

# Celebrating nature

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It's not the worldwide alert for global warming that has prompted Joan Backes' interest in environmental issues. For Backes, the divide between urbanised people and nature begins with a simple question: "What's the temperature?"

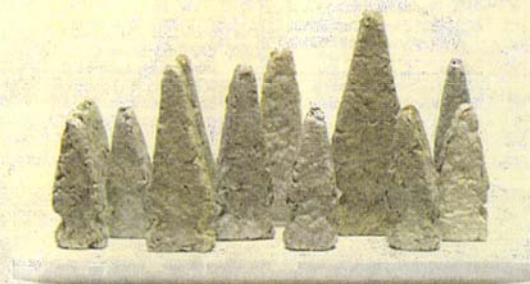
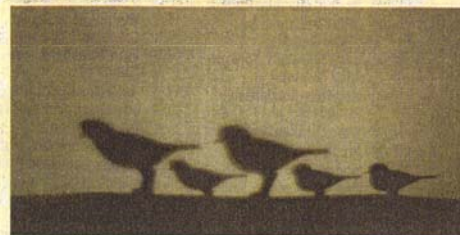
"It was years ago when my child asked, 'Mom, what's the temperature?' and I told him to just open the window and feel it. However, I thought most of the time, we tend to just turn on the computer and check it on the Internet," said the Brown University lecturer of a change in lifestyle of city people, which demonstrates how far away from nature we are.

As an artist, Backes was quick to embrace the issue and has since incessantly sought to express her environmental concern through art. Her paintings, which have been exhibited in the US and abroad, involve the use of acrylic on various discarded natural surfaces. However, Backes' more ac-

claimed art work is the "House series" installation, which comprises *Paper House*, exhibited at Chicago's McCormick Gallery; *Stick House*, exhibited at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in NSCAD University, Canada, and the latest, *Bamboo House*, created specifically for the PSG Art Gallery, Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University.

Though created and exhibited at different places and times, there are certain shared artistic elements in all the three houses. The three exhibitions are designed with a mutual aim to address the changing environmental conditions without stating the obvious.

The three houses are made of discarded natural products, which can be composed and decomposed, and none of them have doors or windows. Though the view to the inside is restricted, viewers driven by curiosity will discover the different natural imagery and will become more more



aware of the environment.

The outstanding characteristic of this *Bamboo House* is that, unlike its two predecessors, it is more site-specific in terms of materials and architectural design.

"This is the first time I designed a piece using the gallery floor plan. It's the tallest house, with three stories, because this amazing gallery has a very tall ceiling," said Backes, of how *Bamboo House* was influenced by the spatial of Silpakorn University's PSG Art Gallery.

"The bamboos I used come from the university's Nakhon Pathom campus and they are not only beautiful, but very useful and available locally. I made it clear that all the materials I use should be from nature. The bamboos are tied with ropes made from bamboo reeds and knotted with wood pegs."

Opposite the house is a set of three giant sculptures made from recycled construction wood, which pays homage to the trees used to build houses, she

said. Greeting viewers at the entrance hallway are a set of miniature sculptures made from recycled paper, such as newspaper and junk mail catalogues.

"The paper and discarded construction wood come from trees and what I do is to put them back in their original shape — the trees," said Backes.

In addition, the two side halls of the gallery house two other installations: Each housing a world in a window. The subjects in each window are endangered species. One will be the Karner Blue Butterfly, which is endangered in Wisconsin, where the artist grew up. The other will display a piping plover, which is endangered in Massachusetts where the artist lives. It is endangered due to loss of habitat and human activity near nesting sites.

"For the installation of the piping plover, you will not actually see the birds but instead their shadows, which will eventually become the only thing we will see of this species should nothing be done to save their population." The interior of the central piece,

the *Bamboo House*, will accentuate the very same idea by housing, in the form of images, endangered species from all continents all over the world. These species are endangered for various reasons: Capture, hunting, habitat destruction and disturbance, pollution, poisoning, over fishing, for example.

"There will be images printed onto recycled paper, glued onto recycled cardboard. There will be the name, perhaps scientific name, of the species printed onto the paper and below it, the continent in which it is endangered," she said.

"I don't want to interpret it too much because I'm sure that's what the viewers could do better but I hope, at least, the work will make them think about nature."

**'Bamboo House' will be exhibited until December 27 at the PSG Art Gallery, Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Wang Tha Phra, Na Phra Lan Road. For more information, call 02-225-8991 or email araya@su.ac.th.**



Joan Backes and the under-construction central piece of the exhibition, 'Bamboo House'.