003. Once on this path, I didn't look back. My largest installations to date are *Hung Out In The Projects* and *The Last Tree*. The transition began earlier though. I gravitated towards sculpture in the mid nineties. Up to that point I was making large paintings of women bodybuilders. The nineties was the height of installation art in New York. Women artist were creating monumental sculptures and installations. I thought it was the most exciting art happening within that milieu. It became the art for me.

In the early nineties three-dimensional objects crept onto my paintings until, in an almost inexplicable yet irresistible momentum, installation and sculpture replaced painting. I believed this transformation allowed me to more fully occupy space and manipulate time. I became increasingly aware of contemporary female artists who were producing exciting and provocative three-dimensional and site-specific installations. Among them, were large cell sculptures by Louise Bourgeois, the incredible *Light Sentence* by Mona Hatoum, monumental pieces by Ursula von Rydingsvard and the visceral wax pieces by Petah Coyne. Further, I delved back into the sixties and seventies and reacquainted myself with Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta and others. All these women artists were utilizing materials in new and different ways. It was experimentation that inspired new visions and I wanted to be a part of it.

As I moved in and around their objects, thoughts evolved to the intensity or force of time — and the effect of that. The physical act became emotional and this was a way forward out of the cliché, a path to hurdle the hegemony handed down. I began experimenting with unique materials to create new spaces, moving far beyond my sculptural pieces constructed of fiberglass and dry pigments. I developed a unique signature, utilizing a bath of rust and tea combined with an encaustic process to stain silk organza and paper.

I continue this path today. It is an evolving process and experimentation continues with an expanded palette of materials — cast wax, iron, and glass, repurposed materials and recycled in the progression.

Babs Reingold, Baggage Light, 2004, Installed at Artspace Gallery, Hartford CT, Silk organza, hair, encaustic, string, rust, tea, wood, clear light bulbs, light control box, 108h x 144w x 72d inches, photo courtesy the artist

Etty Yaniv works on her art, art writing and curatorial projects in Brooklyn. She founded Art Spiel as a platform for highlighting the work of contemporary artists, including art reviews, studio visits, interviews with artists, curators, and gallerists. For more details contact by Email: artspielblog@gmail.com

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