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## Natural Selection

by [Sasha Tycko](#) • April 25, 2012

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(N Masani Muhammad)

Friday night outside the Zhou B. Art Center, the low thumping of house music and huddled groups of gallery habitués on smoke breaks penetrated the otherwise deserted street. Inside, the buzz of voices transported gallery-goers to a livelier place, where moss sprouted from the walls and live plants hung from the ceiling as part of the opening of the Earth Day-inspired show, "Chicago's Twelve." Although the crowd was more white-haired than the typical gallery scene, a range of well-dressed art enthusiasts came out for Third Fridays, the monthly gallery walk in Bridgeport.

The show's name comes from the film "Ocean's Eleven," which for curator Sergio Gomez evokes the idea of a group working toward a shared goal. Settling on the number twelve to reflect the calendar year and the natural lunar cycle, Gomez had four parameters in mind when selecting the twelve artists: they had to be Chicago-based, have made

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“sustainability a passionate working ethic,” have the “highest quality” art, and “respond to the gallery space [he] assigned them.” The debonair George Clooney charm was not, it seems, a criterion.

The space sets the stage for many of the tensions worked out in the collections. Stark white cement pillars, exposed wiring, and naked brick walls allude to the warehouse’s industrial past. Many of the installed pieces hang among the cement pillars, creating a jungle of art, nature, and industry. Children dart through Mary Ellen Croteau’s swinging “Endless Columns” of plastic jars and lids and Yva Neal’s hanging plants. “I wanted people to experience the art by walking under it, around it, through it, at close proximity, and at a distance,” said Gomez.

Recycled objects are among the most common materials in the show; dumpsters, alleys, and flea markets have replaced the art supply store. Connie Noyes’s work subverts the function of these material to explore their beauty and seduction. “I like the idea of taking this ordinary material, pushing it to see what it is capable of doing in reaction to other materials and techniques,” Noyes says. She spreads packing peanuts, roofing paper, and studio debris onto canvases, shellacking them silver and a shiny black. In a complete reversal of the utilitarian purposes of her materials, the effect is sensuous and begs to be touched. A viewer once told Noyes, “I want to lick it.”

One artist emphasizes the “Chicago” part of the exhibition title. N. Masani Muhammad, who grew up in South Chicago, was inspired by remnants of Chicago’s industrial past—the railroad tracks, the old steel mills, and the ship canals. “I learned how to balance what man tries to make of nature with what power and awesomeness nature really has in my pieces to show who has the upper hand,” said Muhammad. Using materials like nails, wood, and a handwritten mantra that declares, “I will obey, I will obey...I will,” her collages speak about industry, slavery, and power. Her work is highly personal; the handwritten notes and photos of her childhood haunts depict an evolving personal struggle with these issues.

Artist Sharon Gilmore has an intimate connection to the transformative process of time and life. When not in her studio, she works as a nurse—first working in postpartum and now in hospice care—and her process alludes to both bookends of the life cycle. Her innovative sculptures, which can take up to a year and a half to make, combine the manmade with the natural. “I don’t sketch,” Gilmore says, describing her “continually evolving” process, which often involves chopping off part of one piece and attaching it to another. She gets her materials from flea markets, woods, alleys, and dumpsters, combining branches and driftwood with bicycle wheels and other found objects.

Viewer engagement is part of what makes “Chicago’s Twelve” a success. The artists, their names emblazoned on name cards, mingled with the crowd the night of the reception to discuss and explain their art. Cell phone audio tours and detailed placards accompany each collection. This interaction between artist and viewer creates a symbiotic ecosystem. And it’s paying off: “There were a number of leads that we are following right now and closing the deals,” Gomez said of selling the artwork on display. “I am sure more will come soon. It was a strong, well-received exhibition.”

*Zhou B. Art Center, 1029 W. 35th St. Through June 9. Monday-Friday, 10am-5pm; Saturday, noon-5pm. Free. (773)523-0200. [zbccenter.org](#)*

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