

## HIDDEN LIFE

*by John Beardsley*

Dalya Luttwak's work has taken a surprising and fruitful turn of late. She has begun to explore a hidden world: the underground life of plants. She has created a series of intriguing steel sculptures that express some of the extraordinary diversity found in the root systems of a wide range of species, translating their shapes into other materials, colors, and scales. There is a striking and seductive reciprocity in these sculptures: nature has presented the sculptor with an exceptional range of forms; she has returned the favor by opening a window into wondrous phenomena generally beyond our vision.

These botanically inspired sculptures are not entirely without precedent in Ms. Luttwak's work. She has long been engaged with metal, although the sculptures she produced immediately prior to these had a strongly geometric, almost architectural character. Nor is this the first time she has explored botanical form: in the early years of this decade, she produced some elegantly flower-shaped copper vessels and a number of leaf-shaped cup stands. But Ms. Luttwak has effected a pronounced change of scale in her recent work. Born in Israel and educated in art history at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, she went on to study metal art at Montgomery College in Maryland between 1976 and 1980. Much of her work to date has been jewelry, hollowware, or Judaica: Menorahs, Seder plates, Kiddush cups. These are beautifully crafted but mostly small scale, while her current sculptures range up to 15 feet in height and 23 feet in length.

Ms. Luttwak has also effected a significant change in method. While many of her earlier sculptures were made for display on pedestals and might be described as "siteless," these were made for a particular situation. One of the first of them was created for a group exhibition at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center called "Architecture/Sculpture," a juried exhibition in which sculptors were invited to make work that responded to the architectural character of the museum's outdoor exhibition space (and for which, in the interests of full disclosure, I should say I was the curator). Much of the rest of the series was made expressly for this solo exhibition, organized in the wake of the juried show, and continues the premise of her initial piece: invading a lifeless, subterranean, geometric space with sprawling, animated, organic shapes.

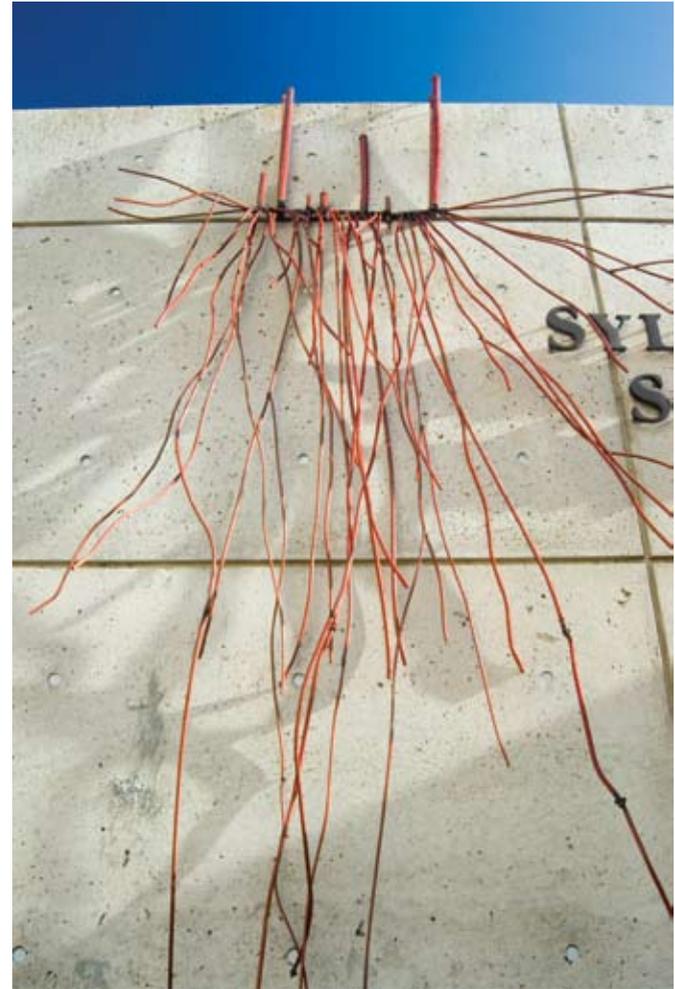
The transformation in Ms. Luttwak's work was inspired by the accidental effects of a tornado some years ago near her home outside of Washington. A large silver maple was ripped from the ground and flung on to her car, crushing it; the root ball was lifted from the ground and lay exposed to air and light. She recalls being captivated by the scale and complexity of the root system; "since then," she says, "I have been collecting roots, studying them, comparing them, looking at the differences among them, the differences between plants above ground and below ground." She has discovered that there is as much variety

in botanical form underground as above: there are taproots and diffuse roots; stilt roots and tuberous roots; structural roots and surface roots; aerating roots that rise above the ground or out of the water and even entirely aerial roots. Each plant, moreover, has characteristic rooting depths and root architecture.

At the same time, Ms. Luttwak is not bound to observed morphology: "this is sculpture, not botany," she insists. While individual sculptures are typically inspired by particular roots—asparagus, leeks, bamboo, basil, fir—she freely adapts the forms. This improvisatory spirit gives her the latitude to simplify at times—as in the case of the sculpture inspired by mangrove roots—and to exaggerate, attenuate, and elaborate at others, which is the more usual case. The rhizomatic character of bamboo is stretched out over 23 feet; the linear qualities of leek roots are rendered so delicately that the sculptures move in the breeze.

Ms. Luttwak has developed a fairly consistent method for the creation of these sculptures. She fabricates them out of steel of various thicknesses and diameters, which she forges, bends and arc-welds into position and then finishes with almost painterly surface treatments. The large horizontal sculpture inspired by bamboo, for instance, was left outside and allowed to rust all one winter; it was then painted with a white resin, with a colored patina applied on top of that. The result is an elaborate surface





that is richly textured and mottled in color. Groups of sculptures inspired by the same plant are often finished in different colors. The three pieces evocative of leeks, for example, are variously red, gold, and brown; these chromatic characteristics underscore their qualities as fine linear drawings in space.

While these sculptures were imagined for specific sites at Katzen, they are subject to final creative transformations in installation. Many of them feature hinges or joints so that their precise positions can be calibrated on site; one sculpture is slightly bent to fit along the base of the Katzen's curved exterior wall, another is turned sharply to fit inside an interior angle of the sunken courtyard. This permits the artist to play off the architecture to the greatest extent possible, making it seem as if her sculptures are opportunistically growing into the space.

For Ms. Luttwak, roots are a metaphor for unearthing a family history that includes multiple dislocations and elisions; they are also emblematic of unseen worlds. In the context of the American University Museum's sculpture space, however, they also have an uncanny quality evocative of some of the most compelling tropes of surrealism. In explaining his conception of convulsive beauty in the opening chapter of *L'Amour fou* (1937), the Surrealist artist and theorist André Breton wrote: "I regret not having been able to furnish, along with this text, the photograph

of a speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest." Breton had evidently once seen such a photograph; he found the image of a train overwhelmed by vegetation "particularly exalting," seeing it as a "monument to victory and to disaster."<sup>10</sup> Something of the same effect is achieved by the placement of Ms. Luttwak's root sculptures in the Katzen Arts Center's sculpture garden: they suggest what the place might look like one day when it is a ruin, invaded by plants and reclaimed as landscape. There is something at once melancholy and exalting about this: the sculptures are suggestive both of the transience of human achievement and of the stubborn, even indifferent, resilience of nature.

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John Beardsley is the Director of Garden and Landscape Studies at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C. He is also a senior lecturer in the Department of Landscape Architecture at The Harvard University Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, MA.

#### Endnotes

<sup>10</sup> André Breton, *L'Amour fou* (1937), translated by Mary Ann Caws and published as *Mad Love* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 10.