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A Conversation with

Blane De St. Croix

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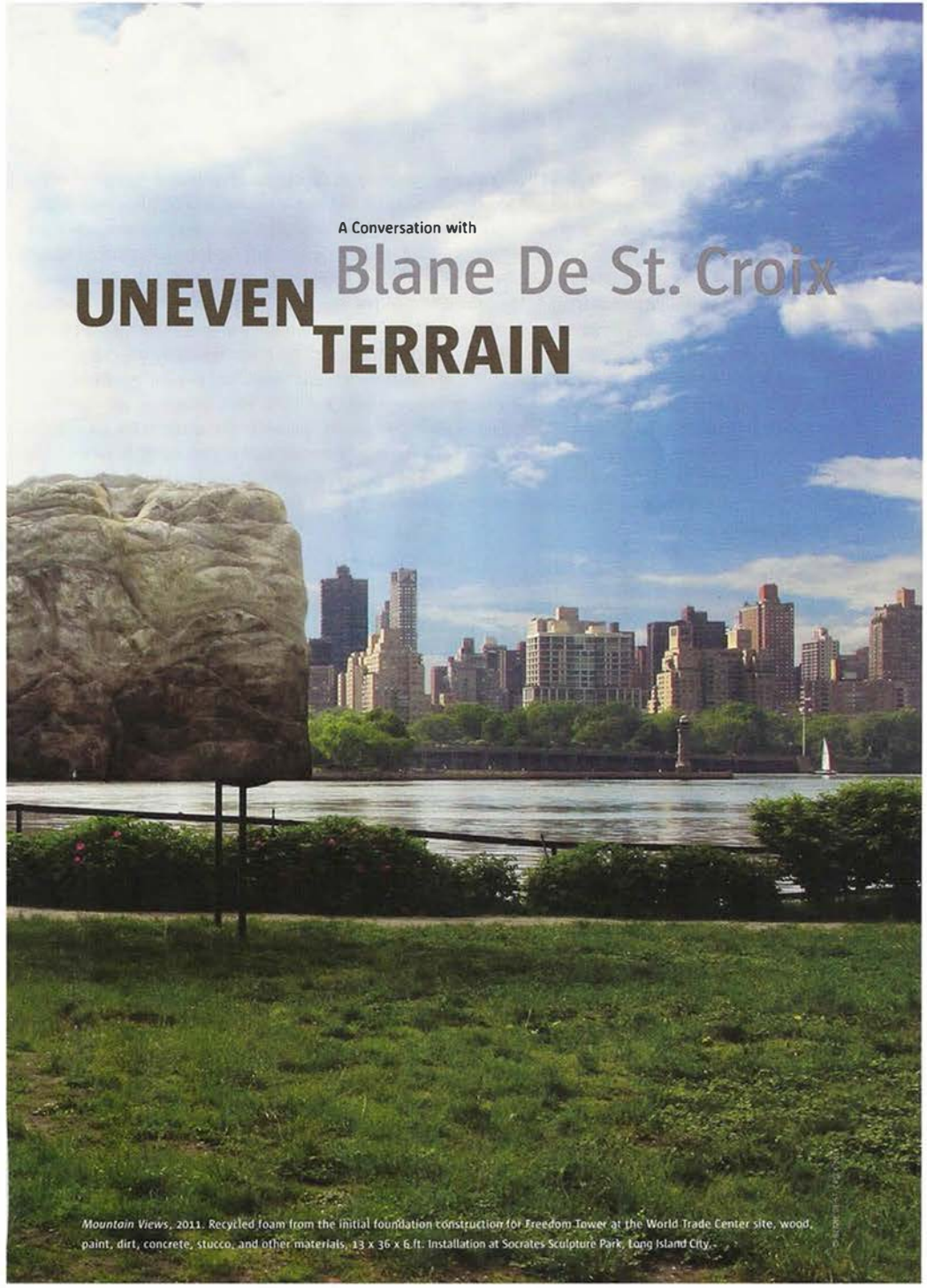


Mountain Views, 2011. Recycled foam from the initial foundation construction for Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center site, wood, paint, dirt, concrete, stucco, and other materials, 13 x 36 x 6 ft. Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City.

BY JILL CONNOR

Since the early 1990s, Blane De St. Croix has focused his sculpture on the various tensions underlying disjunctive communication. The theme first appeared in *Excavation* (1994) and *Bed of Wicker, Bed of Straw, Bed of Clay* (1995), which brought elements of outdoor environments into the gallery. These works also marked the beginning of De St. Croix's extensive foray into sculpted landscapes. During a spring 2009 show at Smack Mellon gallery, he presented *Broken Landscape*, a monolithic, but small-scale critique of the U.S.-Mexico border. Two concurrent installations that fall—*Mountain Strip*, at the Black and White Project Space in Brooklyn, and *Floating Fires*, at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers, Florida—explored different land issues. *Mountain Strip*, which responded to the strip-mining industry, featured a monumental upside-down mountaintop, while *Floating Fires* portrayed the results of encroachment and forest fires in a darkened and burnt Florida Everglades. Bruce Ferguson of F.A.R. (Future Arts Research) at Arizona State University, who exhibited *Broken Landscape II* (2010), says of De St. Croix's work: "By situating itself in the space of the viewer, the sculpture manages both to be suggestively benign as a representation and highly provocative by virtue of its implied content." De St. Croix recently received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which has spurred him on to new geopolitically focused projects based in Haiti, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Korea.

***Excavation*, 1994. Soil, peat, rocks, and wood frame, 27 x 17 x 3.5 ft.**

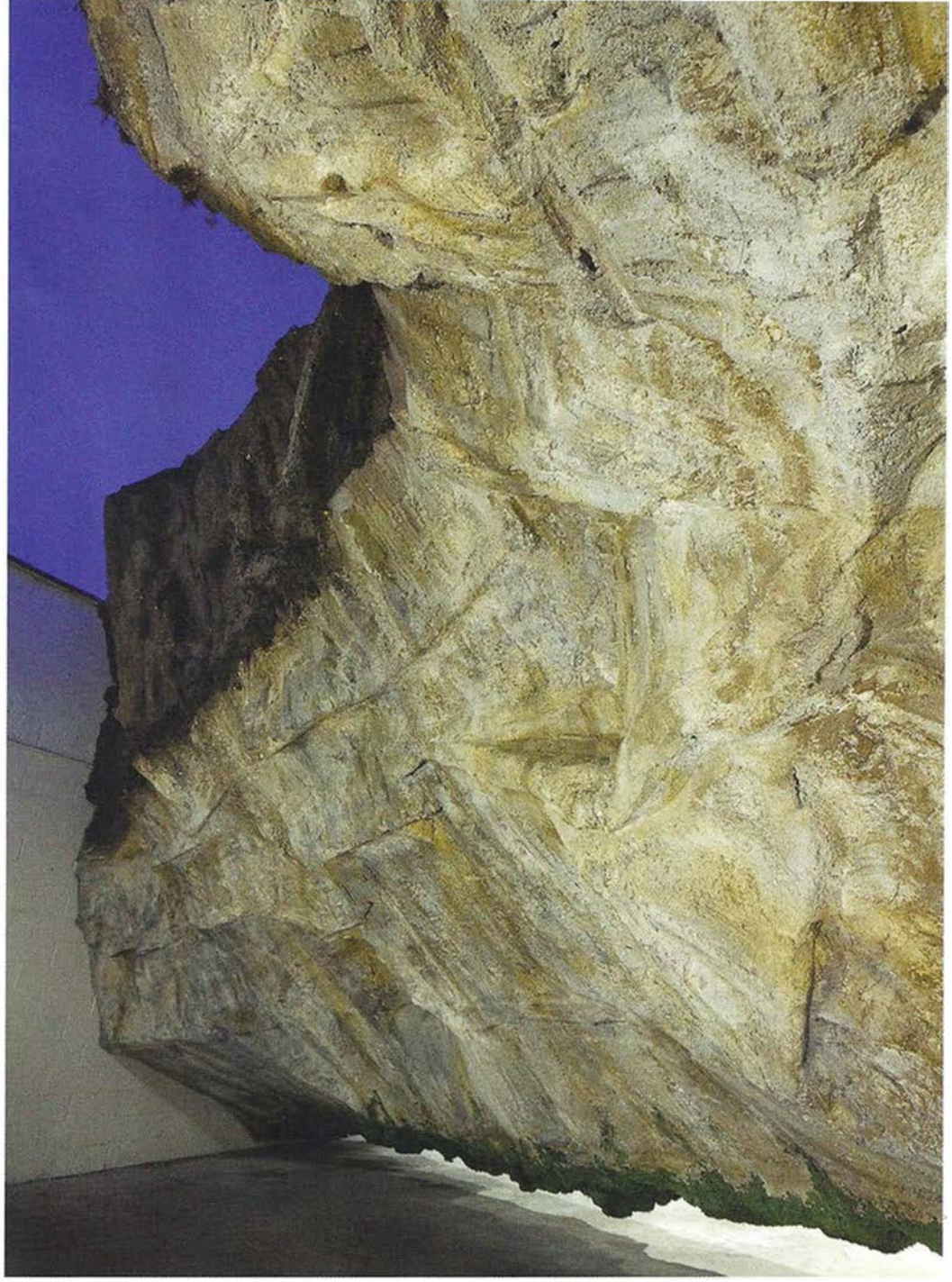
Jill Connor: *How are you using your Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship?*
Blane De St. Croix: The fellowship period is designated for research toward future projects. I'm using the majority of the funds for research trips to several countries that have been in the media spotlight but still haven't received enough attention. Some countries, such as North and South Korea, have complex border issues; there's also the wall that runs between Israel and Palestine.

At the moment, I am planning an extensive trip to Haiti. I have made contacts in art-related fields, as well as with educators, scientists, and medical workers, along with individuals running charities and disaster relief associated with the U.S. and Haitian governments. My project will involve ground trips to the border with the Dominican Republic, to the Port au Prince prison, earthquake sites, tent cities, and other areas, with fly-overs of various environmentally devastated sites. I am very interested in Haiti's ecological problems, particularly those that preceded the devastating earthquake. The earthquake simply magnified those issues so the world could see.

These trips will feed my creative work and dictate what I produce. I can never really tell what I will build until after I complete the research. I may have an initial notion, but it always changes after these encounters. The form is dictated by the information that I take in.

JC: *What attracted you to sculpture, particularly the re-creation of real landscapes?*
BDSC: Sculpture is a medium that is real and tangible to me. It allows me to create a three-dimensional world for the viewer to enter and be encompassed by. The landscapes are simultaneously real and subliminal. They are both beautiful and devastating, as well as refined and abstracted. I like these kinds of dualities since they reveal that things are not always what they seem.

I employ formal elements such as scale (both miniaturized and massive) and perspective (forced and the separation of grounds). Each decision directs the viewer conceptually and physically. My large installations allow me to interact architecturally with any given exhibition space and channel the viewer into a particular position or pattern of viewing. In *Broken Landscape* (2009), for instance, the space was divided, just like the border it represented, allowing viewers to choose a viewing side. I have always been interested in landscape as a subject and frequently reference the historical genre of landscape painting and its accepted, sublime beauty. But I am more interested in how presupposed meanings change how we look at the land.



***Mountain Strip*, 2009. Branches, paint, plastic, Styrofoam, wood, plywood, glue, acrylic paint, dirt, sand, and natural materials, 40 x 22 x 25 ft. Installation at Black and White Project Space, Brooklyn.**

JC: *Could you describe some of your early work and how you were drawn to landscape as a subject?*
BDSC: My work has always been about ecology, nature, and the landscape. I have always been interested in how we perceive nature, both from within, as part of it, and from outside. I lived in Los Angeles for a while, and the film industry has had an effect on how I see things, particularly in the way that sculpture can be subliminal and filmic—it can re-create a three-dimensional still that represents a place at a certain point in time,

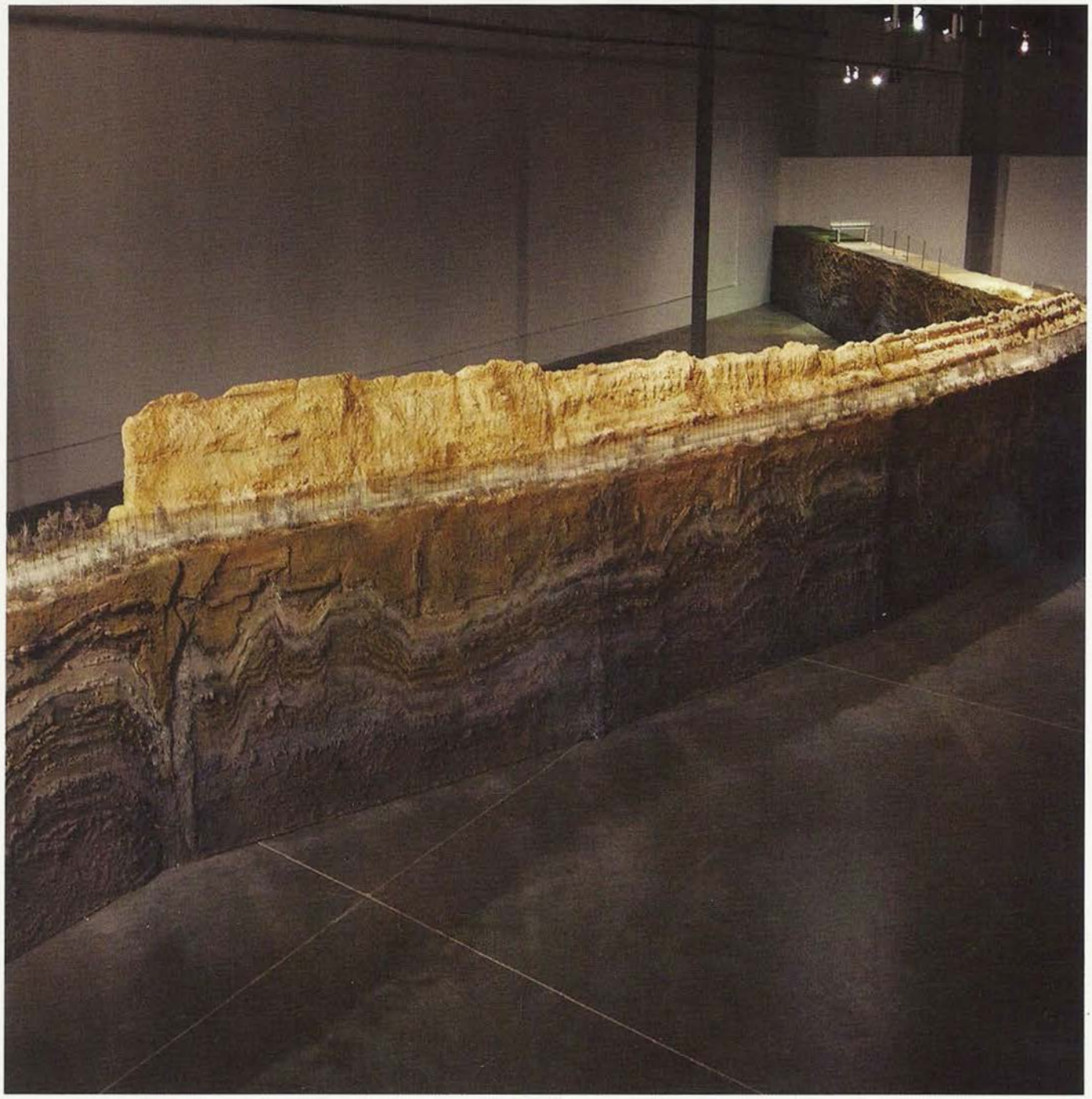
ETIENNE FOSSARD, © BLANE DE ST. CROIX 2011

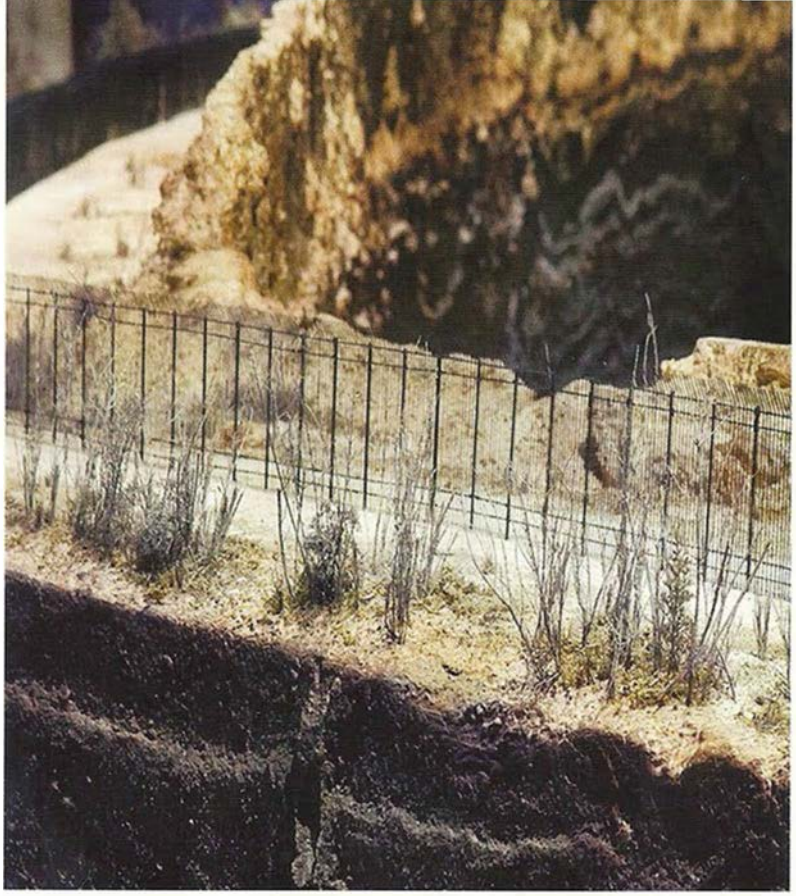
and we can walk around it. The idea of being able to be in the landscape, rather than gazing at it from a comfortable distance as one might view a painting, is what I have been trying to achieve in my work.

The earlier work was life-size or larger. I started to miniaturize after I was asked to design a couple of theater sets. I built scale models for the carpenters to reference and build life-size. During this process, I started to see my work more clearly, and I began to make models of larger sculptures for myself. The models continued to grow in size and became sculptural works themselves. It's interesting when work in one field leads to a whole new way of thinking about and approaching a different field.

JC: *Landscape was a prominent topic for much of the 1970s. How does your sculpture distinguish itself from the legacy of Michael Heizer, Donald Judd, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra?*

***Broken Landscape II*, 2010. Wood, natural materials, plastic, acrylic paint, foam, vinyl, metal, dirt, and sand, 80 x 7 x 2.5 ft. Installation at F.A.R. (Future Art Research) at University of Arizona, Tempe.**





Above: *Broken Landscape*, 2009. Wood, natural materials, plastic, acrylic paint, foam, vinyl, metal, dirt, and sand, 80 x 7 x 2.5 ft. Detail of installation at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn. Below: *Floating Fires*, 2009. Branches, paint, plastic, Styrofoam, wood, plywood, glue, acrylic paint, dirt, sand, and natural materials, 60 x 30 x 1.5 ft.

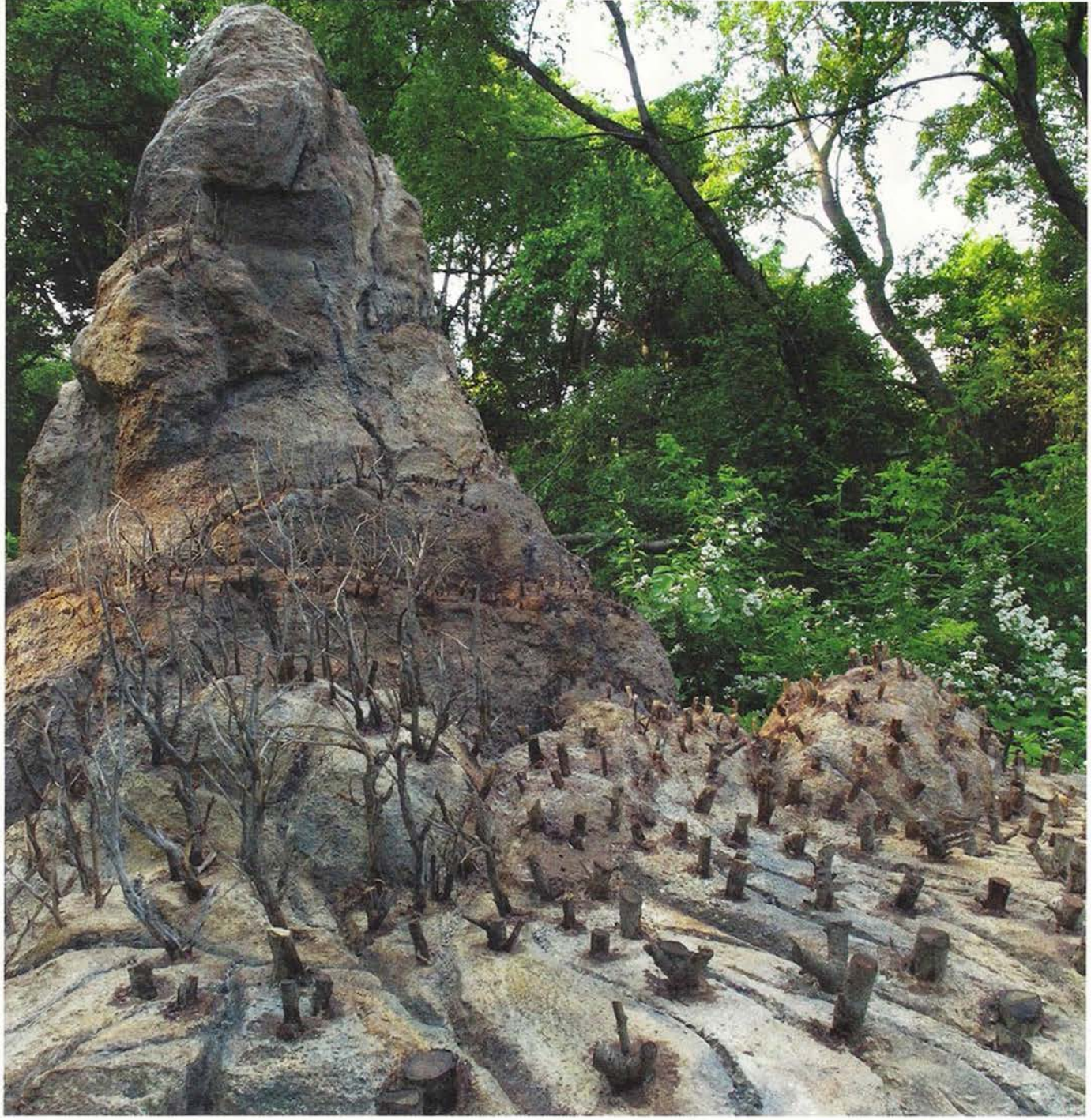
BDSC: I think that they are some of the great artists of the Land Art and Minimalist movements. When I did my research trip along the U.S.-Mexico border, I stopped in Marfa and spent some time with Judd's works. It was great to revisit that history. It made me think about how these artists used nature as an integral element in their work. They placed their forms in the land, in both rural and urban settings. In my work, however, I want to meld the form with the land and the place, to bring the place anywhere, to make a traveling landscape.

JC: *Though narrative appears to be a significant component of your work, there is no single story. How does this relic of traditional art operate in your pieces?*

BDSC: You're right that no specific narrative exists. I like how the genre of landscape can automatically transport the viewer somewhere, whether that place exists in reality or simply in the mind's eye. I like the duality of the mixed narratives suggested by my sculptures; I like viewers to engage and create multiple viewpoints as they become further informed about the work.

JC: *What are your thoughts on the diorama and its didactic role?*

BDSC: The diorama has many associations for people, from natural history museum displays to architectural



Landscape Triptych, 2011. Branches, paint, plastic, Styrofoam, wood, plywood, glue, acrylic paint, dirt, sand, and natural materials, 7 x 5 x 4 ft.

models, and even train sets and dollhouses. My work may be similar in that it tells a type of story, displays an idea, or brings something large and intangible right in front of you, but it differs in form. My sculptures are not usually frontal; instead, they take various shapes and viewing points, both formally and conceptually, and are often interactive. The concepts are usually not as clear as, for instance, a natural history display that addresses antelopes. My installations start with one subject but allow for engagement with that subject—an array of opinions can be formed and re-formed, possibly leaving viewers with no answers but raising more questions. I like to think of each project as a catalyst.

The miniaturized world is part of our psyche. We fly in a plane and see a distorted view of the world below. New interactive tools, like Google Earth, with accessible satellite imagery, have made the world more or less available with the touch of a keystroke. The monumental miniaturization in my work, on the other hand, gives viewers not only a sense of power over the object, but also a feeling of being overwhelmed by the object. Humans have a desire to control or impose on the land, but it is impossible, as we know, to really harness nature. That kind of push-and-pull interests me.

Art historically speaking, I have also been influenced by the miniature dwellings of Charles Simonds, as well as by Robert Wilson's sets and even the works of Ed and Nancy Kienholz. They all create environments differently, using scale and space to connect with viewers.

JC: *How did* Broken Landscape *travel from Brooklyn to Arizona? Did you present the same piece, or was it different?*

BDSC: I was invited by F.A.R. director Bruce Ferguson to bring *Broken Landscape* to Phoenix. I was excited about the possibility of showing the work in a state directly affected by border issues. The project offered another way to dialogue with the public about these complex issues. I also loved the idea that this sculpture represented a traveling border, shifting from one state to another. The move to Arizona placed it in a whole new context in terms of location while opening different social and cultural viewpoints. It was also timely, and completely coincidental, that the show was on view when Arizona introduced its new immigration law.

I revisited the U.S.-Mexico border before the project went to F.A.R. When I re-installed *Broken Landscape*, many portions of it were completely re-rendered, so the work changed quite a bit. Also, the architectural space was quite different, with a greater sense of vacancy. The white walls and starkness contrasted with the dark and unusual historic architecture of its previous home at Smack Mellon. So the project became a new sculpture, *Broken Landscape II*.

JC: *In* Broken Landscape, *viewers responded to the metaphor of a fence.* Mountain Strip *offered a completely different experience, generating a sense of awe. What were the different formal strategies in each piece?*

BDSC: Unlike historical artists using scale, perspective, and color- and value-shifts, I often combine and manipulate these formal devices in untraditional ways. I join multiple perspectives within one sculpture to manipulate the viewer, using depth to create an illusion of space. I've used separated grounds with no transition to force the viewer's perspective. The scale is miniature, yet it seems life-size at times. Depending on the angle or height from which you view something, it completely changes.

But, for me, those two works are most distinct in their treatment of space. *Broken Landscape* traveled through a space, divided it, dictated a path for the viewer, and separated one person from another. *Mountain Strip*, on the other hand, put viewers on one side of the sculpture, way below it, forcing their heads up to look at it. The sculpture was squeezed between the architecture. A small opening at the bottom suggested that you could get to the other side, but that would be difficult—though a few people tried.

***End of the Fence Line*, 2011. Branches, paint, plastic, Styrofoam, wood, plywood, glue, acrylic paint, dirt, sand, and natural materials, 48 x 20 x 54 in.**

JC: *What are you working on now?*

BDSC: My focus for the next year is on research for new projects, with Haiti being the first. The reality on the ground there is devastating. I want to take it all in and do something powerful that reflects the devastation. I am also working with the Lower East Side Printshop to produce a series of special project prints related to my trip.

Drawing is really important for me as a method of exploration. It helps me plan the projects, deal with detail, textures, forms, and overall processing and analysis of the landscape. But it also, quite simply, provides me with thinking time to decide how I will approach a given subject. The drawings, which end up as finished works in their own right, also function more traditionally as detailed renderings of oftentimes beautiful landscapes.

Jill Connor is a writer living in New York.