

## ROCKFORD

**FROM LIMB TO LIMB**  
at the Illinois State Museum,  
Lockport Gallery, Lockport,  
through July 10

By Fred Camper

## DREAM WEAVERS

While this century has seen "fine art" occasionally exhibited alongside natural objects—in the Art Institute's great 1994 Redon show, for example—I've never come across an exhibit quite as daringly inclusive as "From Limb to Limb," currently at the Lockport Gallery of the Illinois State Museum (later it travels to other branches of the museum, including the one in Chicago, tentatively scheduled for September 1999). Curator Geoffrey Bates has combined the museum's ethnographic and natural history collections with work by contemporary Illinois artists, giving each type of object—anonymous Indian baskets, current artists' works, and birds' nests collected a century ago—equal weight. Each piece has its own label, and the three categories are interspersed throughout the exhibit. The result is stunning—and deeply moving. It's a measure of the show's achievement that at times one wonders if the very fine contemporary art here is as good as the nests.

This is not exactly the kind of question Bates had in mind. Provoked by accounts of recontextualizing installations by artists like Fred Wilson and James Rosenquist, he was also aware of

the fact that many contemporary artists have been inspired by nature. At the same time he knew that many museumgoers "walk into a contemporary exhibit and say, 'Where is this from? It's ridiculous.'" He hoped to increase viewers' appreciation of contemporary art by placing it in a new context.

Collecting birds' nests and eggs was something of a 19th-century mania in the United States, one of several expressions of interest in nature coming just as much of the wilderness was being destroyed. Not having studied birds' nests, I can't be sure whether the startling power of those on view here is due to the collectors' and Bates's selection or to the focusing effect of a gallery space—seeing these is not at all like finding a pigeon's nest on one's porch.

But in some ways these animal artisans have outdone artists who've used natural objects and forms in their work. The circular nest labeled *Unidentified Bird Nest (Gnatcatcher?)*, wedged between two branches, seems to concentrate and refine the energy

of the branches' rougher forms. *Cacique (?) Bird Nest* is even more elegant, its tapered, tornadolike cone curving near the bottom, its surface a dense, irregular weave.

The real power of such shapes is that they seem guided by principles outside the orderly realm of traditional aesthetics. Barbara Cooper's wooden *Ova* is elegant and poetic, rising more than six feet above the floor, but its gently curved surfaces are more studied and regular than those of the birds' nests, its woven wood strips more calculated. The strips' straight edges seem to indicate machine cutting, and the work is in two symmetrical halves. One could easily prefer the nests, with their apparently disordered interlacing, raw unpredictability, and rough strength. But closer examination of Cooper's weave reveals that it too never repeats, and that groups of three or four strips always meet at different angles. This work's mysterious form lies somewhere between nature and culture, as does Toby Zallman's



"CACIQUE (?) BIRD NEST"

*Couple (for My Parents)*. From a distance it looks like two large pieces of wood with very rough bark; up close, the surface can be seen to be a nest-like agglomeration of materials. Rough enough to be mistaken for weird growths, *Couple* is a bit too studied not to be human.

In the exhibition booklet Bates suggests that basket making may have originated with early humans' examination of birds' nests; contemporary artists in turn have been inspired by both nature and traditional crafts. But many of the Native American baskets on display here reveal precisely repeating weaves and geometrical designs; though not made for tourists, they seem more influenced by aesthetic choices than by nests. Others, though, combine regularity with striking asymmetry or surprising flamboyance. The spectacular *Pomo Gift ("Sun") Basket* has a concave side decorated with clumps of bird feathers while on the convex side are hung strings of clamshell beads. This piece combines plain functionality with the

notion that natural objects are sacred enough to decorate a ritual artifact. I got the same sense of a decorated offering from Jerry Bleem's two strange fetishlike vessels. His *Mute (L)* is a most unnatural industrial blue, and its surface—of wax, plastic, and found paper—is covered with staples coming undone, perhaps a metaphor for industrial culture falling apart.

The piece that brought the whole show together for me was John McQueen's wall installation, *Occurrence*, a seven-foot-square work that looks like a line drawing and is hung like a painting. It gives us portraits, mostly, surrounding an image of a truck, but their lines are created by willow twigs, many of them bent or broken, all tied together with black string. I found the piece a wonderful metaphor for the exhibit—and a powerful contrast to most art, which radically reshapes, even "breaks" natural materials to create

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forms and images owing little to their material origins. The miracle of this exhibit is that it restores some of the balances our civilization has largely lost: between humans and animals; between nature and the ordered, calculated products we make from it. ■