

Choi, Jennifer. "Natural Works of Art," The Baltimore Sun, 19 June 2008.

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Green seems to be the new "it" color in contemporary art.

The Janet & Walter Sondheim Prize Finalists: Artscape at the BMA, a juried exhibit running Saturday-Aug. 3 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, reflects the growing interest in representing ecological issues. Though the competition, which annually awards \$25,000 to a visual artist who works or lives in Maryland, Washington, Northern Virginia or southeastern Pennsylvania, doesn't specify a theme, many of the works by this year's finalists -- some of which will be created on site -- have a noticeable eco bent. "They're reacting to our times," said Darsie Alexander, the exhibit's in-house organizer. "The artists are reflecting their concerns about the environment."

Becky Alprin's imaginary landscapes focus on the relationship between man and nature. For her 2-D wall hangings, she cuts black and white shapes out of a Plexiglas-like material and glues them on top of each other to create scenes that juxtapose the natural environment with manmade constructions. In *Bridge* (still), Alprin shows a wistful scene with organic elements like leaves and trees, and an artificial bridge. The leaves and trees appear very still, to indicate the absence of wind.

Alprin creates four sculptures using similar black and white cutouts and wood painted white. One of those, *Unflagging*, depicts an urban environment where construction sites and decaying buildings are side by side. "I was interested in talking about humans' relationship to the Earth," Alprin said. "I used our construction and building tendencies as a way to examine that relationship."

Melissa Dickenson's surreal scenes feature images of flora and fauna on handmade paper made of kozo root, indigenous to Japan. The artist created the paper and acrylic, graphite and ink drawings while an artist-in-residence in Japan. Her work *Bramble* shows cartoonish mushrooms floating below a small bird resting on a tree branch. "I was thinking about the state of our environment and seeing animals in a different context," said Dickenson. "Through my works, I reflect on how someday plants and animals will no longer be if we continue on the path that we're going on."

A finalist last year as well, Geoff Grace will create his art at the museum. He plans to use clay slip to paint three giant giraffes, which will be interspersed with photographs and collages. Through the image, Alexander said, he will explore the connection between humans and nature.

Though not as directly environmentally focused, audiences will be able to find links between the remaining artists' works and nature. Dawn Gavin will visit the theme of fragmentation and displacement by inserting thousands of pushpins capped with map fragments into the wall to form a geometric pattern that reminds one of DNA systems and molecular structures.

Maren Hassinger will use hundreds of bright plastic bags inserted with love notes to explore the themes of giving and healing. And Molly Springfield's graphite drawings, mostly consisting of historical texts that she copied and manipulated by hand, evoke a hazy, dreamlike feeling.

The winner of the \$25,000 prize will be announced July 12 at a ceremony at the BMA. "People will be amazed when they see some of the works by the Sondheim-selected artists," Alexander said. "Community members will be able to reflect on how much talent there is in this region."