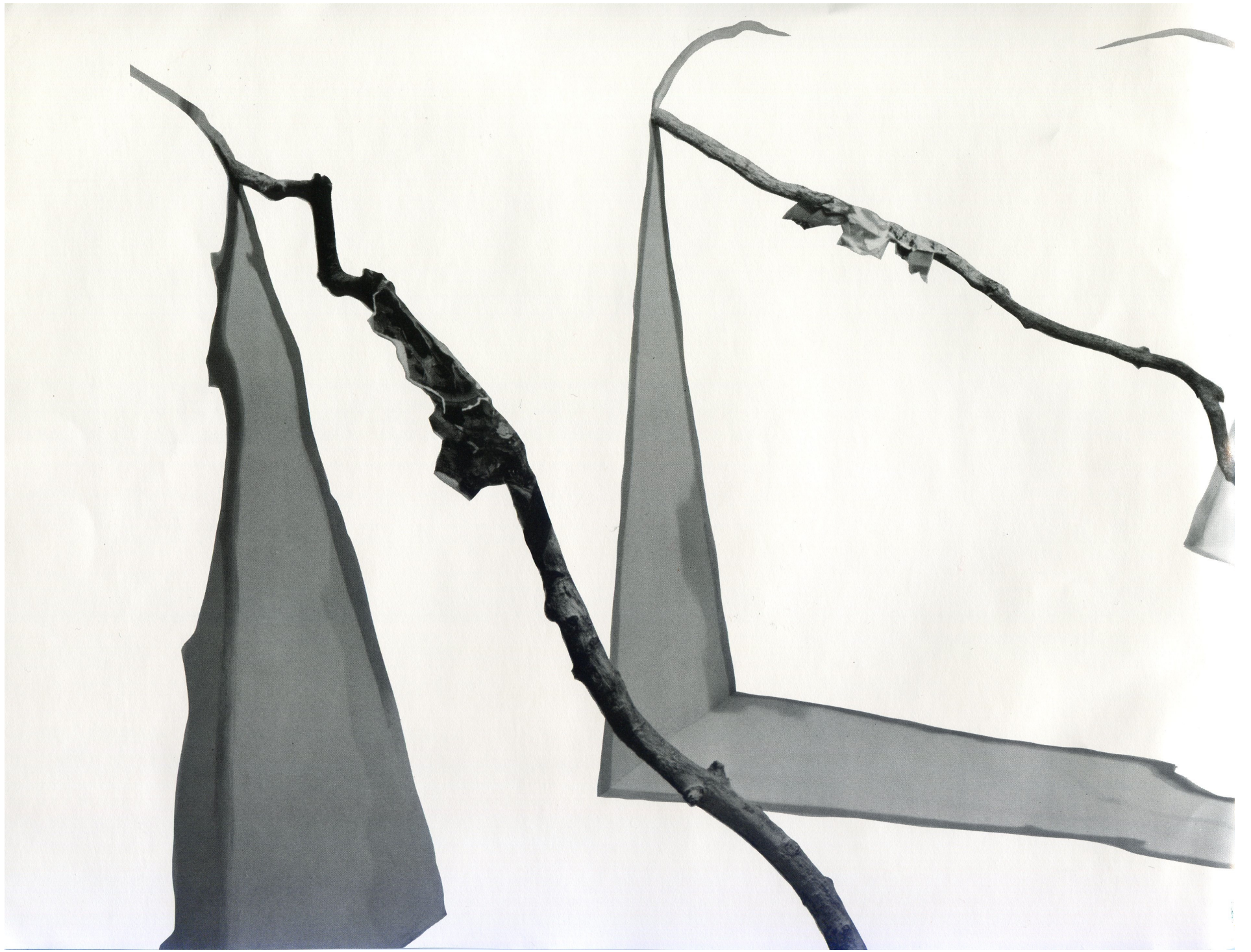




G E O F F R I O N





THE ENIGMATIC ARTISTRY OF MOIRA MARTI GEOFFRION

Any way you look at it, Moira Geoffrion's sculpture and drawing demands that you look at it another way too. Even the very concepts of drawing and of sculpture are inaccurate when applied to her work since her sculpture is linear—instead of being massive or volumetric—and her drawing is sculptural in that it creates the illusion of real objects moving into space. Then too, one of the basic characteristics of sculpture (except for the kinetic kind which deliberately contravenes that quality) is that it is static, it doesn't move. Some sculpture conveys a sense of movement or thrust—one thinks of *The Nike of Samothrace* and, recently, of Ronald Bladen's dynamic abstract forms—and Geoffrion's work is akin to both, but her branch-like sculptures go further. They create such a convincing illusion of move-

ment you would swear they weren't standing still. The shadows they cast are multiplied by her lighting arrangement—but then she complicates the situation even more by drawing additional shadows that simulate other positions or states of lighting. The result is that the pieces seem to be alive—moving, turning, trembling or in some other state than inanimate.

Spiritually, the world Geoffrion creates in these highly-charged installations seems like the enchanted forest in which Una and the Knight of the Red Crosse seek refuge in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*:

*And foorth they passe, with pleasure
forward led,
Joying to heare the birdes sweete harmony,
Which therein shrouded from the tempest dred,
Seemed in their song to scorne the cruell sky.*

*Much [did] they praise the trees so straight
and hy,
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
The Vine-prop Elme, the Poplar never dry,
The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,
The [Aspen] good for staves, the
Cypresse funerall.*

*The Laurell, [reward] of mightie Conquerours
And Poets sage, the Firre that weepeth still,
The Willow worne of forlorne Paramours,
The [Yew] obedient to the benders will,
The Birch for shaftes, the Sallow for the mill,
The Mirrhe sweete bleeding in the
bitter wound,
The warlike Beech, the Ash for nothing ill,
The fruitfull Olive, and the [Plane-tree] round,
The carver [Holly], the Maple seeldom
inward sound.¹*

This is not to say that Geoffrion's concerns are with the character of specific kinds of trees, but rather that the branched forms she creates seem to *have* character. They cower, they lunge, they are proud, or they cling in desperation—what they do not ever seem to do is to be inert and impassive the way sculpture is normally wont to be. And, realistic as they appear, they aren't even real tree branches. Some, in fact, are made of bronze, and in all cases their natural configurations have been altered by the artist's skillful splicings and grafts, cuts and laminations, and their surfaces have been hidden beneath layers of paint, colored pencil, and collage. Deceptively fragile and simple, these sculptures reward careful study by giving up rectangles and triangles where there only seemed to be natural bends in the wood. One discovers the stability of pyramids and the strength of metal where there only seemed to be the casual, chancy balance of lightweight materials.



— Her current work—the culmination of nearly two decades of artistic endeavor that took forms not drastically unlike those of her contemporaries—is now of quite a different order than work by other artists to which it might seem superficially related. James Surls, Janet Schneider and many other sculptors today anthropomorphize trees. Stumps become animals or human torsos, a knot stands in for an eye, a swelling for a shoulder, and so on. But Geoffrion's branched works don't imitate figures; instead they somehow embody animate spirits. Though they don't look anything alike, her sculptures seem closest to those of Martin Puryear in that a spiritual quality seems to be made manifest within abstract, in fact highly formal structures. Like Puryear, Geoffrion spent a great deal of time in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Both seem to have absorbed the African idea of the artist as a creator of objects imbued with magical powers. They both communicate through forms, transmitting energy

instead of specific content. African sources are not obvious, though, in either artists' work.

All artists work out of their life experience and Moira Geoffrion's background is less conventional than most. She was born in Maryland to a highly respected Swiss professor of philosophy, Fritz Marti and his wife Gertrude, a musical prodigy who had had her first piano recital at the age of three. Moira's parents created a private elementary school around their six children, utilizing their own many faceted educating abilities. Modeled on European methods, it ultimately enrolled 125 students. Moira's father was a demanding teacher who gave his very young charges Moliere and the German poets to read and made them study Greek, Latin, and Russian as well as learning French and German. In later years Geoffrion added the West African languages of Temne and Krio to this base. Dr. Marti introduced her to art by showing her slides of European paint-

ing, sculpture, and architecture as though she were an art history student. She wasn't given artistic training per se, but she has been drawing for as long as she can remember. A somewhat sickly child, and quite shy compared with her outgoing twin sister, she often retreated to her secret hiding place in the woods. There she remembers studying the light configurations—the open shapes between the branches—and the shadows dancing on the ground. This tree image was so powerful to her that no matter how hard she tried at the time, her drawings of it always seemed inadequate. But through this struggle, trees became a symbol of permanence to her, a meaning she could always trust not to change.

Geoffrion studied art at Boston University with expressionists like David Aronson and Walter Murch in a rigorously academic context that only about one student in 30 survived. She loved old masters like Perugino, Tintoretto, Mantegna, and more recent artists like Ferdinand Hodler, a

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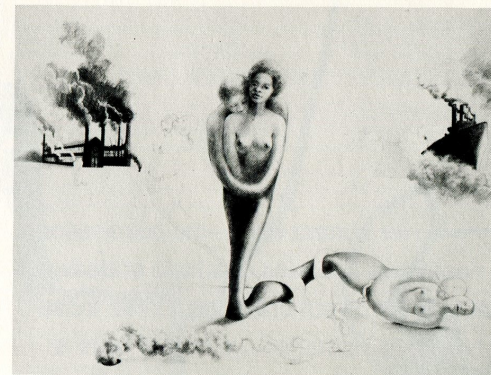
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turn-of-the-century Swiss artist her father admired. Clarity of image characterizes all of these painters' work, yet she also adored El Greco's mysterious atmosphere and Turner's vaporous mists. She especially admired the fact that one had trouble guessing which medium Turner used because of his unusual ways of handling it. Her teachers never managed to spark her interest in modern masters like Matisse and Rodin however, nor did they teach her much about sculpture or how to handle color. After college she and her husband Charles went to Africa with the Peace Corps, to the rainforests of Sierra Leone on the West Coast; and five years later on a doctoral research grant to the mountains of Malawi in South Central Africa. It is so steamy hot and humid in Sierra Leone, she says, that your clothes rot right off your back. The experience of growth and decay there was so intense it became a lifelong element of her content. The drawings she did in Africa were of soldiers and tanks,

vultures and snakes, of people crying and prison walls with blood seeping out through their cracks, of Black Africans and ominous racial confrontations—all subjects having to do with her feelings about her baby girl Sabrina growing up in a Viet Nam world. This imagery emerged out of the drawing paper in various places as though the paper's whiteness were clouds, thus providing a coherent overall context for very disparate material.

Back in America an African intensity of color and an obsession with sexually-charged images (provocative women, shiny black surfaces, vaginal and uterine shapes, sperm and oozing forms) dominated Geoffrion's graduate work, first at Indiana University in Bloomington, and later at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville. African art had also taught her about textures, about using anything you could lay your hands on to make a work of art, and it taught her how essential it was that the work express emotion. So while



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her teachers belabored the idea of sculptural mass, she was exploring sculpture both as line in space and gesture. Her teachers discussed rectangles and geometrical solids, but she thought instead about meaning. When they showed her Donald Judd she found the work too inhuman. She liked the freedom and the content of African art, the mixing of materials in Oceanic art, and the sculptural qualities of Native American utilitarian objects like baby carriers and sleds. Though Minimalism dominated the curriculum, she responded most strongly to artists like Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Magdalena Abakanowicz and to the sculptors working in the landscape like Mary Miss and Nancy Holt.

Although her work became abstract immediately afterward, Geoffrion's first post-African sculpture was a long and sinuous standing female attached to a horizontal curvilinear shadow-form which represented lovers in close embrace. She then began to cast abstract pieces with similar sinuosity in black polyester resin, polishing their surfaces so highly that they mirrored the colors of people's clothing as they walked near the work. When she discovered black vinyl she was able to get similar results much more easily. She liked to contrast softness with hard forms. In one wall piece a hard, pipe-like curving element exuded two soft, pendulous black vinyl shapes, one of which was "marred" by a wound or gash which exposed a velvety purple and red "interior." Vaginal or intestinal, this area represented the vulnerability of the piece's skin in a very human way. In a floor piece from this series, *Homage to Volubilis*, a pliant, brown crocheted horsehair and camelhair form



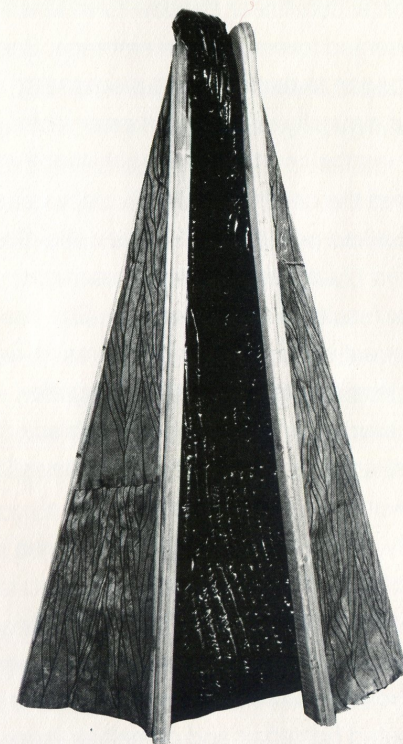
is opened to reveal a bright orange-red interior. This piece was inspired by fertility shrines Geoffrion had seen, and ended up becoming one itself when two women in succession became pregnant while it was in their possession.

Contrasts of shape, texture, and color are maximized in all this work of the middle seventies, much of which was womb-like in appearance. Hard structures would support, frame, or seem to be consumed by billowing, soft, sexually-charged fabric. At this highpoint of the Women's Movement she was making an overt statement about male-female confrontation. In fact she even made a little cartoon then about soft "stuff" coming up to a rectangle and saying "Humph! Macho" and then proceeding to devour it. She had taught herself to weave so that she might study with Arturo Sandoval, a master of fiber art, but her approach was never conventional. In fact her use of materials remained quite African in its ad hoc free-

dom from rules. Feathers and fibers might emerge from shiny quilted satin in a wall shrine; soft, black fur might line a hard wooden skeletal structure which enclosed a cascading, shiny vinyl interior. Fiber pieces often seemed like growth forms and in one large commissioned piece with a series of woven units placed on a similarly colored wall, it seemed as though the whole wall were a living, growing organism. At the end of the seventies she phased out the woven parts of her pieces and substituted handmade paper for the soft, sensuous, textured parts of her pieces. Attached to "L" shaped frames placed upright on the floor in staggered succession they appeared like waves; attached in parallel strips within a rectangular frame they seemed like a waterfall, or clouds drifting across a mountain. In the 1979 *Paper Lean* Series, where the paper was attached to vertical wooden units which leaned against the wall, a very different effect was obtained, however, which al-



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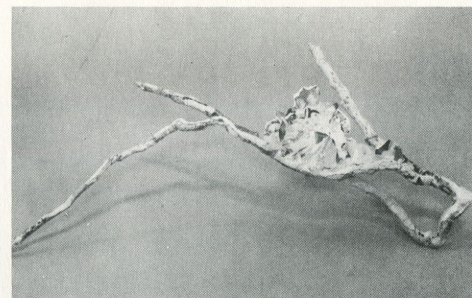
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tered the nature of her work from that point on. Here, the sculpture cast a profusion of light and shadows which seemed (particularly when photographed) to look like dappled light coming through trees. Magically, she had recreated the enchanted forest she had so loved as a child.

Now Geoffrion began to think in terms of drawing the cast shadows to emphasize them. This idea was reinforced when she saw the way shadows looked when she painted her studio floor white in order to photograph a piece later in 1979. In this multi-unit work, random, free-spirited curves with attached handmade paper floated in and out of a grid of rectangular frames as though they were birds or clouds passing windows. A little later, when she began to warp and twist the frames, the attached paper seemed like remnants of interstitial membranes left after some destructive forces had wreaked their havoc. Her drawing-studies for these sculptures were replete with shadows as



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though they were being drawn from actual objects, and when she created her first installation, *Corner Redefined* in 1980, she drew for the first time the real shadows cast by the frames as part of the image. Copper tubing sometimes replaced the wood when it became too difficult to bend or laminate it to arrive at a particular curve or torsion, but she soon realized that instead of laboring to fabricate an image of a twisting branch, she might just as well use real branches. Not long afterward, she began to add color to the wood as well. She still alters the branches to create the shapes she wants, since Mother Nature obviously does not have Geoffrion's artistic vision.

Two aspects of Geoffrion's early 1980s installations should be noted because they relate to the Tucson Museum

piece. The first is her deliberate sizing of units so that they can (or conceivably could) allow someone of her height to pass through them—not someone taller. This is something of a feminist statement in that the work reflects a world seen in terms of a woman's body. The second is her recurrent desire to create the illusion that objects are passing through walls, going from real space to an imaginary place, often with a cave-like, sheltering overtone. In a 1982 collaborative project with dancers, *On Reflection*, she used plexiglass to reflect the objects and create this illusion augmented by a profusion of colored shadows which also seemed to continue on into space beyond the wall. Currently she uses illusionistic shadows and other drawing devices, as well as different whites on the wall when she wants to create a sense of a cave-like space into which one might pass. She wants the corners and the meeting of wall and floor to disappear, an illusion she creates by manipulating the lighting and



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the temperatures of the whites painted on the walls. During the '70s she had been very interested in James Turrell's early projection pieces and his practice of eliminating the same architectural elements can hardly have been lost on her.

Geoffrion's work took a radical turn in 1983–84 as a direct result of her mother's death. She watched the ravages of cancer erode her mother's flesh to skin-covered bones, while tumors were growing wildly inside her body. This tragic image

brought back Geoffrion's old fixation on the processes of growth and decay, deepening their meaning. Her work became completely organic and the "growth forms" of attached paper moved toward complete integration with their supports. Red and other strong colors appeared like blood or bodily excrescences on the white skeletal structures of the branches, and the surfaces were now intensely gouged and scratched with pencil as though eaten away. Incorporating earlier drawings and reproductions both of her own and her friends, into the collaged growth elements gave them diaristic implications. Overall, therefore, her work became more personal and more humanly expressive. Instead of conjuring up impressions of nature with abstract structures, she was now using natural elements in human-like poses and gestures, conveying emotions and states of being—yearning, collapse, elation, loneliness. *Autumnal Dance*, 1982, the first piece she executed after her mother's



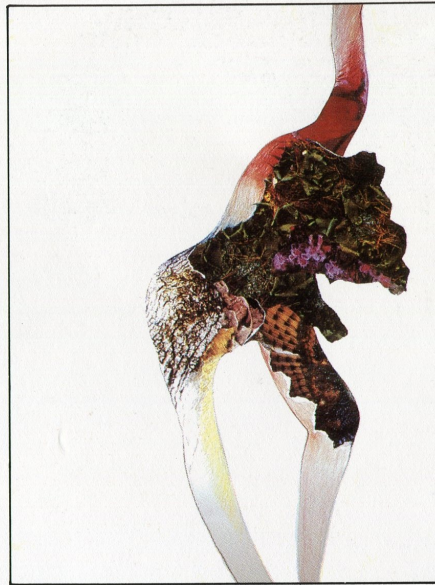
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death, can be read as a dying, wasted figure valiantly trying to rise up off the ground on spindly legs. Its sickly yellowish-white pallor is mottled by reds and purplish blues. Other pieces not so directly tied to real life experience are more ambiguous, but the growth forms often seem like tattered remnants flying in the wind or affected by unseen forces. *First Fall Snow*, a recent polychromed bronze, poignantly evokes that feeling in the air when the last leaves remaining on a tree are frozen, as if caught before flight by the sudden onslaught of winter.

In recent years Geoffrion has been using torn images from magazines in the collage growth from elements instead of the more personal material of 1979–85. Dizzying alternations of scale result, the color is even more intense and the material organic, ranging from the microscopic to the immense—scientific photographs of aquatic flora and fauna, views of the earth from satellites, crystals, arctic snow, jungle



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birds and desert plants. As a result the growth elements are thoroughly of a piece with the physical elements of nature on which they are fixed. She then paints and draws over both the branched elements and the growth forms, further integrating them. The same thing happens in her drawings, making it difficult to tell where photographic material ends and her own imagery begins. This confounding of elements, of course, continued apace in her installations. Instead of simply picking out the shapes of actually cast shadows she also began creating false shadows; instead of using reflections to create a sense of the wall being penetrated by forms she



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began to create the caves of lighted space already described and to use false perspective on the false shadows to create the illusion of forms penetrating the wall. Her new devices added contradictions of reality to already visually complex installations.

She Agreed to Dance, Reaching Out, She Arched, She Left Their Circle, His Shadow Fell Over Her, Our Relationship Changed As We Moved On, Flash Dance—most of Geoffrion's titles reveal her deep involvement with physical movement, and particularly dance movement, in her work. The frequent feminine focus of the titles is both generic—all women—and personal—herself. The abstract shapes in her drawings are so figure-like, with the “movements” of the “figures” so dramatically choreographed, you can readily imagine an entire dance on screen should they be transferred to film. *Flash Dance*, for instance is so believably real in its movement you have to remind yourself that you're not looking at figure drawings but at

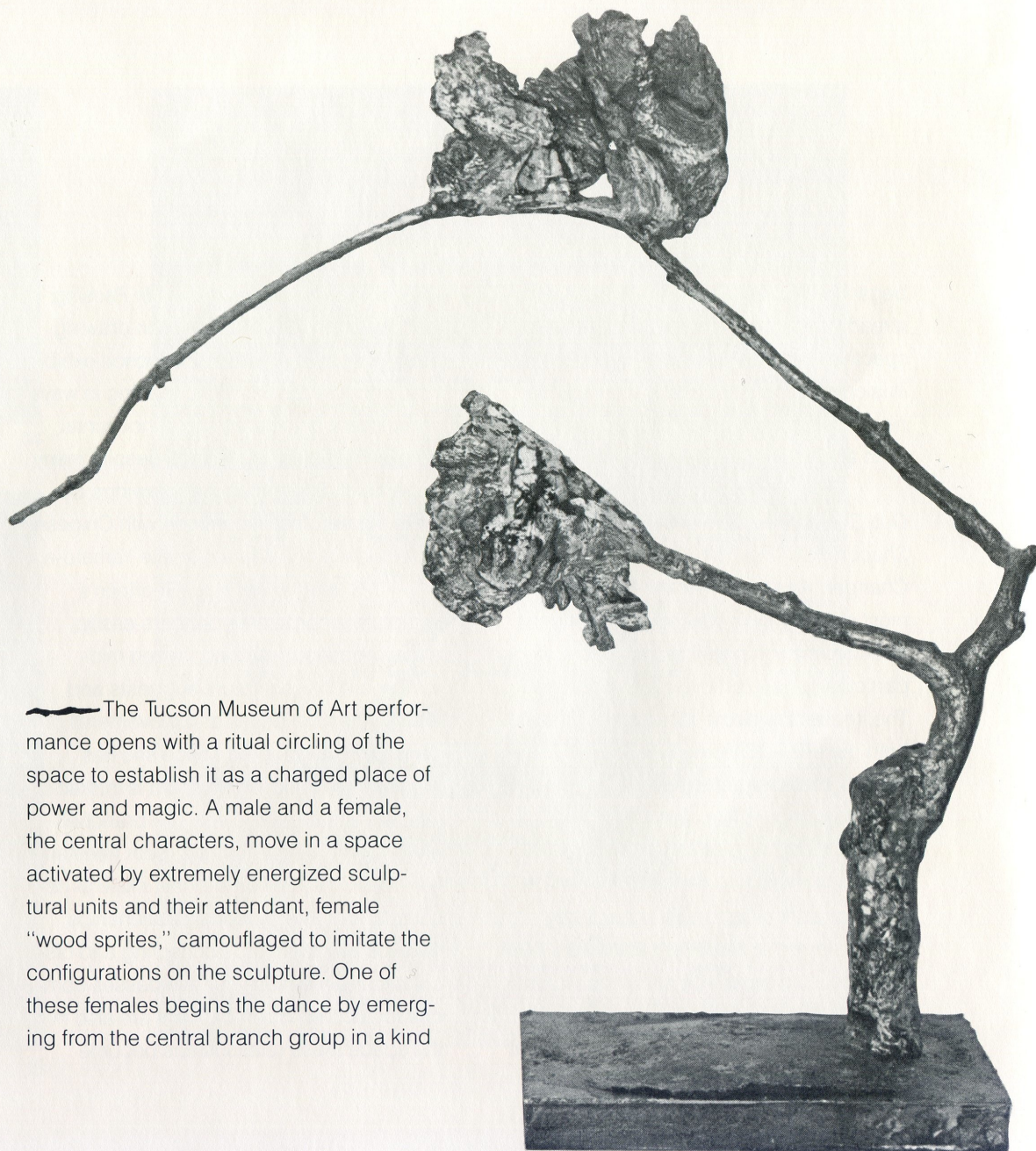
Moved Together, It Happened In Passing, and the enormous eight-section drawing *They Almost Touched*, in the Tucson exhibition, encourages this filmic reading in ways reminiscent of the unrolling of horizontal scrolls in Oriental art. In fact, despite many superficial differences, her drawings do have a great deal in common with Chinese screen paintings and Japanese Yamato-e.

Scaled to her size, Geoffrion's sculpture incorporates dancers easily; already posed, gesturing, frozen mid-movement, her sculpture suggests and encourages the poses and movements of dancers. The sculpted space she has created in the Tucson Museum is interactive, not a static stage set. The branches are both literal and abstract, both trees and not-trees. They are bare-bone, skeletal descriptions of interpersonal relationships and you pair them off, connecting and disconnecting them as your eye passes from one to another. When dancers are also in the space these relationships become

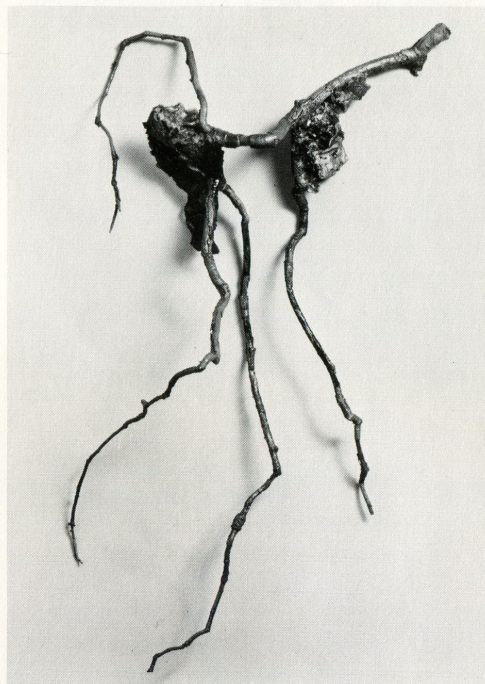
endlessly complex because they too are constantly changing. Connections the dancers establish become residual effects which you continue to see afterward when the space is unpeopled. When the dancers hesitate, stop and then start again, they momentarily *become* sculpture. Their painted costumes function then like camouflage, allowing them to blend into their surroundings. In the context of stasis, it is shocking when the dancers move again. As they run their bodies along the forms they pick up their energy and extend the life of the fixed, sculpted objects, giving utterance to their silent expression.

Even when physical penetration of Geoffrion's pieces is impossible, she always imagines—and hopes you can imagine—what it would feel like to be inside them. When she speaks about the red vinyl interior of *Cosmic Womb*, an early piece, she refers to the vinyl as sticky; a slightly later coffin-shaped piece lined with black fur was deliberately designed to in-

vite you to lie down inside it, even though you were bound to realize that its thin verticals couldn't actually support your weight. In the Tucson installation it is especially important to her that you feel you can enter the cave-like space in the right rear. The white of the wall is cool inside its confines, and when the dancers instinctively make cuddling motions there you sense that you too would be safe inside that mountain cave. It offers a place of refuge away from the intensely bright colors on the branch forms and the costumes, the profusion of colored shadows drawn on the floor and walls, and the warm heat of the very bright lighting. Since she moved to Arizona, Geoffrion's colors have acquired a heightened intensity. Despite these deliberate temperature variations, the white walls and floors seem meant to create the overall impression of white paper, as though her drawings materialized physically and then suddenly became animated.



— The Tucson Museum of Art performance opens with a ritual circling of the space to establish it as a charged place of power and magic. A male and a female, the central characters, move in a space activated by extremely energized sculptural units and their attendant, female "wood sprites," camouflaged to imitate the configurations on the sculpture. One of these females begins the dance by emerging from the central branch group in a kind



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of birth sequence which encapsulates (like an overture) what seems to be the main theme of the work as a whole—the bringing to life of inanimate matter. Embodying intense sexuality, she is born full-grown and full of reproductive potential. One of the women dancers, a kind of earth-mother figure, initially circles the space slowly, seeming as though she were fright-

ened by each branch complex. She trembles and cowers before them whereas the other female dancers make a variety of much more positive responses. One glides sensuously down a branch, another stays tightly connected to hers as if unwilling to let it go and the third uses the branches for protection, returning to hide in them after each encounter with the other dancers. At some point the male dancer moves slowly around the space placing a detached section of branch against each of the fixed units. The connections he makes seem to make forms come alive. He seems to symbolize potency. Increasingly, the dancers interact and gain confidence. They complete forms and create new shapes as they flow with curves, finish triangles, and parallel straight lines, however fleetingly. An almost centrifugal action seems to pull out from the central branch complex to activate all the peripheral ones. After the male dancer has circled the walls with his life-

giving branch unit the earthmother makes a second pass around the space. This time she no longer seems afraid. She doesn't shake and she is able to make contact with the other dancers. Ultimately the women all join upraised hands in a release of tension as though conducting energy from the branches through their bodies and out into the world.

This, at least, was my reading of the performance I saw.² Others may understand it differently, and you will probably be seeing quite something else again when sounds play more of a part in the collaboration and when the choreography has reached its definitive state. In a performance situation the viewer plays an even more important and active role in the completion of the work than is required by a single, static piece of art. Like all of Moira Geoffrion's work, this performance is open to multiple interpretations. Branches are portraits, trees are birds, walls are hollow

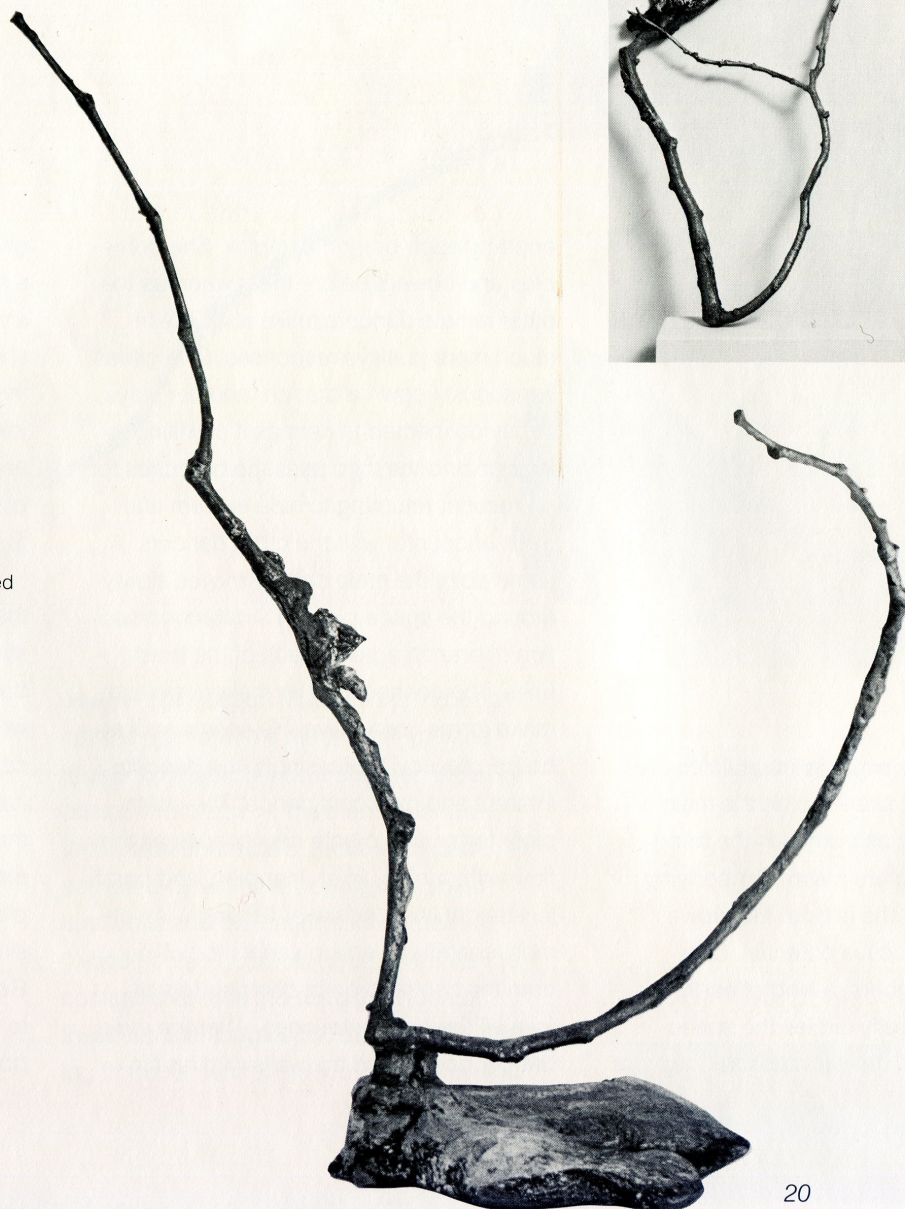
caves, logs are crouching animals. Wood may be bronze and bark isn't bark but a textured painting-drawing-collage. Real shadows are colored pink and yellow, while false shadows may be pencilled in gray. In fact, the enigma of her enchanted forest is that nothing is ever quite as it seems.

1. Hugh Maclean, editor, *Edmund Spenser's Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 8.
2. In July when I saw it the imagery had been finalized and the choreography blocked in, but the musical and poetic aspects of the performance were not yet set.

*Essay by April Kingsley,
New York Critic and Reviewer*



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LIST OF PLATES

1. *It Was the Time and the Place and They Moved Together*, 38" x 24" x 12" cast polychromed bronze, 1988
2. *Indefinitely Yours: The Future Never Came to Pass*, 18" x 24" pencil on paper, 1971
3. *She Arched*, 36" x 30" x 12", cast polyester resin, lacquered, 1972
4. detail of *From Within*, stitched leather, 1977
5. *Pyramidal Growth*, 72" x 36" x 30", wood, stitched leather, and quilted vinyl, 1976
6. *They Entered Each Other's Space*, 57" x 25" x 24", cast polychromed bronze, 1988
7. *Autumnal Dance*, 36" x 36" x 19", mixed media, 1984
8. *She Awoke in Her Dream*, 28" x 17" x 10", cast polychromed bronze, 1988
9. *They Danced and It Happened*, 30" x 22", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988
10. *It Was Her Time and Place*, 30" x 22", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988
11. *They Almost Touched*, (8 panels) total = 30" x 180" prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint and stick on Fabriano paper, 1988
12. *She Moved Freely*, 30" x 22", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988
13. *Never an Arabesque*, 30" x 11" x 10", wood, collage, oil paint, prismacolor pencil, 1988
16. 14, 15 = dancers in TMA installation *It Was Never Endless*, 1988
17. *Fly By Night*, 25" x 23" x 7", polychromed cast bronze, 1988
18. *Budding Twist*, 33" x 36" x 7", polychromed cast bronze, 1988
19. *Approach from Within*, 24" x 18" x 8", polychromed cast bronze, 1988
20. *When the Blue and Orange Sank into Her*, 37" x 19" x 9" polychromed cast bronze, 1988
21. *They Moved Together* (5 panels) Total = 30" x 113", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988
22. *First Fall Snow*, 24" x 36" x 8", cast polychromed bronze, 1988
23. *It Was at That Moment That Their Space Changed*, 30" x 67", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988 Loaned by Paul Folk
24. *He Returned and They Moved Freely*, 30" x 45", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, 1988
25. *His Shadow Fell Over Her*, 30" x 45", prismacolor pencil, collage, oil paint on Fabriano paper, Dec. 1987 Loaned by Paul Folk
26. *Gentle Awakening*, 22" x 10" x 4½", cast polychromed bronze, 1988
27. *It Was Never Endless*, 60"–144" x 324" x 348" Site specific sculptural space, mixed media, 1988