

Sculpture in the great beyond

Abington Art Center's woodland hosts vast treasures.

By Edith Newhall

For The Inquirer

Built entirely from stones, leaves and logs, Brandon Ballangée's sculpture, "Small Universe: A Micro-habitat for Plethodontid Salamanders," will be a place of safety for small animals. The green expanse at the bottom of the Abington Art Center's dramatically sweeping lawn might seem the site of choice for outdoor sculptures, but not all sculptures call for maximum visibility.

Moreover, the artists who are invited to participate in the center's Sculpture Park exhibitions seem to be increasingly drawn to what's beyond the grass: a surprisingly sizeable, untouched woodland with winding paths. The light is dappled and mysterious; the quiet, broken only by birds and crickets, is profound. Who can resist?

None of the artists in "Inside/Outside: Habitat," apparently, whose outdoor works constitute the Abington Art Center's new season of Sculpture Park installations. All seven found themselves various locations in the wilderness, joining the works of such earlier woodland pioneers as Winifred Lutz (*A Reclamation Garden*, 1992-present) and Steven Siegel (*Scale*, 2002).

The only work to occupy the lawn - and it does that only peripherally - is Knox Cummin's *Habitation Suite: Cabin van Gogh, Bird Bridge, Shelter*. During a Woodland Residency of several months at the center (funded by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission), Cummin conceived a three-element sculpture linking his site's possible inhabitants - European colonists, wildlife and Native Americans.

The result is a life-size, cleverly constructed wood cabin at the lawn's edge whose cartoony exaggerated perspectives recall van Gogh's paintings of interiors; two red bridgelike structures leading into the undergrowth (bridges for birds only, as you'll see), and a simple shelter in the woods woven from bark and branches. It's a charming piece, full of whimsy and affection, but I'm still puzzling over the van Gogh reference.

Farther into the woods, a group of red birdhouses on poles emit gentle music. These aren't just any birdhouses, of course; they're Elizabeth Demaray's and James Walsh's *Listening Stations for Birds*, to which the birds presumably gravitate for snacks (there is birdfood in them) and entertainment after crossing Cummin's bridges. The music was composed specifically for the birds, whose songs, after all, may have inspired humans to create music in the first place. Lovely.

Nearby, I came across my personal favorite, Simon Draper's *Private Reserve*, a structure that's the size and shape of an outhouse or a shower stall, but that looks like a chapel inside (it also has a built-in bench to sit on to look at one of Draper's own paintings). It's made entirely from recycled materials, too, which made me like it even more.

Across the way from Draper's meditative space, Austin Thomas' *Patio Perched*, a group of carved, Corian-topped wooden-legged stools, offers another, more communal kind of rest. The kids will like these.

Need a drink? Anne-Katrin Spiess is serving stress-relieving herbal concoctions in a retrofitted readymade greenhouse. Actually, she's not there - it's an honor system. You can help yourself to samples of various calming infusions from large, upside-down glass bottles with spigots (the kids will like these, too, but they do in fact have an alcohol content of 5 percent, so be watchful). The herbs themselves are in *G.R.E.E.N.H.O.U.S.E* too, being watered by clear plastic tubes carrying rainwater collected on the greenhouse's roof.

The most awesome work of these new sculptures, and the one that relates most directly to its site, is Brandon Ballangée's *Small Universe: A Micro-habitat for Plethodontid Salamanders*. This towering, impenetrable, nestlike sculpture was built entirely from wood, stones and leaves collected on the property (it will eventually be covered with native vines, as well), and is intended to serve as a protective environment for small animals.

There is one other work on this massive a scale in the woods, Steven Siegel's now-collapsing *Scale*, composed of thousands of recycled newspapers, and it has a similarly staggering effect. You expect to see such works sited on lawns, where they can be viewed from a distance and then approached, not to come upon them suddenly, in a clearing in the woods.