



Wanderers

Emily Miller

Curiosity and excitement come naturally before we learn to fear the unknown. I believe that joyful exploration of the unknown can create a positive, active relationship with our world, encouraging the fearless seeing, seeking and dreaming that is characteristic of childhood and creativity. This positive approach towards exploration leads to a deeper connection with our environments and communities, encouraging stewardship, innovation and creative problem-solving. In keeping with this inquiry-based attitude, I have found that exploration without explanation and questions without answers are central to my nonfigurative artwork. My art practice is my personal connection to the beauty of exploring mysterious environments.

The Wanderers installation presents an interactive experience of darkness and light centered on the joy of exploring unknown worlds. Discovering and describing these environments involves crossing a border between the known and the unknown, amid constant cycles of change. Wanderers represents this uncertainty with curiosity and delight by creating an ambiguous, responsive space with the freedom to enjoy instinctive exploration and experimentation without the judgment of failure or success. I created a darkened space for the visitor to wander through, surrounded by open-ended, glowing orbs that brighten or fade in response to our actions. These organic, tactile, portable objects address themes of individuality and community, purpose and doubt, natural cycles and the effects of time. Using light, darkness, sound, and touch, Wanderers responds to the formality of off-limits art objects with the freedom to explore, interact, wonder, and play.

Freedom to wonder and experiment is the basis of creativity. This is the meeting place of innovative science and art. What we learn in the process of exploring the unknown can be as important as the final outcome, for both artists and scientists. My work addresses the relationships between art and science, and between nature and human structures. I am fascinated

by the complex living systems of individual plants, colonies of coral, schools of fish, and their relationship to the larger systems that control ocean currents and the formation of galaxies. My work deals with the placement of human systems and individuals within this larger network. My past work addressed these themes mostly by instinct. Developing the Wanderers installation provided an opportunity to intentionally explore how they all fit together.

The environmental installations of Dale Chihuly and Andy Goldsworthy reflect many of the values and forms I use in my sculpture. Although their work draws from natural forms and harmonizes with the landscape, it is not meant to completely blend in. Their work presents the unexpected in a familiar environment, created with playfulness and positivity, encouraging curiosity and interest in the beauty of these unknown forms. Chihuly says about his work: *“I want my work to appear as though it came from nature – so if someone found it, they might think it belonged there.”* I love the idea of situating art in unexpected places, blurring the line between an art object and an environment. I believe this creates an active connection between the viewer and the artwork, transforming the viewer into a participant. This active relationship is essential to forming a personal connection with an artwork, and it can be missing in traditional gallery-based presentations where the artwork appears separate and isolated. Andy Goldsworthy speaks about his outdoor installations in terms of the presence of nature in human environments and as part of human identity. I am intrigued by the idea of a physical marker of human presence, and how we leave our impression on an environment. The Wanderers installation aims to create a participatory, art-based environment which highlights how our actions impact the world around us, and how this interaction strengthens our bond with our environments.

My work is less about our specific positive or negative effects on the environment, and more about simply drawing attention to our existence as part of a larger system. My work

references vast, mysterious environments like the deep ocean and outer space, which are difficult for humans to explain and inhabit, but draw an instinctive emotional response and provide a sense of perspective. I am also inspired by overlooked spaces and how we interact with, and affect, these unintentional environments. I focus on visible signs of the interactions between humans, the structures we build, and the natural world, and how these physical relationships change with the passing of time. Although nature's part in these relationships seems chaotic in comparison to the intentionally organized forms of machinery, natural growth also creates structure and symmetry. The dynamic between nature and structure shows how our work is always connected to nature and how that relationship is always evolving, with our original intentions interacting with the forces of wind, water, and growth. I feel this ongoing balance between order and chaos, control and freedom reflects the state of the whole world. Beauty is the way I interpret this constant exchange between human initiative and natural forces.

Like a living environment, the Wanderers installation is interactive and reacts to our presence, providing constant feedback about how its components are connected to each other, and to us. The responsive nature of the Wanderers installation highlights our dynamic relationship to our environment. It is impossible to experience the installation without affecting it. The orbs are treated with blue glow paint on their interior surfaces. Walking through the installation causes nearby orbs to shine with a brighter white light, which fades back to blue as you move away. Lifting an orb extinguishes its bright light, leaving only the blue glow in your hands, which will also fade slowly over time. Exploring and discovering how different actions cause the glow of the orbs to brighten or fade is meant to inspire curiosity and delight. There is no right or wrong way to explore or experience the installation. This emphasizes our position as

part of a complex, dynamic living system, rather than isolated individuals viewing an unchanging landscape.

I considered touch, sound, and movement as part of creating an environment open to curiosity and exploration. The full experience of an object includes the way it feels when we pick it up, the way it sounds when we put it down, and the way our perspective changes from different points of view. In the darkness, your other senses are heightened and weight, texture and material become even more important than they are with traditional sculpture. I prefer to leave surfaces bare, and focus on the natural beauty of a material's color and texture. Most of the orbs in the Wanderers installation are made of unglazed porcelain, which has a very specific feel and sound when touched. I love for people to physically interact with my work. It is important to me that my sculptures do not feel too precious. I focused on creating a variety of touchable textures for the orbs. The size and shape of the orbs is meant to fit naturally in our hands, encouraging the visitor to touch them and pick them up. I also created an ambient soundtrack for the installation mixed from a variety of underwater and forest recordings. The soundtrack loops through layered samples of wind in trees, crickets, and underwater diving, creating a peaceful, natural, but non-specific atmosphere. The goal of all the visible and audible elements in the installation is to suggest an open, welcoming environment within the uncertainty of darkness. Allowing visitors to interact with the artwork adds personal significance and meaning to their experiences. The interactivity of the Wanderers installation provides a framework for enjoying experimentation and facing the unknown with wonder and joy.

I use organic form and repetition, informal presentation, and light to represent my sculptures as organisms in an unknown, living environment. I chose to repeat a simple, open-ended orb shape in the Wanderers installation as an intuitive reference to seedpods and aquatic

plant life. The orb shape is also easy and attractive to pick up and hold. These non-specific organic forms feel familiar and unexpected at the same time, inviting curiosity and suggesting a positive encounter with the unknown. I want the sculptures to feel alive and mysterious, but still attractive and approachable. I love creating colonies, using groups of repeated forms that each have their own unique identities. Different arrangements of the forms can communicate entirely different meanings: belonging, separation, loneliness, caring and growth. The colony arrangements reflect human interactions and call attention to our dual status as individuals and members of communities. For me, working with repeated forms raises the questions: How different are we from each other? How much the same? How important is our identity as individuals, as part of a community, and as part of an environment? I created over 40 wheel-thrown and coil-built orbs for the Wanderers installation. The orbs all share the same basic shape, but each one was made to look and feel unique, speaking to the balance between individuality and community.

An informal, natural presentation of the orbs further emphasizes their position as part of an environment, rather than isolated objects. I feel that formal arrangements on pedestals only convey part of the message, by artificially disconnecting the object from its surroundings. I envision my sculptural work either integrated into a natural landscape or placed unexpectedly in a gallery. Encountering the artwork tucked into corners, mounted near ceilings, or rising directly from the ground adds a key element of surprise and delight, creating the feeling of entering an unknown landscape. In the darkened Wanderers installation, the orbs are nestled in shallow depressions on a raised, uneven surface. They appear to fit into the landscape and to grow from the ground. Outside the darkened space, the installation also includes a group of orbs presented under a spotlight, on traditional pedestals. I wanted to address the contrast between our

experience of the orbs outside as static art objects and the orbs inside as a dynamic environment. I am interested in the gallery setting, where the standard rule is “don’t touch,” because I feel it reflects a wider reluctance to engage and experiment in life. The Wanderers installation aims to counteract that reluctance by providing a space for curiosity, play, and wonder. However, the gallery environment also adds a valuable layer of separation from everyday life, giving visitors an opportunity to think differently about their experience.

Utilizing light in my sculptures is intended to give the objects a sense of internal purpose and energy, without providing any specific explanation of what that purpose might be. My creation of mysterious, "useless" objects meant to represent living forms is focused on the question: what is the purpose of life? I am not sure there is an easy answer, and I enjoy creating work that raises the question without providing a solution. The Wanderers installation uses light to represent life, and darkness to represent the surrounding environment. Not only are the mysterious living forms important, but also the vast realm of uncertainty where they are found. Darkness and light create the most basic separation between the known and the unknown. Darkness has a huge range of powerful emotional meaning. It can symbolize possibility and infinity but also fear and death. It can be terrifying to step into the unknown, but fear is not the only way to approach something we don’t understand. Curiosity, creativity, and joy can also arise from embracing the unknown. Entering the darkened space of the Wanderers installation can create both a feeling of freedom, because you are hidden from view, and a feeling of reluctance, because you can’t clearly see everything around you. The darkness of the Wanderers installation represents a mysterious space that holds only beauty, possibility, and wonder, creating a positive experience out of approaching unfamiliar situations.

Creating the Wanderers installation was a very social, interdisciplinary process. This was very different from my normally solitary art practice. I worked with at least 10 professionals from a wide range of fields. It was exciting for me to integrate art and science in the Wanderers installation thanks to their knowledge and support. Constructing a responsive environment was one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of the project, both technically and conceptually. At least half of my time was spent building the environment and its pressure sensors to function in a lifelike, logical way that allowed room for freedom and creativity by visitors, without leaving them totally lost. Significant time was also spent figuring out how to attach two components together for the first time, or brainstorming common materials I could creatively use as pieces in the environment. My materials came from lumberyards, hardware stores, automotive stores and event rental services. I tracked down sources for recycled wood, carpet, and cardboard alongside researching porcelain, industrial quality glow pigment, electronics and wiring. It was exciting and challenging to go beyond my normal studio practice to build my sculptures into a larger environment.

The Wanderers installation raised questions in my mind of how we relate to our environments, how we react to the unknown, and how art is relevant in our world. It was a rewarding experience to create an environment that heightens awareness of everything around us, and to cast that awareness in a sense of wonder and joy. I look forward to exploring these ideas in future projects.