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sculpture

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Martha Jackson Jarvis

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Dumbarton Oaks



Martha Jackson Jarvis, *Pod Forms*, 2018. Stone, glass, mortar, and wood, installation view. Photo: Miga Purev-Ochir

A perfect match of artist and venue, "Outside/IN" (whose outdoor component remains open until December 16) shines an overdue spotlight on a substantial body of work by Washington, DC, sculptor Martha Jackson Jarvis, while illuminating the collections that led to the creation of this Harvard research center as a "home of the humanities." The exhibition is the fifth in a series of contemporary art installations designed to provoke fresh interpretations of Dumbarton Oaks' famous gardens and tightly focused museum—the public faces of a scholarly paradise. The mixed-media works on view in the garden include 20 sculptures and assemblages made of wood, wisteria vines, sumac, stone, glass, and concrete. Inside, a dozen works on paper, composed of botanical images (both drawn and digital), black walnut ink, and other earthy pigments, are juxtaposed with objects selected from the renowned Byzantine and Pre-Columbian collections, locating Jarvis's work in relation to much older traditions.

The strong resonance of Jarvis's work with the interests of Dumbarton Oaks founders Robert and Mildred Bliss is evident in their shared fascination with mosaic techniques. Abstraction, texture, biomorphic form, and organic materials are other common interests. Many of Jarvis's titles, such as *Flying Colors; Path of Healing, Spores*, reference the transformational power of nature, a theme not at all out of place in an institution committed to the values of the humanities—plants and "noble trees" explicitly included.

While the title "Outside/IN" alludes to artistic and curatorial intent, it also serves as a guide to exploration. At the eastern edge of the 16-acre garden, the huge, twisted vines of *Pod Forms* (2018) seem to dance up a terraced green hillside, as if stepping over the crusty, zoomorphic forms half-buried beneath them. "Are they art, or part of the garden?" one visitor asked. Another playful yet puzzling work, *Reclamation in Bamboo* (2018) is located nearby. A series of poles bound with copper tubing and garden hose, the seven structures could be impossibly tall, skeletal tipis. Yet they seem so intrinsic to this working garden that an image of one appeared, unremarked, in a photograph illustrating a *Washington Post* story on the recent renovation of the water system.

One of the most striking sculptures can be viewed only from the museum looking out. *Earplugs/ Listening* (2018) glints through the glass walls of a corridor that connects the Byzantine and Pre-Columbian galleries. The two dozen rough round shapes could be vessels, perhaps water jars, scattered around what might be an archaeological site. On second glance, through one of the curved glass walls of a domed gallery, the blue-green, mosaic-on-concrete forms appear as enlargements of, or a riff on, the centuries-old Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec ear ornaments, made of jadeite, obsidian, gold, and crystal, that seem to float in their Plexiglas vitrines in the Pre-Columbian Pavilion.

The biggest surprise here is how Jarvis's contemporary works bring the collections into sharper focus in relation to each other. The pivot point is her passion for mosaic. She pursued it to its source, studying in a workshop in Ravenna, an important northern Italian center of early Christian and Byzantine art. In the Courtyard Gallery, *Umbilicus I* (2011) stands surrounded by older examples of the technique: Roman floor and wall mosaics; a stunning 14th-century icon of Saint John Chrysostom made of gold tesserae so tiny that the image shimmers; and a shell and turquoise Wari mirror, an Andean ritual object created half a world away, half a millennium earlier.

Jarvis's work has long deserved a wider audience, as does Dumbarton Oaks; the contemporary installation series is a welcome step in the institution's turn toward broader public engagement. Like the serene gardens and exquisite permanent collections, "Outside/IN" rewards repeat visits with new discoveries. A last look at drawings that Jarvis created when she was concerned with healing revealed, high above them, a message from the 4th-century Greek playwright Menander inscribed on the Courtyard Gallery's west architrave: "Art is a haven from misfortune for mankind."