





q/a

From the Smallest Scraps of Nothing:

A Conversation with Alice Momm

by Kay Whitney

Delight in the natural world permeates Alice Momm's work. Transitory and ephemeral, her creations often consist of things that she finds around New York City and works with on site or in her Harlem studio. Her unexpected juxtapositions, which offer a fresh lens to consider the interconnectedness of all things and the impact of human action on the environment, aim not only to spark curiosity, but also to catalyze discussion through beauty, metaphor, and the power of the handmade. Momm's painstaking and delicate fabrication processes involve minimal alteration to her original materials, often pieces of natural detritus.

Changes, when they are made, may involve stitching, weaving, cutting, carving, watercolor, or assemblage. Each intensely metaphorical object offers wonder, care, and humor through an engagement with the ragged beauty of picked-up things.

Much of Momm's practice revolves around daily exploratory walks around Central Park, where she engages in sculptural interventions and quiet activism. She is currently working on an artist's book stemming from her immersion in the park and is collaborating with Alison Cook Beatty Dance on works to be performed outdoors in New York City in the spring of 2023.

OPPOSITE:
Séance,
2020.
Cardboard and gouache,
66 x 60 x 1 in.

Kay Whitney: There were hundreds of objects on display in your exhibition “The Gleaner’s Song” (2020), at the New York City Parks headquarters in Central Park. Most were small in scale—photographs, objects made of leaves, pieces of wood, seed pods—but there were also large woven structures consisting of twigs, branches, and manmade scraps. What was this show about, and could you discuss some of the works? Several pieces, including *Séance* (2020), wall drawings made with catalpa pods, and long, somewhat colorful weavings, particularly caught my attention.



Alice Momm: The exhibition, which opened just a day or so before the city shut down because of the pandemic, was really my love song to urban parks, and to Central Park in particular. Parks have always been my refuge, and they have made it possible for me to live in this city. All of my works begin with a walk. Then, I take the impressions and materials gleaned from the park walk back to my studio where the conversations continue.

The weavings grew out of many years of experiments, starting with kudzu—an invasive species that has taken over vast swaths of the south. *The Exiled Queen of Kudzu* (2012) was made during a residency at the Hambidge Center in Georgia, *POD: Peas be Seeded* (Flux Art Fair, Harlem, 2016) came next, and then *Mountains for a Moment* and *Migrations* (K-Lab Land Art Biennale, Kjerringøy, Norway, 2018).

Séance, which looks like a display of thin cross-sections cut from the trunk of a tree, is made from scrap sheets of cardboard that I painted with gouache, one circle circling another until I hit the edge of the sheet—at which point, I would cut and complete the tree ring. While I was making it, I was channeling the cardboard and conjuring it back into its original form as tree. In some sense, it engaged my urge to repair while also recognizing the futility of such a correction. Yes, there is the illusion of tree rings, but the corrugation and the traces of box folds bring you back to its tangible materiality. Pairing the tree rings with painted bird heads expanded the inhabitants called into my *séance*.

There are several catalpa trees in Central Park—in the fall, the ground around them is covered with their long, dark pods, and I usually gather a few at a time on my walks. I love how calligraphic they are, and in *Tree Memory II* (2020), for instance, I used the shorthand of the pods as brushstrokes to bring memories of walking among the trees onto the gallery walls.

KW: Walking through the park two days after Hurricane Isaias blasted through in 2020, there were fallen trees, downed limbs, and scattered branches everywhere.

AM: There were a lot of trees down from that storm; there was a cut-up stump with yellow caution tape tied around it that looked like an artwork to me—the caution tape is a symbol of how we keep trying



THIS PAGE:
Trace: What Follows, 2011.
Site-specific installation with used kiln bricks outlining the longest shadow cast by a dead tree, and new replacement sapling, 20 x 20 x 65 ft.

OPPOSITE:
Horse & Rider, 2020.
Sticks, reeds, cardboard, yarn, fabric, and bark, 18 x 24.5 x 15 in.



“ The work is a poetic response—if it lasts, that’s a bonus, but I am very good at letting go. Most of my materials are met beyond their initial function and are already in the process of entropy. ”



THIS PAGE:

POD (*Peas Be Seeded*), 2016.

Peas and plants grown in salvaged-branch living sculpture, 10 ft. high x 12 ft. diameter.

OPPOSITE:

Tree Memory II, 2020.

Catalpa pod wall drawing, installation view.



THIS PAGE: NICHAMA WINSTON / OPPOSITE: DANIEL AVILAN NYC PARKS

and failing to keep nature curtailed and controlled. There's a pine that I'm especially attached to next to the knocked-over tree; I've used its fallen needles for little pine-needle sculptures.

Walking in the park slows me down. I've gotten to know its non-human inhabitants and seasons in a very intimate way—every immersion offers possibilities for wonder and surprise. The park is the closest I get to wilderness in the city. This is what wilderness is for urban dwellers—it's approximately wild. There are little basins in the dirt that look like Minimalist earthworks, which are the remnants left by sparrows rolling and splashing in their dirt baths to rid themselves of mites. The Ramble, with its big trees, underbrush, and little winding dirt paths, is not groomed like the rest of the park. When it's hot everywhere else, it's always cool there, and peaceful—though for a woman walking alone, it can also be edged with danger, which seems just about right for approximately wild.

About two years before the Central Park show, I started to keep a visual diary of my park walks on Instagram. I've seen rainbows birthed from sprinklers, leaves woven through fences, the sensual curve of a twisting root, pine needles in snowballs. The world I see is animate; there are faces in fence posts, a phantom caress in the shadow of a tree branch draped over a neighboring tree, and the monk-like forms of cypress tree stumps watching over the Harlem Meer. These incidental sculptures and fleeting moments, captured in photographs, spark the dialogues I have with my works. They also tell the stories of my ongoing engagement with the park.

KW: When you're walking in Central Park, do you think about environmental concerns?

AM: Yes, all the time. The year before "The Gleaner's Song," we had only one dusting of snow, and the trees were blossoming earlier. The insect population is in steep decline. It is all connected. The effects of climate change can be felt all around us and, of course, on a global scale. I suppose in the grand scheme, one of the comforting things when thinking about a post-Anthropocene world—when humans are no longer the dominant force in earth's ecology—is that we are just a blip in time. It's exhausting to fight, but I am compelled to respond with love and a sliver of hope for adaptation.



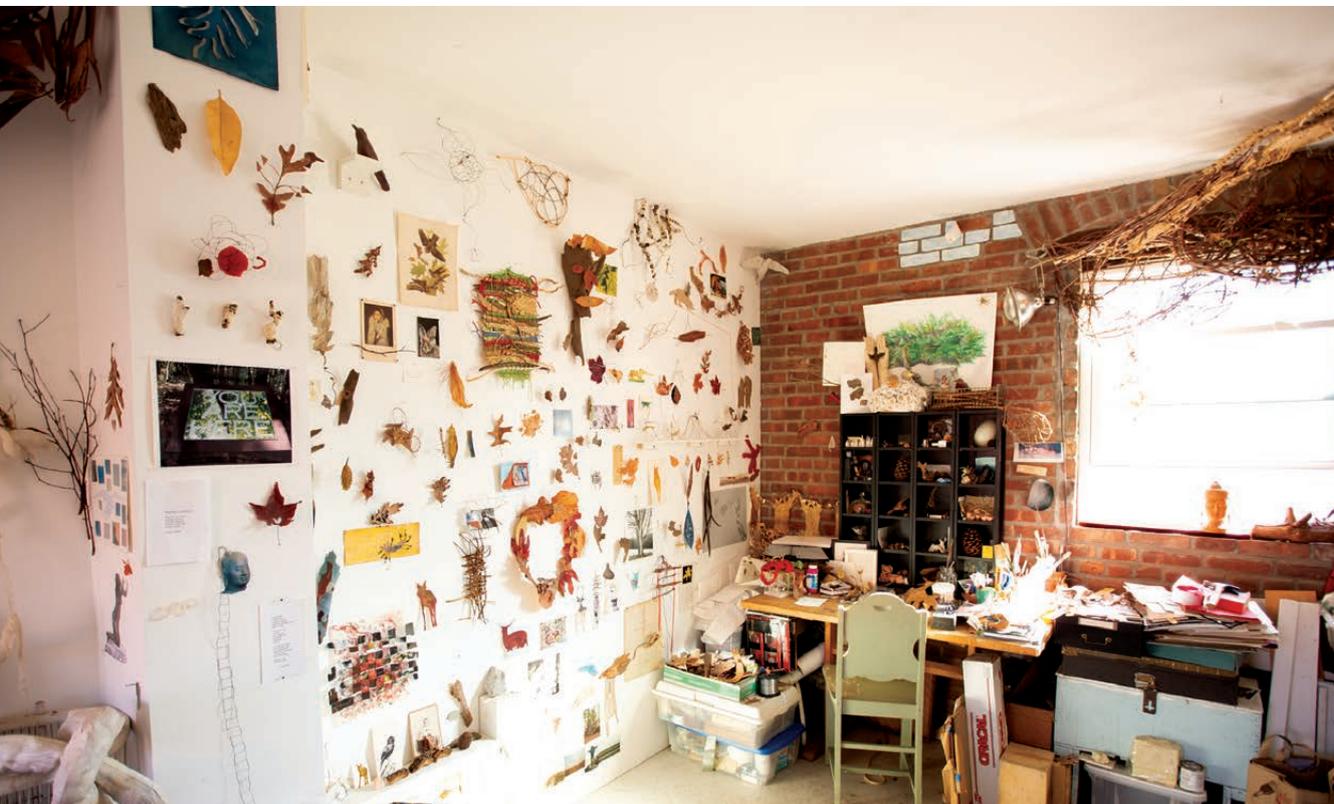
KW: You work within a carefully delineated set of rules regarding materials and how you use them. Many of your decisions define how you work and how you want your work to function in the world. Does it concern you that your work is transitory?

AM: I had the most awesome experience at the K-Lab Land Art Biennale in Norway, sitting high above the Arctic Circle and working in a damp patch of moss and stone, surrounded by fjords and mountains marked by glacial time. I marked my presence there by weaving dried stalks of a grass that I could not name into a sketch of the mountains I saw all around me, knowing my piece would be gone with the next strong wind or heavy rain. My ephemeral response was appropriate to the piece; it was never meant to be permanent, just as my encounter there was fleeting. When I came back to New York from that adventure, I had a personal reckoning, thinking about the carbon footprint I left to get there. I looked around at my cluttered studio and decided, "No new art materials." I had enough stuff to keep me busy for years to come. I have pretty much kept that promise for the last two years, except for printing photos and one or two other items needed for an exhibition, otherwise most things that I've sourced have been recycled.

What I really want to do is make fragile pieces from the smallest scraps of nothing. The weavings I've done recently incorporate natural materials picked up from walks, yarn and basket weaving supplies, scraps of paper, and coffee cup holders (I feel badly about even having them). I made looms from old pieces of foam core. While my other pieces were created purely

from gleaned natural materials, the weavings more accurately reflect my urban existence, where nothing is pure and one accumulates material glut just walking down the street. So, in a way, they are portraits of my life in the city.

For the longest time, I have been interested in looking at what's forgotten, in resurrecting stories from extinction and honoring the small and unnoticed. The work is a poetic response—if it lasts, that's a bonus, but I am very good at letting go. Most of my materials are met beyond their initial function and are already in the process of entropy. My engagement with them comes from searching out possibilities for conversations with respect for their beingness—their inherent logic and beauty. I love it in the park, but if you told me the only materials I could use for my works would be picked-up things from one city block, it would probably be just fine—look carefully, and you will be surprised at what is available.



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OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:

**The Exiled Queen
of Kudzu:
I Wear My Struggles
(Dress Wins),
2012.**

Still from performance
with kudzu vines.

Alice Momm's studio,
2020.

THIS PAGE:

**Walking Leaf Boat,
2017.**

Mounted photograph
depicting sculpture made
of two leaves and
pine needles (in situ),
11 x 18 in.

KW: Do you consider yourself an activist? How do you think of your work functioning in the world?

AM: Yes, but perhaps a quiet activist. I feel an ever-increasing sense of responsibility and urgency to use my creative voice and vision to effect change. The scale may not be huge or permanent, but, for me, it is important to help others see the possibilities of finding joy and glimmers of hope in this wonderful, terrible world in which we live.

KW: I feel that the viewer is important to you—that your work is an invitation to collaborate in a particular kind of experience. You bring a directness and clarity to the work that makes it exist without cynicism, makes it coherent and approachable on a

number of levels. There are many points of entry.

AM: I see what I do as a way to invite people to notice the big and small beings living their lives all around us, whether it is pollinators in flowers, sparrows eating Cheetos, ferns unfurling from cracks in walls, trees that move sidewalks, or clouds that mimic mountains. I'm asking viewers to share my amazement and wonder at the world we share. Because I'm taking some of that natural world out of its context, they can see its details more clearly, and because I often use humor, I hope the possibilities for dialogue, wonder, or contemplation are more easily accessed.

A few years ago, I created a piece called *POD: Peas be Seeded* in a Harlem Grown urban farm a few blocks from my home: it was my offering of a living resting

place for the children and neighbors working there. *POD* was woven from gleaned branches and old vines and seeded throughout with peas and plants. I considered it done when someone could sit in the pod and happily eat a pea.

There is a bit more to say about activism in this context. I left for my last residency in I-Park in November 2016 intending to gather fall leaves to weave into a floating leaf carpet, but when I arrived, I found that most of the woods had been decimated by a gypsy moth invasion. The trees were barren, and those leaves that I found were small, brown, and pocked with holes. I began to gather the broken leaves and started filling in the holes with other more colorful leaves in a symbolic gesture of repair.

On November 8, 2016, the results of the U.S. election came in and were so traumatic that for days I could not understand how to make art with the

urgency needed to counteract this new political climate and the devastating impact it would have on our world. For a while, it stopped me in my tracks and I couldn't continue working. Instead, I wrote a poem to my repaired leaf, asking: Is metaphor enough? In 2019, I returned for a short visit to I-Park and saw the resiliency of the trees; some had perished, but many remained, and they continue to weather the insect invasion, just as we've weathered the erosion of democracy in our country. I counter the hate with compassion and beauty. I think that what I need most, and what I wish for everyone, is that resiliency. We still need it—resiliency and the ability to find beauty and joy even in challenging times. ■■■



THIS PAGE: ALICE MOMM / OPPOSITE: DANIEL AVILA/ NYC PARKS



OPPOSITE:
***Mountains for
a Moment,***
2018.

Woven grass
on mossy rock with
distant mountains,
32 x 8 x 4 ft.

THIS PAGE:
***Weaving It
All Together
(Studio Scraps),***
2018–20.

Natural and
manmade materials,
64 x 60 x 20 in.