

## Arts Publications

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# Frances Whitehead at Tough - Chicago, Illinois - Review of Exhibitions - Brief Article

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## Art in America, Oct, 1996 by Susan Snodgrass

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Frances Whitehead, a sculptor originally inspired by the industrial world, began gardening as a respite from urban life. Later her recreational activities became part of her studio practice. For Whitehead, the ecological cycles of renewal and decay metaphorically connect to history and memory, and in her use of materials she seeks to address that connection. Her work explores the relationship among the organic, the social and the physical, and includes artifacts from a pastoral sphere now marred by human intrusion--rosemary topiaries, for example, sheared into statements of loss (Rue, Amnesia), or deadly nightshade made into jam.

Her recent project, Untitled (*Actea artemesia*/*Artemesia absinthium*), was a meditation on nature and the baroque, where issues of beauty, excess and entropy played out in complex configurations. Named after the luna moth (*actea artemesia*) and the absinthe plant (*artemesia absinthium*), the installation incorporated these real-life organisms into sculptural constructions that together read as a kind of constellation, a collection of individual parts related by the larger shape the mind makes of them. Four colossal porcelain columns commanded the gallery's darkened center. Their sinuous lines paid visual homage to Bernini's baldachin at St. Peter's, yet their marred surfaces suggested architectural ruin.

Other components exploited the mutability inherent in their biological specimens. Most minimalistic was a large cube built from thin slabs of pressed sugar. Overhead hung two glass funnels, one containing absinthe oil, the other water. These fluids fell in dribs and drabs, dissolving the geometric form below and emitting a suffocating yet seductive perfume. Of course, absinthe is best known as the crucial ingredient in the addictive liquor whose drinkers were famously a subject of early modernist painting; this quasi-laboratory set-up recalled the process by which that liquor was concocted. In another element of the piece, the vines of nine potted absinthe plants grew toward simulated natural light--a tropism that again emphasized the strength of biochemical reactions, while inviting us to consider the ways in which man turns nature to his own ends.

Various visual and conceptual links between the two artemesias were explored in a nearby projection. Behind a curtain cast in pine rosin was a cage filled with cocoons (and, over time, with live and dead moths), while a slide projector cast an image of a mature moth distorted into an amorphous shadow of pale absinthe green. Like the absinthe addict, the luna moth is

decisively impelled by its own biological response to external stimuli--in its case, light. Here, Whitehead's intervention, at first an arcadian lament, became a rediscovery of nature through esthetic inquiry.

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