

Shelburne Museum
John Bisbee: New Blooms
January 18 – May 26, 2014

Published in Art New England, 2014

Could there be a more humble medium for a sculptor than the 12-inch common nail? Maine artist John Bisbee shows us the profound transformations that can be wrought from this common industrial material in a most engaging exhibition in the Shelburne Museums new Pizzagalli Center for Art and Education. Using heat and cold, physical exertion; hammering, bending, twisting, folding, flattening and unexpectedly, computer technology – the nail undergoes a complete metamorphosis, at times rooted to the ground as in the monolithic *Seed*, 2013, or it appears airborne as in the wall sculpture *Pelt*, 2014.

The varied surfaces of the floor sculptures invite being touched, we are drawn in to the untreated, darkly gouged *Seed*, tempted to run our fingers along the form, following the light as it settles as shadow into nooks and crannies. The light then appears to mimic sound as it reverberates off the burnished sheen of *Hearsay*. Both pieces are fixed in time and space, unlike *Thicket*, whose elongated stems, gathered in clusters or in single stalks, can be rearranged at will, and the possibilities are infinite.

All artists are to some extent magicians whose process can seem mysterious. After seeing the awe inspiring wall pieces that wrap around the entire gallery, my first thoughts were “how did he do that?” Although there was a video monitor mounted in a corner that showed Bisbee at work with his forge and welding equipment, I had to ask the well informed docent who was present during the installation, how a piece as complex as *Pelt* came to fruition. The piece was entirely constructed with nails in their original state. A computer program calculated the depth and angle of the holes drilled into the wall panels that were mounted according to a predetermined scheme. The nails, hundreds of them, were then driven-in by hand during the installation.

John Bisbee had spent nearly 3 decades working with nails in his Maine studio before Thomas Denenberg, the Shelburne Museums director, approached him about being the first contemporary artist to have a solo exhibition in the “soon-to-be-constructed” Pizzagalli Center. The seven pieces; 3 floor sculptures and 4 wall pieces were created over the past 2 years specifically for this show. It was an act of faith for both artist and curator that have come together as a satisfying whole in this most ambitious exhibition.

—Cynthia L. Close

YOUTUBE Video Brunswick Maine Studio visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbaFi_774Wc