

HK\$55/US\$7/
CAN\$7/£3.50/€6

WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

VOLUME 15 NUMBER 4 AUTUMN 2009

15th Anniversary

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Deconstructing Landscape

Scottish sculptor Kirsteen Pieterse, who is an artist in the romantic tradition, draws upon an enduring fascination with landscape and the man-made structures within it. Her sculptures draw attention to the transience of human construction and the timelessness of nature.

By Kate Bryan

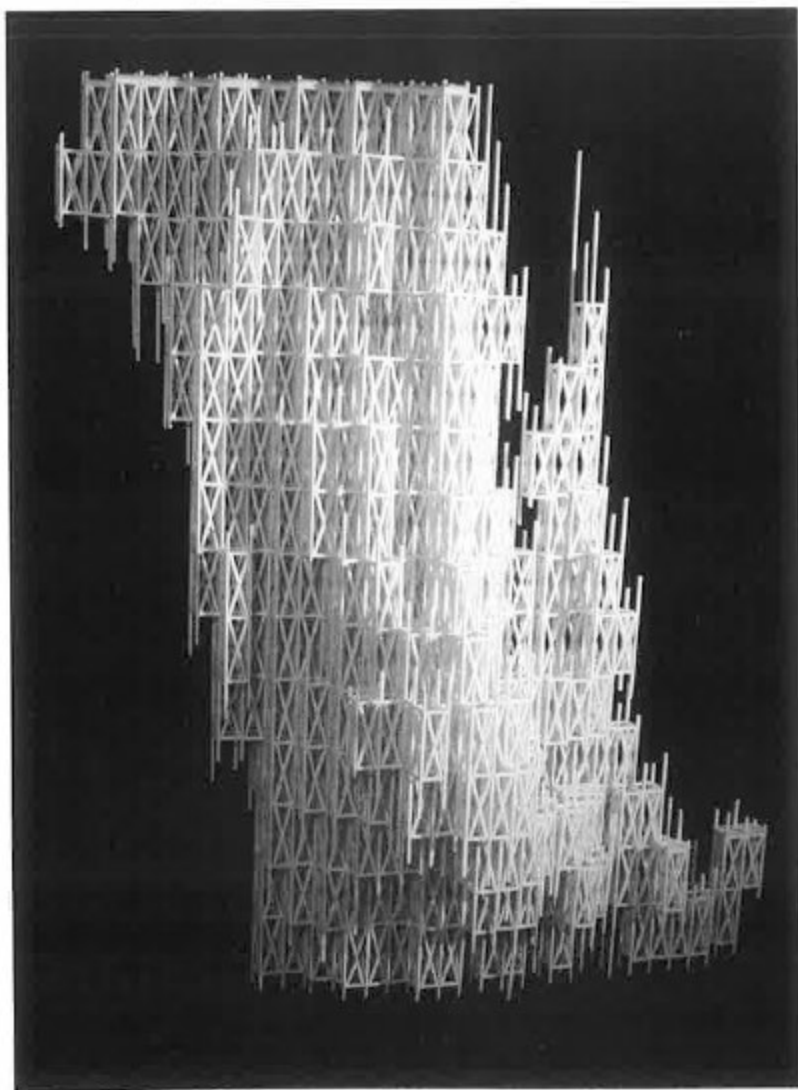
The natural world has played an unrivalled role in the story of humankind, which has always experienced an intrinsic link to its environment. The modern world, however, leaves increasingly little room for the contemplation of nature and the cultivation of a relationship to one's environment. In the West the notion of an unspoilt terrain, with no trace of human impact, has become something of a Holy Grail. We revere such unique locations as if they belong to another realm when in fact they simply represent this world. The dual forces of a vast world population and relentless construction means that the world's landscapes and topography are forever changing.

The Scottish sculptor Kirsteen Pieterse draws upon the precarious relationship between man and built environments in her work. Her sculptures resemble architectural models but, rather than celebrate the triumph of man's ingenuity over the natural world, they signify unease about man-made constructions. She draws attention to the regard we hold for our environment and how

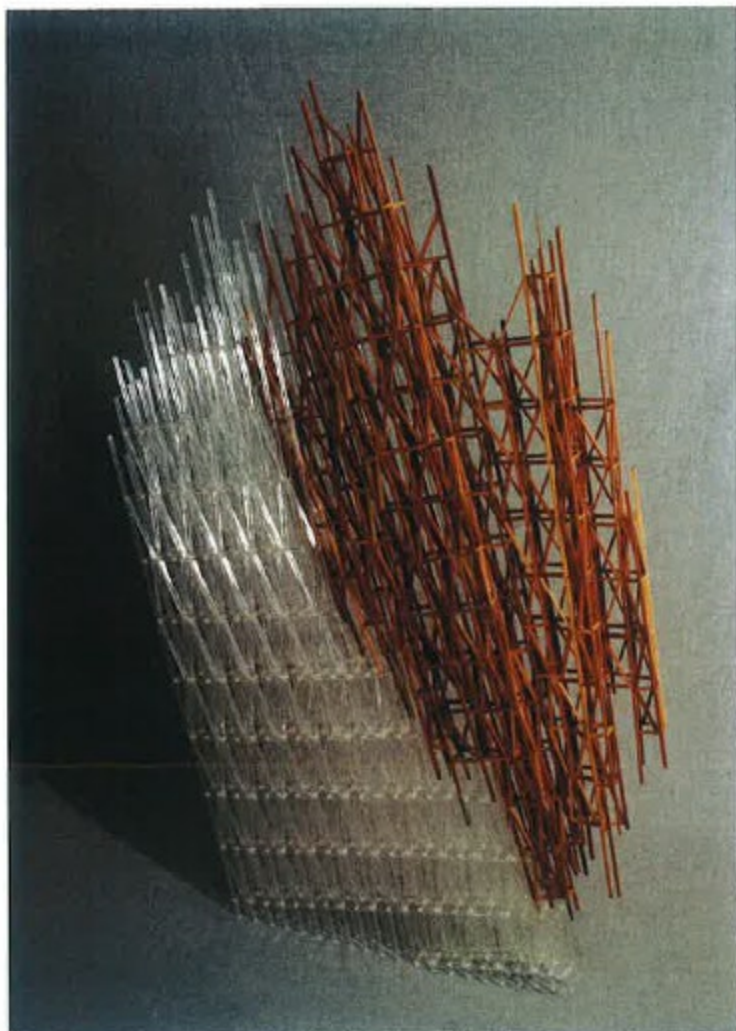
easily we might forget the power of nature. Modern architecture and engineering represent, in many ways, the epitome of

humankind's 'taming' of the natural world. We have built bridges over vast expanses of water and skyscrapers on the sides of mountains. However, as Pieterse infers in her sculptures, the ramifications of such endeavors should not be neglected. Many of her works display precariousness; the structures seem capable of tipping over at any moment. The pieces may resemble architectural models but closer inspection often reveals that the composition features aspects of deconstruction and ruin.

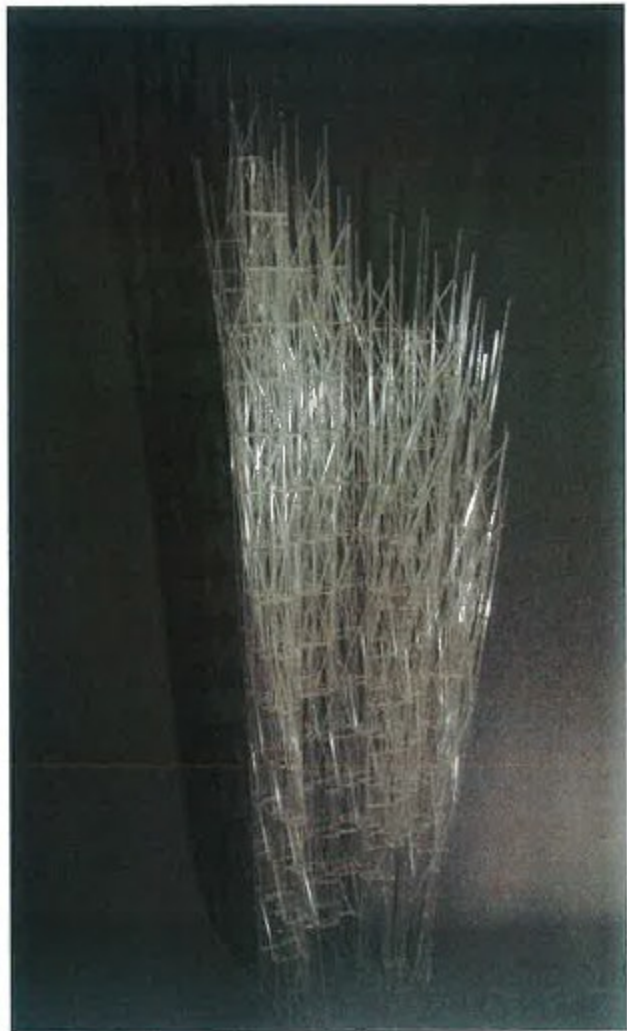
This is not to suggest that the sole theme of Pieterse's work is inevitable destruction and the negative consequences of humankind's doomed enterprise in building structures. Instead the artist belongs to a more romantic tradition, one that finds the ruinous appealing and decay beautiful. Like the grand tourists of Italy before her, Pieterse is more interested in the effect of the ruins of the ancient Roman forum, say, than in the grandeur of the original construction. Architecture for the sculptor is not simply about new construction but also about the unstable remains of past buildings and nostalgia.



Kirsteen Pieterse, *Fault*, 2005, foamcore, 153 x 135 x 46 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and The Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong.



Kirsteen Pieterse, **Recline**, 2009, acrylic rods, reclaimed cedar, 120 x 79 x 20 cm.



Kirsteen Pieterse, **Respite**, 2009, acrylic rods, 195 x 75 x 50 cm.

Pieterse's sculptures are themselves firmly tied to both the aesthetics and principles of architecture. Each piece starts life on the drawing board in ink, watercolor, or graphite. When using graphite and an eraser, Pieterse constructs form through an unending series of repeated lines, which she then sporadically erases and redraws. The trace of the removed line remains on the paper, adding a sense of memory and layering to the drawing.

"The issue is never where to begin but where to end. I like repetitive tasks and I keep making and erasing the line until I feel that the piece has reached some sort of inevitable conclusion," says Pieterse of her drawings. As for the implementation of the drawings into sculptural form she says, "It's impossible. They are not exact designs for pieces I am going to make. It's impossible on a practical level and would also detract from the organic process of sculpting. The drawings create the feel of the piece and I see them more as artworks in their own right."

It is clear from looking at the drawings, however, that they serve a very real and direct purpose in the sculptures. By

emancipating herself from the physical restraints of making an object, Pieterse is able to push herself creatively. "I find when I am drawing that I am not bogged down with the physicality of how I am going to make something, it makes me think differently."

When it comes to taking the work from the developmental drawing stage to the act of sculpting, Pieterse relishes the challenges that her compositions bring. Her choice of material—small, milled pieces of acrylic, steel, or wood—means there are physical limitations from the outset. "Working in this way means there are always problems of weight distribution, making something upright and working out how best to catch light and shadow," she says. Rather than seeing these issues as drawbacks, Pieterse enjoys the way in which problem solving contributes to the work in a creative way. This is evident in her sculptures, which are a labor of love and are testament to her painstaking precision and patience.

In her latest body of work, Pieterse employs small, milled pieces of acrylic and bamboo just five millimeters in diameter. The choice of media was in response to the

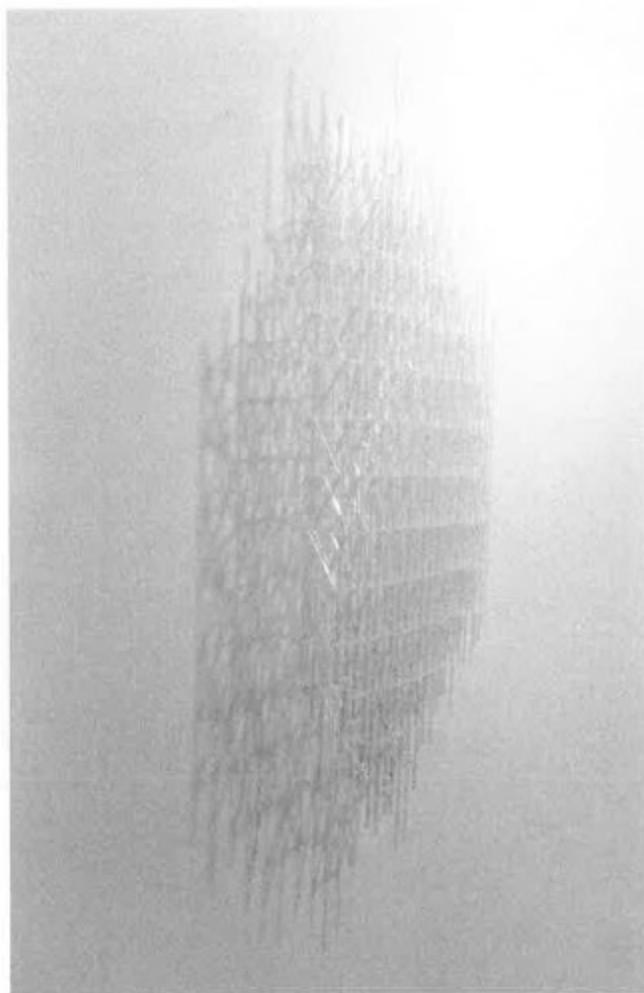
environment of her new home, Hong Kong. Bamboo is an intrinsic part of the fabric of Hong Kong, found in nature but more commonly seen in the city as scaffolding for the construction industry. The other new medium, transparent acrylic, refers to the wet environment of the region, where rain is a regular feature. Weather effects have been central to Pieterse's practice since her graduation from the Glasgow School of Art. "Growing up in rural Scotland it rained constantly and as a family of golfers we really felt it. But it became something with which I developed a different kind of relationship; you just couldn't let it ruin things. I began to really enjoy seeing the rain coming in and living in Hong Kong is equally as dramatic."

The artist's fascination with nature and the effects of weather on a landscape recall the outlook of the 19th-century German Romantic, Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), whom she cites as a huge source of inspiration. In his landscape paintings Friedrich put the viewer in a position to contemplate nature and the sublime. In a modern reincarnation, Pieterse draws attention to power of nature by conjuring images of buildings in a state of disrepair or

on the brink of collapse, which are soon to be reclaimed by the landscape. In doing so, Pieterse, like Friedrich, demonstrates the enduring strength and romance of nature.

Pieterse is an artist who is highly conscious of her environment. The combination of acrylic and bamboo in her latest series of work is the vocabulary she has created to speak of the Hong Kong landscape. Her use of bamboo and acrylic in *Decline* (2009) marks a departure in Pieterse's practice and speaks so strongly of the artist's new home. Speaking of the new work Pieterse said, "I immediately knew Hong Kong would change my practice. I found the bamboo scaffolding so inspiring. It seemed like a parasite feeding off the old." The combination of the synthetic acrylic and natural bamboo are a simple metaphor for the duality that exists in the city between urbanity and nature. But it is in the composition where the metaphor finds its apotheosis: Pieterse strikes a fine line between vitality with decay, signaling the distant threat of ruin.

Another work strongly echoing the feel of the city is *Respite* (2009). The complex structure continually shifts its axis, from left to right and from the front to the rear. The only constant



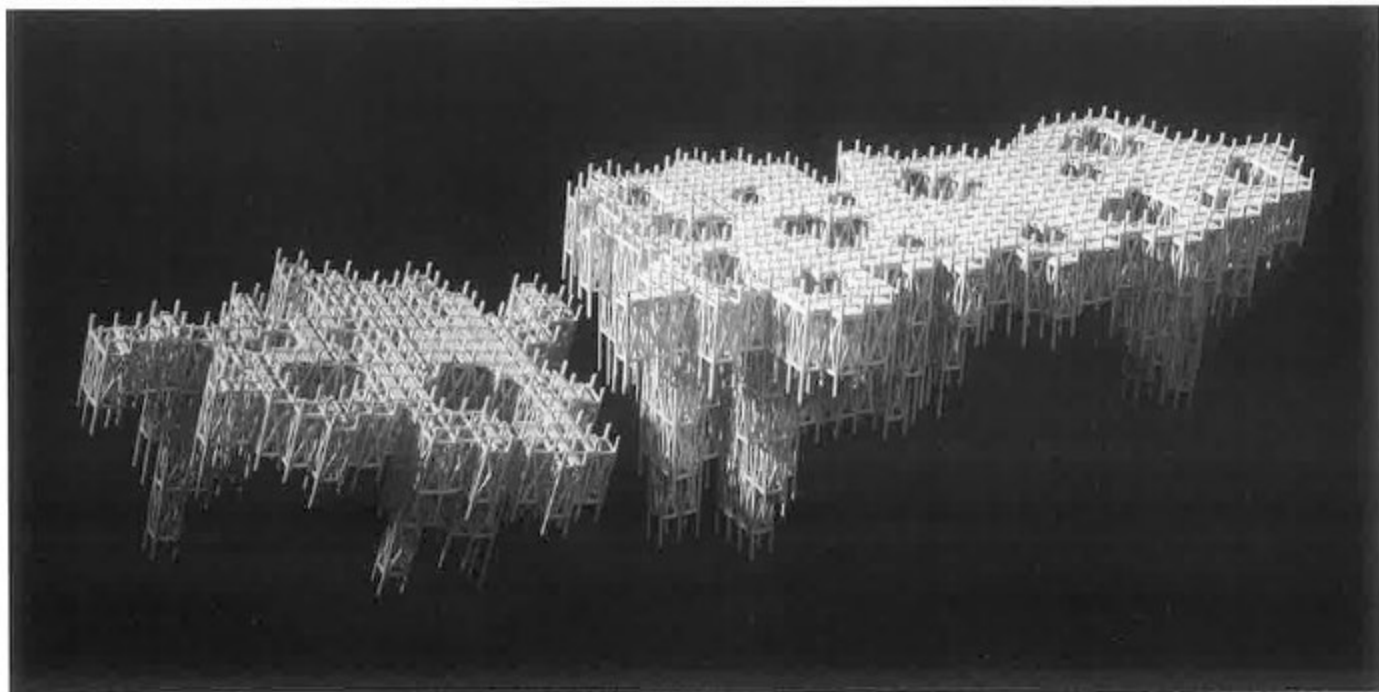
Kirsteen Pieterse, *Rainshadow 1*, 2009, acrylic rods, 135.5 x 60 x 15 cm.

is the verticality of the composition, the upper reaches being defined by the length of the acrylic rods Pieterse employs. The artist makes intricate patterns within the

structure and at moments the crisscrossing lines resemble I.M. Pei's iconic Bank of China in Hong Kong's central district. Both share the same combination of strength and gentle beauty. The reference to skyscrapers of this type is also pertinent when we consider the artist's enduring interest in urban building and its relationship to the landscape.

In many of her works, Pieterse considers the way in which man has negotiated with the landscape, creating structures that facilitate a passage through an otherwise hostile terrain. The engineering feats of the 19th century are a source of inspiration for her, too; in particular the iconic Brighton Pier in England. As a child the artist witnessed the structure's gradual decay, which eventually collapsed into the sea in 2002. There are parallels between the Old Pier and the artist's sculptural practice. "The Pier was created to avoid the upper classes getting their feet wet at the seaside. It allowed them to experience the water without touching it," she says. "My work deals a lot with the idea of how man gets through the landscape without really dealing with it. Ultimately things fall into a state of disrepair."

An experience that has a significant impact on the artist's outlook was a trip to the Tarkine Forrest in Tasmania. One of the largest wilderness sites in the world



Kirsteen Pieterse, *Fell*, 2005, balsawood, 35 x 150 x 50 cm.

with no trace of modern human constructions, Pieterse's every footstep was privileged. Unlike the lines in her drawings they would not be endlessly erased and reprinted. "There was a real conflicting excitement in walking through a terrain that has no trace of human life. You rest your foot on a log and it decomposes into paper, you've just left a lasting impact on nature. It is a place with long-held memories."

Not only did the experience affect Pieterse's viewpoint, it directly found its way into her sculptures. In its scale and composition, the balsawood sculpture *Fell* (2005) references the size and might of the undeveloped landscape, but simultaneously makes reference to its fragility. The abstract composition works on varying levels; it is visually similar to an aerial view of the forest and also, by contrast, one small ruined log. The sculpture *Metbuselab* (2005) is made with reference to a ruined tree from the region. The artwork reminds us of how inconsequential individuals are in the face of the immense age of this natural object. That the artist is able to negotiate such enormous issues in works of an accessible scale bears testimony to the forcefulness of her aesthetic.

Pieterse's work is primarily conceived for interiors and some pieces in her latest series are designed as wall sculptures. Installed in this way, the pieces refer to their genesis on the drawing board. We can clearly appreciate what Pieterse means when she says that she sees each drawing as a sculpture, and each sculpture as a drawing.

The wall sculpture *Rain Shadow* (2009) neatly balances a feeling of complete weightlessness with the force of strong rainfall. Depending on the direction of the light source and its strength the effect of the composition changes. By playing with light and shadow the wall sculpture transcends the boundaries of the sculpted materials and begins to seep out from its physical space, taking command of its surroundings.

The artist has also made works that were destined for the outdoors such as *Fossil* for the Helen Lempriere



Kirsteen Pieterse, *Relict*, 2009, reclaimed wood, 223 x 75 x 80 cm.



Kirsteen Pieterse, *Fossil*, 2008, steel, dimensions variable.

National Sculpture Award in 2008. The large structure sits within a green landscape and is fashioned from milled pieces of steel. It is natural for Pieterse's work to find its way back into the landscape that is so central to her working practice. In this sculpture Pieterse is skirting the borders of Land Art, reminding us of the way in which British artist Richard Long responds to his place in the environment and the inevitable changes that occur as a result of his practice.

Relict (2009) is similar to *Fossil* in composition, but in the new work Pieterse has opened up a new set of issues by utilizing reclaimed wood. The large upright structure is fashioned from milled pieces of old skirting board. The title sets the work in contrast to 'derelict'—by giving the dispossessed material a new task the artist is circumventing its decay. The sculpture references the cyclical nature of man and the environment: the material was once natural wood, then employed in urban building, then discarded and is now re-fashioned into a sculpture that refers to the whole process.

In all of Pieterse's sculptures there is strong duality at play. The artist cultivates something that is strong and physically works but that which appears to be precarious or ruinous. Particularly when employing transparent acrylic, she presents an object, which aims to be both sturdy yet seem delicate, full of light yet impactful in its shadow. There is also a strong duality in her process and aesthetic. The artist agrees that her repetitive, ordered approach to construction is somewhat masculine in tone, whereas the light compositions she produces could be described as gentle and feminine. The combination of both reinforces the presence of the coexisting forces of strength and lightness in extraordinary pieces. Δ

Note:

1. All quotations were taken from a conversation between the author and Kirsteen Pieterse at her studio in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong, June 2009.

Kate Bryan is a Hong Kong contributing editor for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News.