



SYBASE, INC. PRESENTS

# Nature Speaks

Environmental Installations

by Deborah Kennedy

September 25, 1999–December 10, 1999

January 4, 2000–March 19, 2000

de Saisset Museum  
Santa Clara University  
Santa Clara, California





Above and right page: sculptural elements from the installation *EarthWise*.  
Below right: The artist with her work.

## Curator's Message

The de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University is delighted to present *Nature Speaks: Environmental Installations* by Deborah Kennedy, sponsored by Sybase, Inc. The exhibition not only showcases the vision of Kennedy, an experienced artist and environmental advocate, but also speaks to deeper issues and values held by faculty and staff at Santa Clara University. As the art and history museum for SCU, a Jesuit University, we share the University's goal of providing the opportunity for students to make connections among different aspects of their educational experience and to relate what they learn to how they live. We strive to help mold individuals with conscience, competence, and compassion, but how exactly might this be accomplished? The *Nature Speaks* exhibition provides a case-in-point; a model for how educational goals might be accomplished through an exhibition of contemporary art.

The topic of environmental ethics looms large in Kennedy's mind, and she was able to convey her understanding of the urgency of the environmental crisis by organizing and teaching an undergraduate course at SCU. *Environmental Art: Theory and Practice* was sponsored by the Environmental Studies Program, as well as the Department of Art and Art History. The course's objective, among other things, was to lend students an understanding of the core concepts in the areas of sustainable development and industrial ecology. This understanding would be expressed via a conceptually-based installation created in collaboration with Kennedy. The 11 students who enrolled in this spring 1999 course—none of whom is an art major—created *Close the Loop*, an installation focusing on paper use at Santa Clara University. The central image is a river of paper flowing through the University. Students employed a 12-foot model of the infinity symbol to indicate that finite resources may be used infinitely if we recycle. The symbol was purposefully made incomplete, with a gap symbolizing our need to close the loop by both recycling and buying products containing recycled materials. The experience of working on this installation has no doubt shaped the viewpoints of the student artists, thereby enabling them to draw connections between environmental concepts and how artists might respond to such issues. It is our hope that the public, upon viewing the *Nature Speaks* exhibition in its entirety, will reflect upon our fragile environment and the role we all play in determining whether or not it thrives.

JoAnne S. Northrup  
Curator, Exhibits and Collections

## Deborah Kennedy: *Nature Speaks*

Say the phrase "world wide web" today, and an image of information traveling on connections among computer comes to mind: an intricate fabric of text and image instantaneously rewoven from one moment to the next. But no matter how complex and significant the pattern of this structure, it only mimics the net that cradles us and the entire universe: the web of life. Understanding the interconnectedness of the elements of this web is the ardent focus of Deborah Kennedy's installations in the exhibition, *Nature Speaks*, at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University.

An accomplished and thoughtful artist, Kennedy combines two traditions in this exhibit: object-oriented and socially-engaged art. The aesthetically powerful and finely crafted elements in her installations encourage us to look at nature differently. Her intent is not only to entice us, but also to spur us to act differently in our relationship with nature. By including educational components, community participation, collaboration, and interactive features in the installations, her art builds new audiences to encourage social change.

As she comments, "My artwork begins with questions. In this case: Can we create a new vision of our relationship with nature? Can we begin to understand the complexities of the web of life? I try to bring these questions to life in my installations. I want my art to be at the growing edge where we are struggling to create new visions to help solve our problems."

*Nature Speaks* features two installations. The first, *EarthWise*, is a landscape—a small grove of metallic trees stand in a field both strewn with boulders from which human faces emerge and scattered with stones in the shape of human hearts. Kennedy says, "This work is about imagining a more thoughtful relationship between people and nature. Today, we seem to feel ourselves above and apart from nature, but, of course, we are knit more tightly into the fabric of nature than we can imagine. Whatever we do to the environment, we are doing to ourselves. If we deeply understand this, caring for the environment will not be a chore, it will flow naturally from our experience, like caring for our own bodies."

*Project Nexus*, the second installation, offers an alluring and engaging encounter with environmental complexity. The interactive installation gleams with reflected light, vibrates with musical components, and includes text and moveable elements. The structure of the installation illustrates and draws us into the complexity and interrelatedness of the "web of life." Lighting, sound, and a wall of suspended leaves add to the installation.

Kennedy suggests, "If we are to create a healthy future for ourselves and the biosphere, our science, technology, and society must be informed by systems theory, which emphasizes that everything is connected, interdependent, and moves in cycles." Kennedy invites us to envision the changes that could result from applying this method of thinking to private, public, and industrial decision making. She states, "I want this exhibit to address the fundamental environmental problem: the way we think. If we change the way we think, we can begin to change the way we act."

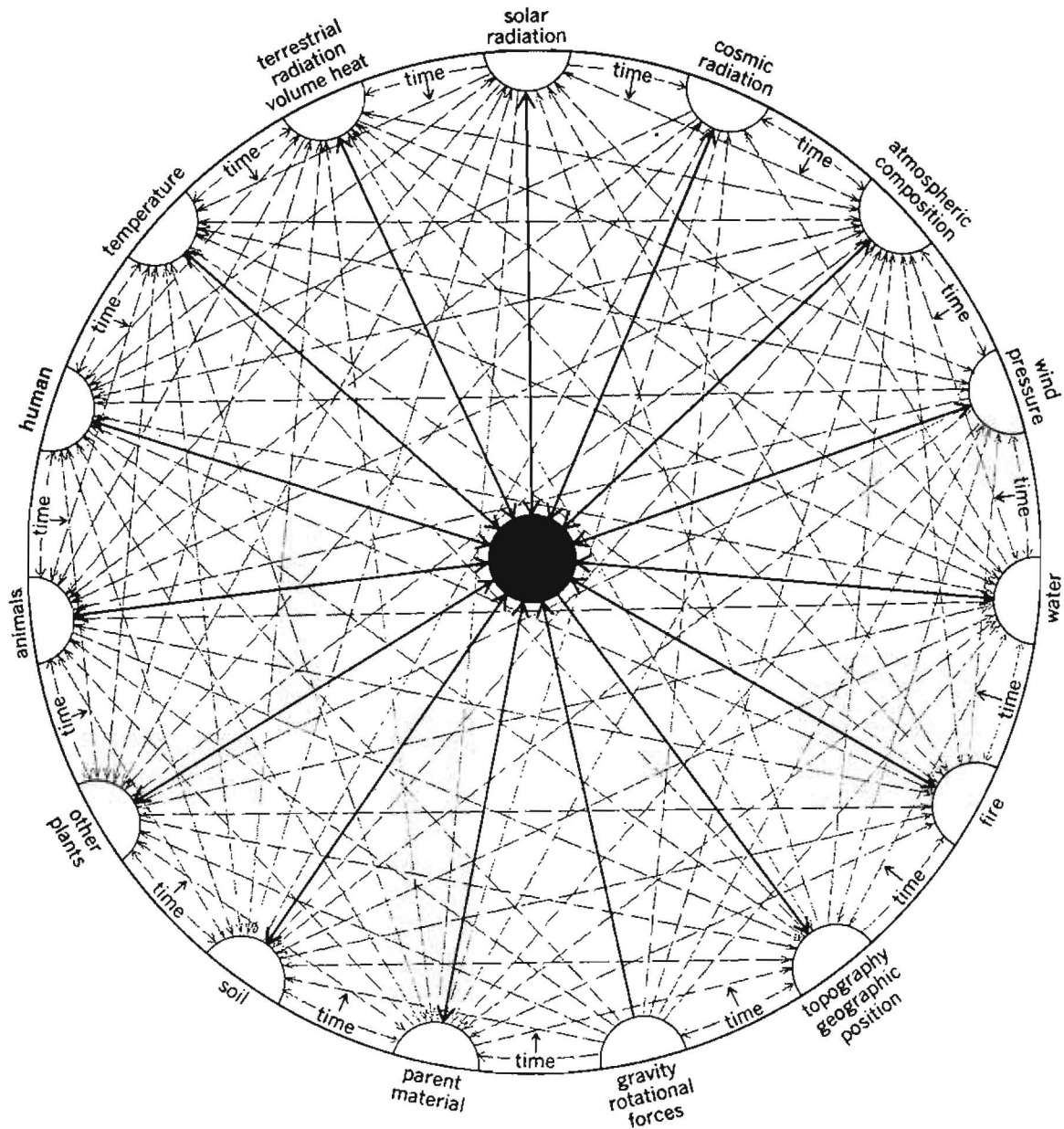
Kennedy identifies two artists who have influenced her work; Joseph Beuys, whose linking of environmental and social issues she admires, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose work inspires others to mine the hidden or ignored detail of life.

Inspired by these artists' approaches, Kennedy has created a socially-engaged body of art. This art addresses environmental and social issues, reveals our attitudes about them, and encourages the development of new web-of-life conscious attitudes. Art can once again serve to deepen our spirits and to create a sense of resonant values that can sustain us for the future.

Jo Hanson  
Environmental Artist and Writer







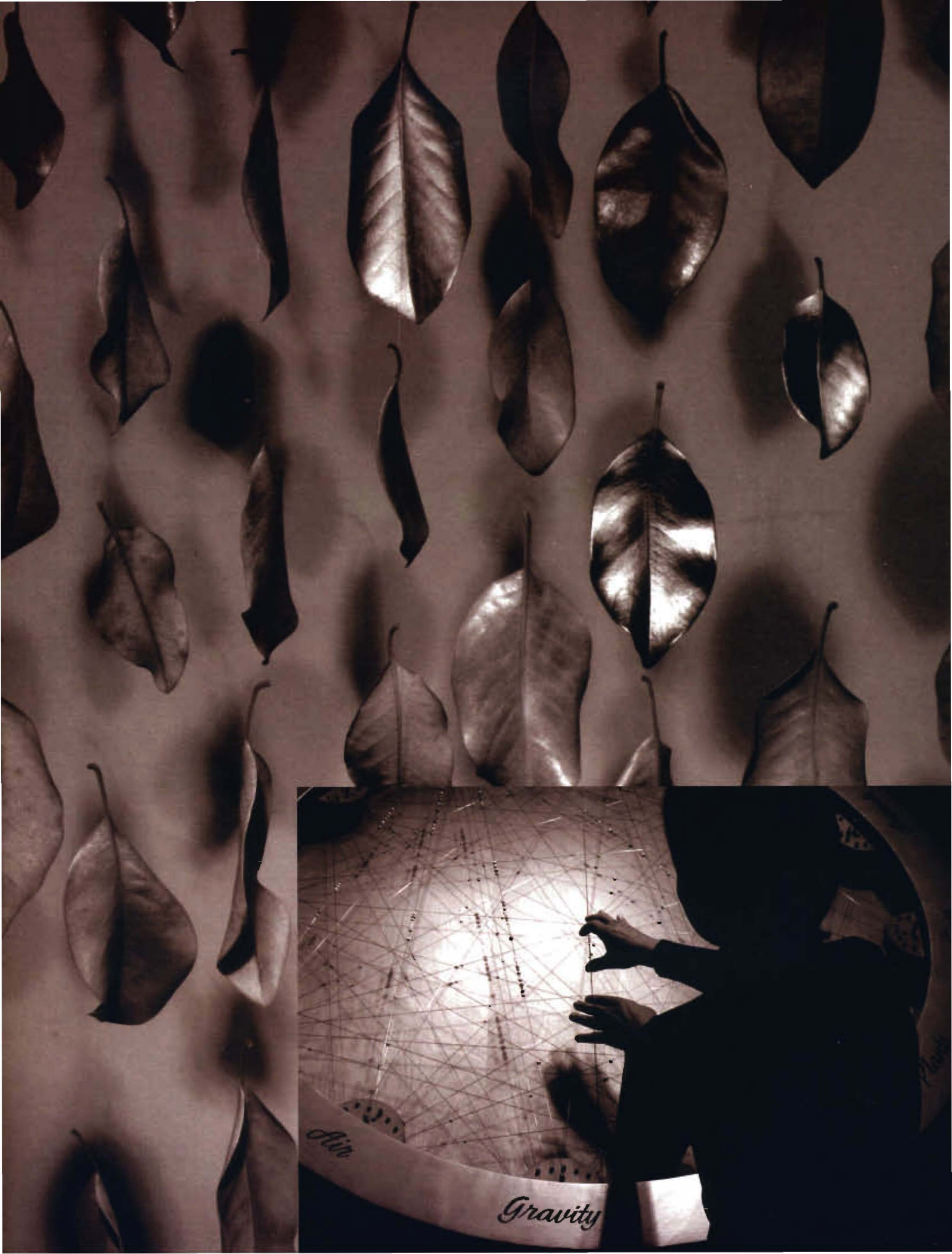
## Project Nexus

*No problem can be solved by the consciousness that created it.* A. Einstein

Deborah Kennedy's installation *Project Nexus* was inspired by the scientific illustration shown above. This image is called "the yarnball theory of environmental complexity" and was developed by a professor of botany at Duke University, Dr. W. D. Billings. He was one of the earliest life sciences researchers to apply systems theory to analyzing a living botanical environment. In this drawing, all the forces and substances affecting the life cycle of a plant are positioned on the edge of the circle. Lines between these forces and substances show their inter-relationships, and the plant is indicated by the circle at the center of the diagram. This illustration helps the viewer visualize the complex set of relationships at work in most environmental settings.

Kennedy explains that this illustration is not only a graceful representation of the web of life, but it can also help us to fully imagine some important truths about the living environment. One can see how humans are linked as equal partners in the web of life and share the high degree of complexity, interdependence, and cooperation at work in natural systems. For the artist, this drawing makes accessible part of the new consciousness needed to solve our current environmental problems.

Above and right page: elements from the installation *Project Nexus*.  
Inset: Musician plays "The Ring of Life."







## Recent Work

First row

***Killing Comfort***, 10/98, Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA 20' x 10', Mixed Media: photos of guns, bed, sheets, bullets, light, sound

This installation is a response to the following question: How have guns and violence become so embedded in the fabric of American life? *Killing Comfort* features a large quilt of black and white photographs of handguns from our local community confiscated by the Santa Clara Police Department. The handguns are photographed on calico backgrounds, printed on transparent plastic material, and pieced together in a traditional quilt pattern.

Quilts, a uniquely American art form, evoke the realm of family life filled with caring, comfort, and protection. Guns, despite their potential for destruction, are also seen by many as a source of protection and safety. This quilt of guns explores the uneasy and paradoxical relationship between violence and security in American life.

Sound performance: Gunshot sounds randomly occurring at the rate of gun fatalities in the United States.

Second row

***EcoTech***, 3/97, Champion Light Rail Station, Valley Transportation Authority, San Jose, CA, 44' x 6' x 5', Mixed Media: metamorphosed diabase stone, stainless steel, rose quartz, bronze

I created *EcoTech* as a public art commission. Installed in the entry way of the Champion Light Rail Station in San Jose, this piece consists of a large boulder cut into four one-foot thick slabs. The densely patterned slabs are positioned on either side of the entry walkways. Text, symbolic images, and stone inlays related to the theme of sustainable technology, solar energy, and systems theory enrich the polished surfaces of the boulder sections. A large bronze casting of the top section of one of the boulder slabs is mounted on the bottom half of the same slab. This technically demanding melding of metallurgy and rock evokes the overall theme of the piece: creating a bio-compatible technology.

Third row

***With These Hands***, 7/94, Frederick Spratt Gallery, San Jose, CA, 12' x 14' x 10', Mixed Media: alternative photo, 8,000 slices of bread, wire, colored light, nails

For *With These Hands*, I asked prisoners at Elmwood Correctional Facility to allow me to photograph their hands and faces. I also asked: "What would you like to say to people on the outside?" *With These Hands* transports images and words of these inmates across physical and psychological barriers to the community outside the prison.

Fourth row

***The Writing on the Wall***, 4/89, Supported by Museum Haus am Checkpoint Charlie, 30' x 13', Mixed Media

In this artwork, I asked ordinary people in West Berlin, East Berlin, and the United States to write down their hopes and fears. I then inscribed 112 metal plaques with these statements and mounted them on the Wall. The inner thoughts and feelings of people from all of Berlin and from both sides of the Atlantic communicated together on the Wall, itself a potent emblem of both hope and fear, East and West. This allowed viewers of the artwork to see both the similarities and differences in the concerns of ordinary people who normally have no public forum.

## Artist's Statement

My installations begin with questions: What are the core values of democracy, and how can we revitalize them? What are the barriers dividing people, and how can they be bridged? Can technology and the environment exist in balance? Questions addressing social and psychological and environmental themes are the starting points for my installations in galleries and public spaces. These questions matter to me, and my artwork is my small way to contribute to our understanding and response to these social dilemmas.

My work is characterized by a research-based creative process, an interest in community relationships, and a search for solutions to social and environmental dilemmas. My artwork invites contemplation, dialogue, and action.





Detail Project Nexus Installation

## Deborah Kennedy

### Biography

Deborah Kennedy, M.F.A., was born in Connecticut in 1953 and has exhibited in both California and Germany in numerous solo and group shows. She was awarded a three-year California Arts Council grant to work with at-risk youth on graffiti murals and has completed a public art commission—*EcoTech*—on the light rail line in San Jose. Recently, she received an Artist's Fellowship for Installation Arts from the Arts Council Silicon Valley. Currently, she maintains a studio in her home and teaches in college and university settings.

### Solo Exhibitions and Installations

- 9/99 Nature Speaks, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA
- 10/98 Killing Comfort, Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA
- 9/95 Licensed Targets, Folsom Street Interchange, San Francisco, CA
- 6/95 Artists Respond to Proposition 187, Center for Latino Arts, San Jose, CA
- 7/94 With These Hands, Frederick Spratt Gallery, San Jose, CA
- 6/90 Secrets/Geheimnis, Walter Bischoff Gallery, Stuttgart, West Germany
- 5/90 Brought to the Light, San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA
- 4/89 Schrift an der Mauer, Berlin Wall, East Germany, Supported by Museum Haus am Checkpoint Charlie
- 3/86 Liberation, San Jose State University Gallery, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA

### Public Art Commissions

- 3/97 EcoTech, Champion Light Rail Station, Valley Transportation Authority, San Jose, CA
- 3/97 The Power of Light, Champion Light Rail Station, Valley Transportation Authority, San Jose, CA

### Selected Bibliography

- "Recent Projects," *Public Art Review*, St. Paul, MN, Fall/Winter 1997, page 38.
- Alan Hess, "Light rail station is a champion," *San Jose Mercury News*, San Jose, CA, 4/20/97, pages 1 and 3F.
- Susanne Altmann, "Von Tal zu Tal," *fama*, Stuttgart, Germany, 5/1/95, pages 40 and 41.

- Chiori Santiago, "Exhibit of Outrage," *San Jose Mercury News*, San Jose, CA, 4/29/95, pages 10E and 12E.
- Maya Suryaraman, "'Taggers' paint rosy future: Artist helps teens color their graffiti with dreams," *San Jose Mercury News*, San Jose, CA, 7/29/91, pages 1 and 12A.
- Herman Waldenburg, *The Berlin Wall*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1990, page 104–105.
- Alfred Jan, "Healing Words," *Artweek*, San Jose, CA, 6/21/1990, pages 19–20.
- Dorothy Burkhart, "The Writing on the Wall," *San Jose Mercury News*, San Jose, CA, 12/10/1989, pages 18–19, 28–29, Arts and Books.
- Reuter, "Frau Kennedy an der Mauer," *AZ politik*, West Berlin, West Germany, 4/17/89, page 2.

### Professional Experiences and Honors

- 1997 Artist's Fellowship for Installation Arts, Arts Council Silicon Valley, San Jose, CA
- 6/97 Lecture: "EcoTech and Conservation," Change Agents '97: A Public Art Preconference, Americans for the Arts Annual Convention, Minneapolis, MN
- 9/94–97 Design Team and Public Artist, Tasman Light Rail Corridor, Santa Clara Transportation Agency, San Jose, CA
- 8/93 Adviser, Art in Public Places Advisory Panel, San Jose, CA
- 6/90 Artist-in-Residence, Walter Bischoff Gallery, Stuttgart, West Germany

### Collections

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- David O'Mara
- Karen and Robert Milnes
- Fawn Powers
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