

Reflecting Time
June Ahrens





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September 8–October 22, 2022

Housatonic Museum of Art
Housatonic Community College
Bridgeport, Connecticut

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Director's Foreword

As the new Director of the Housatonic Museum of Art, it is an incredible honor to have *Reflecting Time: June Ahrens* as the first exhibition under my tenure. Within the first week of the exhibition, I have personally witnessed students, faculty, staff, and community members visit the exhibition at the Burt Chernow Galleries at Housatonic Community College. Their reactions have been a resounding “Wow!” as the exhibition has activated a sense of awe, curiosity, and introspection – the true power of successful installation art. It is this combination of emotions that have always drawn me to installation art as a contemporary art historian who is committed to engaging audiences with original works of art. Ahrens’ two artworks in this exhibition are both profoundly thought-provoking and intensely sensory, and they complement one another perfectly in the galleries.

Upon approaching the Burt Chernow Galleries, the visitor may notice the aroma before laying eyes on the full piece. This is because the work, *Changing*, is made of thousands of flowers in various states of decay laid out in an enormous circle that fills the front gallery. Ahrens encourages us to think about the cycles of life and death – a beautiful, natural, and physical process. Along the back wall stands a distorted, mirrored wall that encourages the viewer to consider their own sense of mortality, as they see themselves and others in the space. As one rounds the corner into the back gallery, the shards of broken mirrors take a more circular form in the piece called *Surround (Hiding in Plain Site)*. The broken mirrors sit in a round but jagged form on the floor, while carefully placed lamps bounce light off the mirrors and create an impression of watery shadows along the three walls. This immersive environment gives visitors a place to think about themselves and society in a broken but collective state. Both *Changing* and *Surround (Hiding in Plain Site)* elicit a sense of the fragility of one’s own life but done so in a communal way that recognizes each other’s humanity. I hope that when you visit the exhibition, you’ll find yourself in these meditative spaces, walking around the pieces both alone and together.

As we reflect on the nature of time, Ahrens has also given us the gift of *time to reflect*. For this, we are eternally grateful. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Barbara O’Brien, who has done an excellent job curating the exhibition and composing this catalogue, designed by Elizabeth Helling. I would also like to thank Robbin Zella, former HMA Director, for her twenty-four years leading one of the largest community college art museums in the country. I am also grateful to Elyse De Martini, David Hoskins, and Vincent Dion for their unwavering help in making the installation a success, and Laura Roberts for her efforts to share the exhibition far and wide. This exhibition would not be possible without the vision and support of Terrence Cheng, President of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system, and Dr. Dwayne Smith, CEO of Housatonic Community College.

—Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, PhD
Director of the Housatonic Museum of Art



Holding Light in the Palm of Her Hand

by Barbara O'Brien

The tangible and the ephemeral. The industrial and the natural. The mundane becomes the universal. The everyday becomes the mythic. The earth becomes the sky. But the earth will always triumph. The weight of gravity and mass and form overwhelming the presence of a light—be it a star or a twinkle in an eye or the glimmer of hope that dies quickly among the weight of reality. Perhaps that is the reading of just one human among many who seeks solace where there seems now to be none, who turns to the power of art to offer just a crack in the black night of our times.

While I wrote this passage in 2020 about one of June Ahrens's sculptural works, it seems still relevant to her current work on view at the Housatonic Museum of Art. The extraordinary exhibition *Reflecting Time* addresses the great mysteries of life; love and loss and longing; that which we know deep in our souls and that which we will never fathom; and questions to which there are no good answers. The conversation, the dialogue is here honored. Can art allow us to get closer to one another while hearing our own thoughts, June seems to ask. The answer is a resounding "yes."

Reflecting Time is a bravura event in the career of June Ahrens. At 83 years of age, June is ambitiously building on a decades-long history of creating elegiac sculpture and installations through which she has addressed both personal and societal loss and confusion surrounding the most complex issues of our time: homelessness, 9/11, gun violence, and now the global devastation of COVID. Yet the power of her installations—whatever their inspiration—is their ability to offer a generous range of experiences for the viewer: joy, sorrow, curiosity, wonder, awe. June harnesses the ephemeral potential of light and decay, and the emotional power of memory and loss to create sculpture

that transforms the very architecture in which she creates her installations.

Two site-dependent installations comprise *Reflecting Time*. The first sensation upon entering the gallery is a heavy, slightly dusky aroma like the scent of night falling over an open field. Orienting one's vision brings into focus the drama of *Changing*, a mandala of decayed flowers placed directly on the floor, and a wall of broken acrylic mirror at the end of the gallery, reflecting both viewer and art. The central form is composed of layers of thousands of petals plucked from flowers donated to the artist; the desiccated remains of roses, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, and lilies are still identifiable, their once-vibrant hues darkened by long exposure to the air. Dozens of decayed white roses form the 18-foot perimeter; and just prior to opening night, the artist placed a final ring of fresh, white long-stemmed roses, stripping off all of the leaves and arranging the heads toward the inner circle with the long stems emanating in a pattern of evenly spaced, not-quite-straight lines





that create a post-minimal drawing. While June uses the mandala form to focus our energy, she does not allow our gaze to rest easy, as there is a powerful story still to be told.

Moving along the perimeter of *Changing*, one becomes aware of a wavering light along the side walls, quiet and melodic. Our gaze, as one's gaze will, follows light and this shimmer leads one toward a ten-foot high and wide wall at the far end of the gallery that is covered in broken acrylic mirrored panels and shards. The startling effect of this arena of wavy reflections is akin to a carnival sideshow with forms expanding and contracting in our vision as we move around the mandala and toward the mirrored wall. The mirrored wall plays visual tricks that both inflate and wither the art, the gallery, and the viewer—morphing them into forms that viewers alternately described as “large, looming animals” and “the shifting shapes of continents.” The comfort of a circle, a form signifying unity and wholeness, is upended by the shifting light and forms of its (and our) reflection. June insists on no easy resting place for herself in the pursuit of artistic metaphor. “A circle is a circle,” she shared during one of many conversations leading up to the exhibition; “It’s whole. But within the circle, lots of things can happen.”

A central element of June’s artistic vocabulary is built on monumentally scaled installations that use both the aesthetics of accumulation and the emotional power of abstraction. I first worked with June in 2003, showcasing an iteration of *The Wishbone Project*—a collaborative installation that premiered at the Housatonic Museum of Art (HMA) in 1999 and included nearly eight thousand hand-formed wishbone shapes of modeling compound, made by community members across New England. Suspended from fishing line, the shapes seemed to waver, shimmering in the light of the gallery. In 2019, June created *How Many Tears are Enough*, an ambitious, immersive installation addressing gun violence, in which hun-



Photo: Donna Callighan

How Many Tears are Enough? at UConn, Stamford Art Gallery 2019

dreds of lengths of rope and wire were suspended from the ceiling of the University of Connecticut, Stamford Art Gallery. June incorporated hand-sculpted forms made from wire and bits of glass along each strand creating a complex composition; a drawing in space. These intimate, abstracted objects suggested flowers or thorns; prayers or memories, and were reflected in a floor completely covered in reflective foil.

The pendulum swing between action and reflection is brilliantly evidenced in the dynamic between the two installations that comprise *Reflecting Time*. As one emerges from *Changing*, one walks into the back gallery to enter *Surround (Hiding in Plain Site)*, an immersive experience of light, shadow, and reflections. *Surround* features a 14 ½-foot wide circle of shattered plexiglass placed directly on the floor, rough edges overlaid in strata four and five deep. Scoop lights set waist high at the front corners of the gallery throw wide shadows across the space, creating a shimmering sea of reflections on the back and side walls. As viewers walk around the perimeter of the rough circle, their shadows break and reconfigure the constantly shifting movement of light across the gallery walls. More surprising is the experience of seeing other visitors reflected and refracted deep in the pool of broken mirrored shards, turning the soft curves of a torso or the sway of an arm into sharp-edged fleeting mo-

ments. The metaphor of a broken spirit is palpable; yet in the upended sea of 21st-century social ills and public health challenges, *Surround* reconfigures the forms in a cubist composition to impart a semblance of calm.

I have experienced two previous iterations of *Hiding in Plain Site*: at Silvermine Galleries in 2008, and at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in 2011. Both installations were sited near a corner, expanding into the center of the space, but with only a slim area between the sculpture and the walls. A rotating light hung directly above the shards, creating an external rhythm for the viewer. At the HMA, June has created a theatrical experience with the proscenium stage holding the installation and the viewer becoming part of the narrative. The “activation” of the viewer in the HMA *Surround* takes this installation from a work of elegant immersion to a place of discomfort and psychic challenge. June has upped the emotional ante, inviting the viewer to animate the art with their presence.



Photo: June Ahrens

June’s use of industrial and organic materials to transform both the architecture and the viewer into broken geometry calls to mind the cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). In *The Reservoir, Horta de Ebro* (1909), a mountainside village in Catalonia is transformed into a nearly-faltering tower of glowing, slim rectangles. The light, coming from sea and sky or perhaps both, shimmers while the city on a hill is reflected in the sea below, water separated from the land by a smoothly rounded retaining wall. While the light is prominent, the palette is quite subdued; the range of tones stays warm with ochres and oranges that seems to be dug out of sand and stone. Nothing is as idyllic as we might wish, even with the wash of shimmering light. Nature takes second place to the built environment; and the artist takes pride of place over the subject matter. This art historical turn of affairs—artists moving from representing nature or life or the human figure toward a self-conscious awareness of the power of composition, broken forms, historical context, and subjective experience—is a legacy that June’s installations embrace.

In her ability to transform space and materials, June Ahrens honors the never-static experience of life. While not turning away from the political and social challenges of our time, June has transformed the Burt Chernow Galleries at the Housatonic Museum of Art into a space of beauty and healing, memory and hope.

Barbara O’Brien, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the former Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri. She is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her twenty years in Boston included positions as Editor in Chief of *Art New England* magazine, Director of the Trustman Art Gallery at Simmons University, and Director of the Gallery and Visiting Artist Program at Montserrat College of Art.

Artist Statement

Over the years, my art has explored issues of fragility, vulnerability, danger, and healing. These themes continue to surface, and I respond to them as best I can through a visual language that takes many forms and shapes, often unexpected and surprising. I have learned to let the work lead me and to embrace the openness of what lies ahead. It goes beyond what we know and asks: “What if?”

My work continues to explore the unique properties of different materials. I am particularly attracted to industrial materials and everyday objects and their artistic potential. I develop a dialogue with the material that informs the outcome of each piece. The use of manufactured or found materials is seductive and feeds my focus on danger, beauty, darkness, and reflected light. The pieces can be site-dependent or stand-alone, depending on the space. I isolate these materials to encourage the viewer to consider the open-endedness of the work and to remind us of the need for social ritual and political discourse.

Last September I had an idea that slowly developed into *Reflecting Time*. I am truly grateful for the generosity and help of each person (5–87 years of age) who made this possible. Many of you know how tedious, back breaking, and time consuming these installations were to create. It would take several pages to give tribute to each individual, but know that this show would have not existed without all of you. Thank you to my family, friends, and neighbors who helped make my show *Reflecting Time* a reality. A special thanks to Jamal Ansari of East Coast Wholesale Flowers for his donations of flowers and support.

—June Ahrens



Photo: Donna Callighan

Works in the Exhibition

Changing, 2022

broken acrylic mirror, dried flower petals and whole roses. Installation dimensions variable: central mandala 18 feet diameter; reflecting wall 10 x 10 feet

Surround (Hiding in Plain Site), 2022

broken acrylic mirror, felt, 14½ feet diameter (site dependent)

June Ahrens graduated from Purchase College, New York, with a BFA (Summa Cum Laude). She attended the Advanced Seminars at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Ahrens has participated in numerous one-person shows, group exhibitions, and collaborative installations. Her work has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Duracell and Polaroid Foundations, and was nominated for a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant. She was granted the Distinguished Advocate for the Arts Award by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, which also awarded her an Individual Artists grant.

An installation by Ahrens was acquired by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City Missouri, for their permanent collection and her work is in the collections of the Trustman Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts; the Housatonic Museum and the Contemporary Gallery of Art, Sacred Heart University, both Connecticut; and numerous private collections.

For further information, visit juneahrens.com

Credits

Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, Director, Housatonic Museum of Art

Robbin Zella, Director Emerita, Housatonic Museum of Art

Barbara O'Brien, Guest Curator

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