

## Leaves of mass

Considering her long interests in light and the environment, it is fitting that artist Ana MacArthur would come to a focus on photosynthesis. And since leaves are the "solar collectors" that plants use to manufacture sugars from sunlight, why not check out the largest? Her new installation, *Where Light Meets Water: Mamara on the Equator*—T12a, features a mold of a huge aquatic plant, the *Victoria amazonica*, known as the royal water lily or giant water lily. The installation is shown beginning Saturday, June 27, at the Santa Fe Art Institute as part of the LANDART project (landartnm.org)—a group of lectures, exhibitions, and site-specific artworks presented at various venues in New Mexico through December.

MacArthur first saw the South American plant in 1993 and was instantly fascinated by its design. "I had a father who was a naturalist, and he taught me at a very young age to press plants," she said in a recent interview. "So at 4, 5, 6, I was always engaged in this activity of pulling the dried plants out of the press and holding them up to the light."

Her perception of the giant water lily, which she calls "so exquisite," was also shaped by a lifelong interest in holography. The artist began researching and then experimenting with holograms just after college. In the 1980s, she was on staff at the Museum of Holography in New York and co-founded a holography lab in Colorado in 1988. "In my years of making art about and with light, it is most especially my time making holograms that has helped me think about what happens when sunlight encounters surfaces and thus organisms," she said.

The leaves of the *Victoria amazonica* are tremendous—they can be more than 7 feet across—but are not much thicker than the leaves of philodendrons. There is, however, a network of thick ribs on the underside that gives the leaves great structural strength. "Birds as big as storks can stand on them to hunt," MacArthur said. "I've seen pictures of humans standing on them. When the Indians were collecting things in the water, they used to set their babies on the leaves to keep the jacare [catmans] from eating them."

As she learned more about the water lily, she decided she would attempt to make a mold of one, in part to highlight issues having to do with the biodiversity of the Amazon region. "I had to make a lot of connections spontaneously, and I ended up with a great cubo [a member of the mixed-race people along the Amazon River] river guide, and he surprised me by diving into the water with a machete once he understood which lily pad I wanted. There are also piranhas and anacondas there, but he said you just keep your eyes open.

"You can not take any biological specimens out of Brazil at all. My belief is that you work respectfully.



Turning over a new leaf: artist Ana MacArthur on a floating dock on the Amazon River, 2008

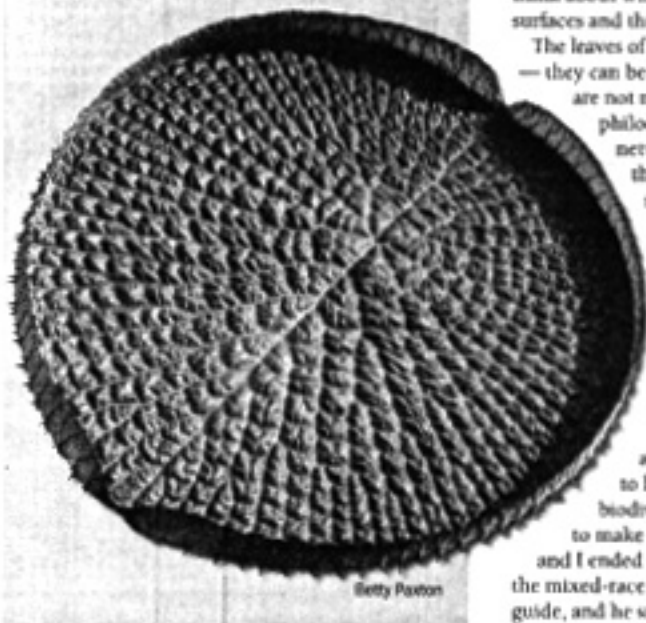
I was gratified to find out this plant has a large tuber buried in the river that sends up five or six shafts. When one of those leaves dies off, it sends up another one."

MacArthur said that the molding procedure was daunting, and not only because of having to improvise in the bush. The chosen leaf was huge and, once cut, it would begin to wilt. Both the stem and the ribs on the underside of the leaf are covered with 1-inch thorns, so there were many finger-pricks to endure. It was also hot and very humid, and there were biting insects.

The LANDART project pays tribute to and continues the work begun by pioneers in land art and earthworks in the 1960s and 1970s. Seminal pieces include *Star Axis* by Charles Ross and *The Lightening Field* by Walter De Maria, both in New Mexico; *Sun Tunnels* in Utah by Nancy Holt; and *Roslin Crater* in Arizona by James Turrell. Since that time, the field has been generalized into what is known today as "environmental art."

MacArthur's installation is shown along with a 15-foot scroll documenting two years of her work. Her response is fired by her concern over the destruction of the Amazon rain forest for cattle ranching and more recently for agrofuel. "They're clearing the exquisite, phenomenal, ancient belt of biodiversity that is unbelievably prolific and lush to grow beef for our fast-food chains and to do palm and soy plantations," she said. "I feel great respect for the country of Brazil, and I know there's a history of defensiveness about us telling them what to do, but we all have to try to do something. It is not a joke that this great Amazon rain forest is considered the lungs of the planet."

She sees her current work, which she calls "nature's veils," as an extension of an earlier series inspired by the veils worn by women in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where she lived as a young child. "The burqa is an ideal metaphor for light not being able to enter skin. We need sunlight for our health, and our two most important organs are the eyes and the



Betty Paxton

LANDART



Roberto Jürgen, MacArthur's river guide, with an Indian boy named Gustavo on the Amazon in 2008

skin. Some of the veil-use culture is gentle but some, like with the Taliban, is harsh," she said. "I found out they had put their women in completely dark rooms and if they took them in cars, the back seat was blackened out. My feeling is that a lot of these men were psychologically really messed up from the war with the Soviets and they had so much trauma and anger and they were taking it out on the women. Sunlight is nutrition, and for nature's veils I'm looking at what happens with sunlight on the skin of these different plant organisms."

MacArthur explained the title of her SFIAI installation. *Mumukshu* is the local Indian name for the royal water lily; the equator's inhabitants see equal amounts of sunlight all year long, and "T12a" is MacArthur's code for this phase of her Amazonia project.

"This is a big project with lots of layers to it," MacArthur said. "I kind of want to emphasize that, from spending time with people down there and finding out what their predicament is. One of the solutions to helping the Amazon is to help people figure out how to have sustainable ways of living. It does feel pressing to get people to seriously take in what is happening to the Amazon rain forest." ◀

#### details

- ▼ Ana MacArthur: *Where Light Meets Water: Mumukshu on the Equator* — T12a
- ▼ Opening reception 3-5 p.m., Saturday, June 27; continues 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Mondays-Fridays through July
- ▼ Santa Fe Art Institute, 1600 St. Michael's Drive
- ▼ No charge, 424-5050

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— artist Ana MacArthur on the giant  
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