

Connecting to Nature Through Art



MIGRATION AT HEINZ, 2021. PHOTO: SARAH KAVAGE

Building eco-tech structures with invasive plant material, weaving climate science into striking tapestries and supporting the growth of a healthy forest are only some of the ways the Environmental Art Program at the Schuylkill Center has worked on restoring people's connection to nature over the last two decades.



PORTAL AT GATEWAY PARK, 2021. PHOTO: ROBERT ZVERINA

Last year the Center participated in the tri-state art initiative Lenapehoking~Watershed (the land of the Lenape people and today's approximate geographical area of the Delaware River Watershed) commissioned by the Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River (AWE). The initiative aims to activate our watershed region in the public's imagination through art, education and playful engagement.

Two key projects were launched: Aqua Marooned! is a new card game, created by Adrienne Mackey and her team at Swim Pony, that explores nature using quick wit, physical activity and creative invention. The card decks are free to take and play, and are available at your nearest AWE site. The cards can be played everywhere where one can find nature.

For Water Spirit environmental artist Sarah Kavage has created an array of art installations in our regions' fields, wetlands and woods. Using locally-sourced natural materials, Kavage's sculptures are rooted, literally and figuratively, in the specific landscapes of the host sites. For example, on the Schuylkill Center's grounds Kavage built in collaboration with Iraqi designer Yaroub Al-Obaidi Al Mudhif – A Confluence. A mudhif is a traditional Southern Iraqi guesthouse, made entirely out of bundled and thatched invasive reeds, called phragmites. Al Mudhif is the first of such structures in North America.

While phragmites is an invasive plant in the US, it is native to the Middle East and Europe. By productively applying this plant as building material, Kavage calls our usual conservation methods into question. "That's the beauty of art," she explains her approach to invasives in a more practical and metaphorical way. "Similar to demonizing anything that is sort of out-of-place,

I would love for this work to rather provoke a more nuanced understanding of that language around displacement and the movement of plants and people." Kavage's work draws on community organizing, spans long time horizons, and takes in a sweeping view to frame the examination of systems, ethics, and landscapes. Her dramatic gestures are humanized and given depth by the intimacy of individual interactions and unexpected encounters.

The mudhif was erected by the hands of hundreds of volunteers, particularly by US veterans and Iraqi refugees from the US wars. The mudhif was designed to be used as a space for healing and dialogue across cultural, religious and political boundaries. As a spatial and metaphorical vessel for living with nature, the mudhif brings attention to the changing landscape in our current climate. Albeit severely impacted during last year's Hurricane Ida, the structure is holding up in its winterized state. For the late spring the Schuylkill Center and the artists are planning to invite the public again for a celebration and respectful goodbye of this unique installation, creating a space for contemplation, conversation and awakening in nature.



Check out the mudhif at www.schuylkillcenter.org and other Water Spirit installations throughout the region and learn more about the art initiative at www.lenapehoking-watershed-art.com.

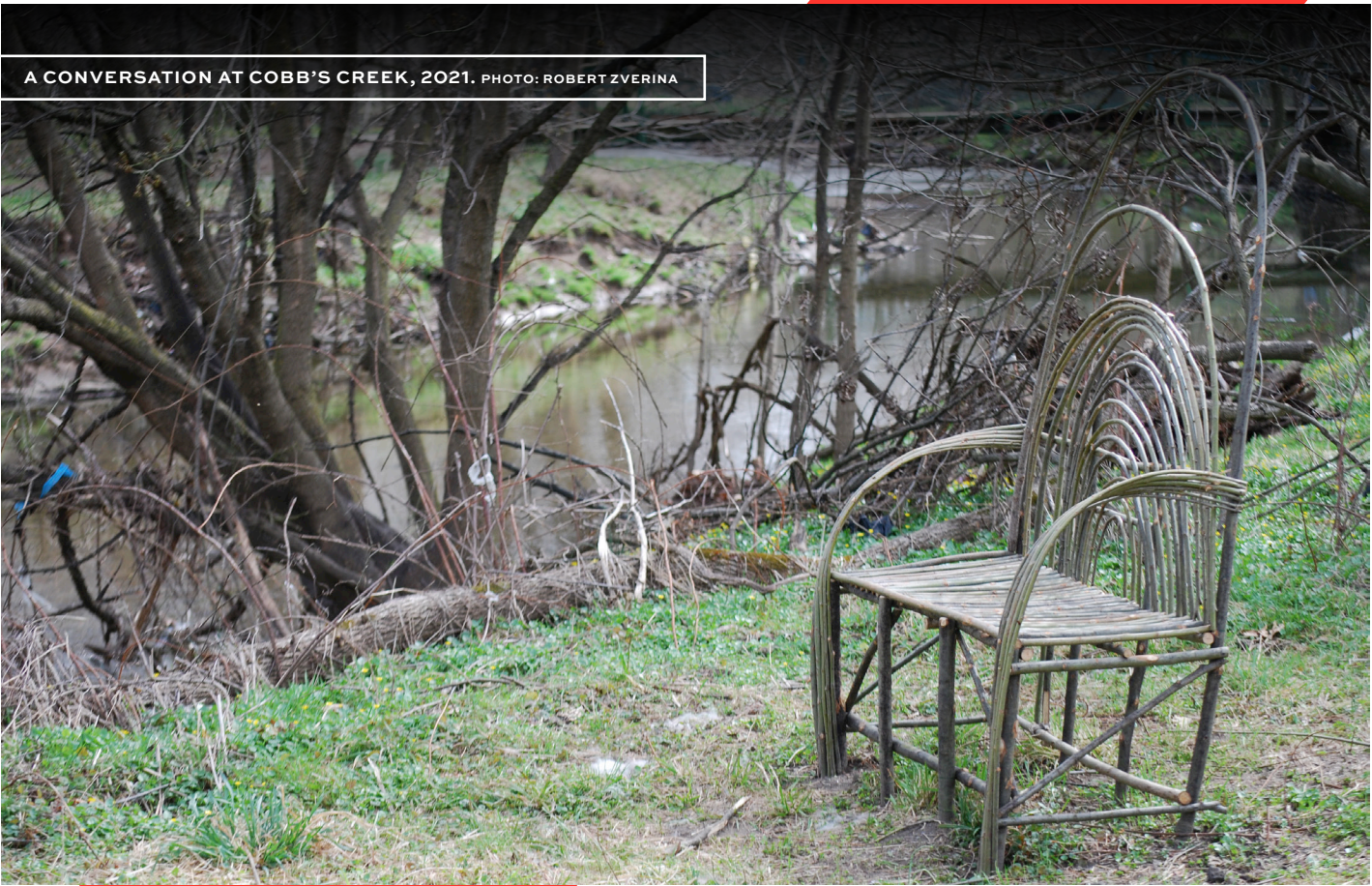




ARC IN THE BOAT BASIN
AT THE INDEPENDENCE
SEAPORT MUSEUM (AYMAR
CCOPACATTY CONDUCTING
ARC), 2021.
PHOTO: PHOTO: ALI STEPHANIK.



MIGRATION AT HEINZ, 2021, PHOTO: SARAH KAVAGE



A CONVERSATION AT COBB'S CREEK, 2021. PHOTO: ROBERT ZVERINA