



**Of Sticks and Stones:
Sculptures by Jeff Baldus**

May 19 – August 5, 2018



Jeff Baldus, *BC Ravine I*, 2016, cast bronze, 10 x 24 x 16 inches
photo credit: Doug Burg of Burg Studios, Orange City, Iowa



Jeff Baldus, *Sumac*, 2016, cast bronze, 66 x 47 x 8.5 inches
photo credit: Doug Burg of Burg Studios, Orange City, Iowa



Jeff Baldus, *Orb 5*, 2017, wood clay, 21 inches, diameter
photo credit: Doug Burg of Burg Studios, Orange City, Iowa

Art is contemplation. It is the pleasure of the mind which searches into nature and which there divines the spirit of which nature herself is animated.

– Auguste Rodin

Introduction

For nearly his entire life, Jeff Baldus, professor of art at Briar Cliff University, has worked with nature to create beautiful things. Among his most important memories from his childhood is working in his family's garden alongside his father. His love for the soil and the magic of what could grow from it later led to a passion for pottery. For the last 20 years, Jeff has produced some of this region's most consistently elegant vases, plates, and other pottery items, with more than a couple thousand of them finding their ways into private collections.

His devotion to pottery continues. But over the last decade, Jeff has found new materials, techniques, and inspirations to create in a different and perhaps deeper way. This period of broader experimentation with materials began not long after the death of his father, when Jeff returned to school in 2009 to work toward a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of South Dakota. He began working more directly with a variety of natural materials, from those representing

the beginning of life like seedpods to those representing the end like dried flowers and dead trees.

While searching for new materials, Jeff hiked along the ravine that borders the Briar Cliff campus. There he discovered the decaying remains of a box elder tree, its trunk eroding from both weather and insects. Rather than seeing it as inconsequential natural debris, he found physical beauty in its current state and great symbolic value connected to the process of life and death, which all organisms experience. With this realization, Jeff's sculptures began to grow increasingly ambitious, aesthetically and conceptually.



Installation View, featuring Orbs, Scholar Rocks, and Vine Drawings

Scholar's Rocks

After Jeff discovered the first rotting trunk from a box elder tree, he began thinking about its physical characteristics and why they were so intriguing to him. The trunk was gnarly, varied in its textures, uneven, and punctured by holes from decomposition and termites. Yet Jeff recognized that those features of the tree's decline sparked his imagination. Well-educated in the history of art, he realized that much of what he valued in the box elder trunk was similar to what Chinese intellectuals have found in what are referred to as "scholar's rocks."

For more than a thousand years, people in China have appreciated uncarved rocks that possess unusual forms. Scholar's rocks have been collected and placed in outdoor settings like formal gardens or indoor settings such as libraries to inspire poetry and essays, paintings and drawings, and conversation and contemplation. As the tradition continued, artists began carving rocks to mimic the odd shapes that collectors had begun to value.

The characteristics that Chinese thinkers most revered in scholar's rocks included: thinness, openness, perforations, and wrinkling. Not coincidentally, these are the same characteristics that attracted Jeff to decaying tree material, and for somewhat similar reasons. The Chinese have most revered scholar's rocks that have been shaped exclusively through erosion, that is, rocks that show their age naturally. While the shapes of scholar's rocks are valued primarily through the visual similarities that they share with those of mountains, plants, or even animals or humans, it is their capacity for a potentially endless aging process that can represent the spiritual forces of nature. Likewise, Jeff's use of the decaying tree forms in his sculptures takes thin, open, perforated, and wrinkling organic material and converts it into cast metal, something that has nearly the durability of rocks.



Jeff Baldus, *Ancestors*, 2018, mixed media, dimensions variable (tallest, 98 inches)

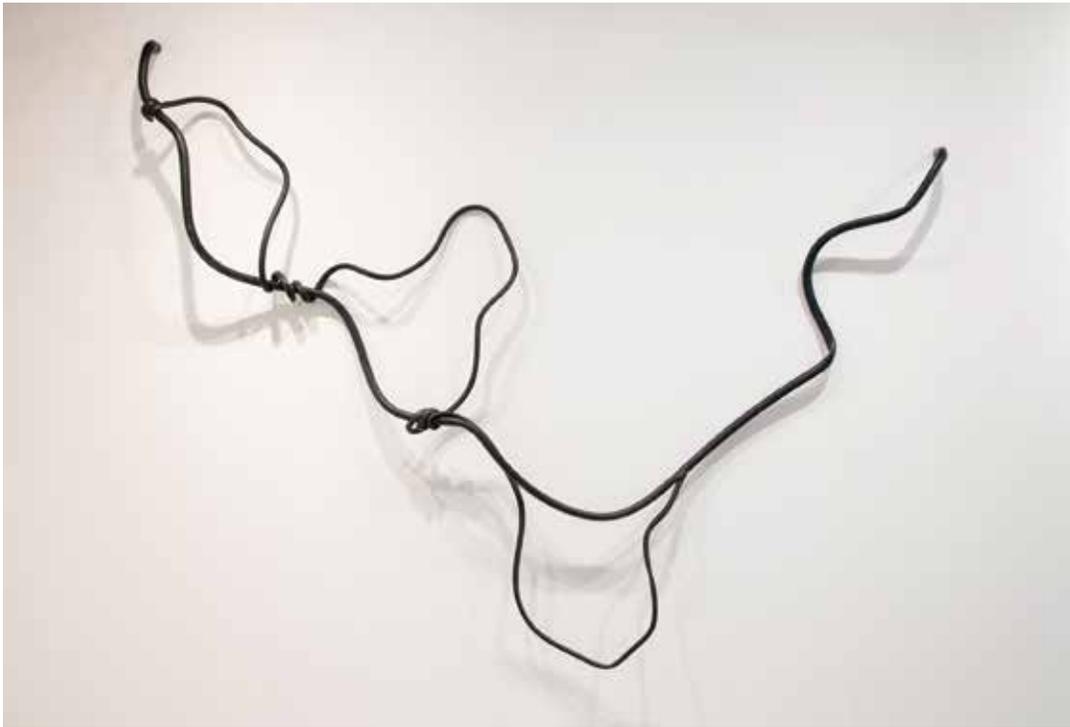
Gardens

The Chinese also design entire gardens to contemplate beauty, nature, and spirituality. As political turmoil ensued toward the end of the T'ang dynasty (618-906), increasing numbers of intellectuals and aristocrats began retreating toward manmade gardens for artistic inspiration and scholarly conversations. The gardens included rocks, small trees, and manmade ponds that evoked a sense of the grandeur of nature on a miniature scale. By partnering, in a sense, with the rocks and trees, the Chinese were able to find peace and humility in the knowledge that their lives were part of something much larger and enduring.

Jeff's passion for gardening has made him well aware of the realities and the metaphors for natural processes and the creation of beauty. While natural objects are subject to seasonal changes and aging, art is able to transcend time. What is especially meaningful is that in most cases he is actually transforming the materials of nature into his artworks. Jeff sculpts clay into large, rough, earth-toned boulders or

smaller, smooth stones. By using soil to create new kinds of garden rocks, he maintains his connection to his childhood memories of time in the garden. By casting broken limbs and decaying trunks of trees into metal or preserving them through paints and other applied materials, he honors his relationships with those who live on in his memory.

In his series, *Ancestors*, Jeff integrates these real and metaphoric elements into his work. Smooth, simply shaped, ceramic pedestals support the rough and unpredictable preserved remains of trees. As he describes *Ancestors*, "it is about formal relationships, clay and wood, manmade forms with natural elements, and the curves/lines of my clay forms with the lines found in nature." Just as important, he states that these sculptures are about aging "family and friends who once stood tall and proud." Through his success in artistically connecting humanity and nature, Jeff is able to, in Rodin's words, "divine the spirit of which nature herself is animated."



Jeff Baldus, *Vine Drawing 8*, 2018, mixed media, 96 x 130 x 10 inches
photo credit: Doug Burg of Burg Studios, Orange City, Iowa

Statement

I remember as a child working in the garden with my father... he would plant the vegetables and take care of the peonies and roses, and I would plant annual flowers. When we were in the garden, it was just my father and me. I had my father all to myself—doing something together that I grew to love—planting seeds and watching them grow—then arranging the flowers into bouquets. With five brothers and a father who loved sports, most of his free time was focused on sports—playing catch, golfing, attending games and then reliving moments of the games, watching sports on television, etc. He always tried to get me interested in sports. I did not care about sports. I preferred to play in the clay. So, the garden became a safe place, where there were no pressures to do anything but be with nature and my dad.

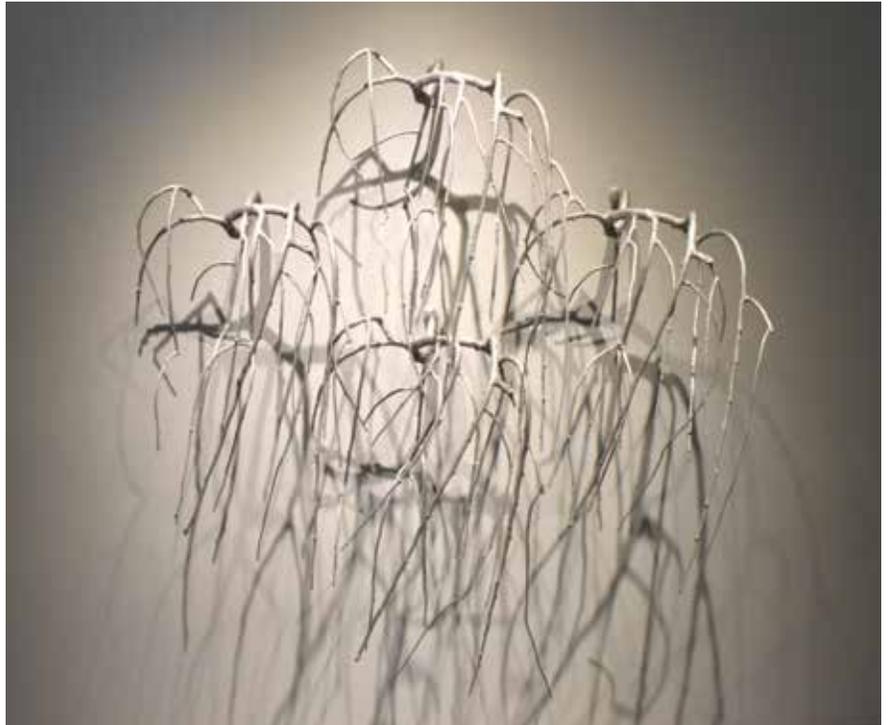
I started graduate school shortly after my father's death. He was on my mind, and I felt his guiding hand. From day one, my work was inspired by nature—incorporating seedpods, branches, dried flowers, dead trees. However, it was also

inspired by the idea that we have the opportunity to reinvent ourselves. To take something damaged, abandoned, etc. and make it whole again in a new and beautiful way. I saw the seedpods as a metaphor for my father. As I expanded the range of sculptures I created, I moved from the wheel thrown vessels that I have produced for years to more sculptural forms. Working with wood clay (a clay body that includes a large percentage of pine wood shavings) also created the earthy feel that I was striving for in the orbs. As the wood burns out in the firing process, it leaves a wonderful textured surface. The glazes, also made from elements of the earth, tend to be the colors of nature.

With the death of my father and then more recently my mother, I started to look at the cycle of nature a little differently. I saw trees that had once been so magnificent and grand, which were now broken off by wind and storm, infested with insects, and some so rotten that when you picked them up they disintegrated. Yet there was still so much



Jeff Baldus, *Scholar Rock I*, 2016, bronze, 22 x 7 x 6 inches
photo credit: Doug Burg of Burg Studios, Orange City, Iowa



Jeff Baldus, *Untitled*, 2018, cast aluminum, 93 x 84 x 32 inches

beauty in the pieces. I began to seek these out, collect them and carefully transport them. Then I tried to preserve them in some way by creating cast metal sculptures—to give them new life.

I think often of my parents and friends, their bodies aging, weakening, becoming frail and eventually giving out. I see them in these pieces of wood—and in their fragility, there is such beauty.

I try to preserve that beauty and bring it to the attention of the viewer. The work stands on its own—what the viewer experiences will never be the same as what I experience and that is as it should be.

Acknowledgments

This exhibition has been made possible in part through a grant from the Iowa Arts Council to support the production of many of the cast metal sculptures included in this exhibition. This exhibition has also been funded in part by a donation from the Aalfs Family Foundation.

The metal sculptures in the exhibition were cast by Leslie Bruning and his crew at Bruning Sculpture in Omaha, Nebraska and Rick Haugen and his crew at BronzeAge Art Casting in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Jeff Baldus is represented by Modern Arts Midtown in Omaha, Nebraska and Michael Warren Contemporary in Denver, Colorado.



Jeff Baldus, *Second Self*, 2018, bronze with steel base, 84 x 30 x 30 inches
Sioux City Art Center Permanent Collection
Purchased with funds donated in memory of Louise Persinger by 65 individuals, couples,
and businesses, and with funds from the Persinger Family Foundation

Cover
Installation View, featuring *Orbs* and *Vine Drawings*