

# GYÖNGY LAKY CROSSING BORDERS

BY  
ANNE LEE

*legant and ornery. Crude and tidy. Playful and menacing.* Throughout her career, San Francisco artist Gyöngy Laky has

crafted intricate sculptural works from both natural and man-made detritus—cut and painted twigs, commercial wood, telephone wire, and toy figures—fastened together to form grids, vessels, language-related sculptures, and abstracted architectural shapes. Her interdisciplinary body of work is often described with such seemingly contradictory terms. Yet that duality is exactly what makes her oeuvre, presented in more than 180 solo and group shows, so complex and provocative.

Laky's personal history is as multilayered, dynamic, and rich as any of her visual subjects. A self-described "artist participant," she explores our world in work that purposely creates tension, is "attractive and yet playfully turbulent," and thus makes us think about how we co-exist with each other and with nature.



OPPOSITE PAGE: **Give and Take**; 2009; manzanita, red ink, and bullets for building; 30.5 x 31.5 x 4"

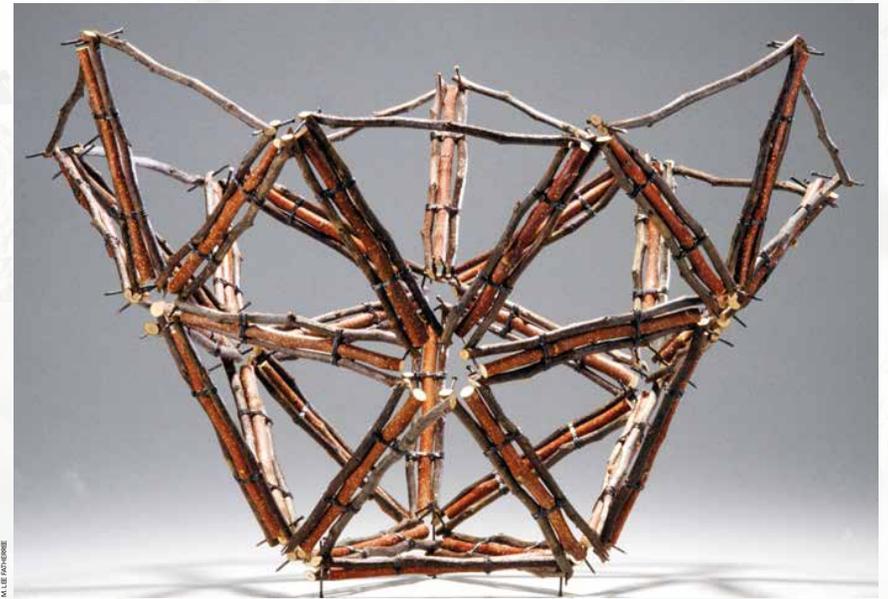
THIS PAGE ABOVE: Laky in the studio. In background: **Chance Encounter**; 2009; walnut, paint, and dowels; 80 x 11.5 x 2"

BELOW: **For BF**; 2000; plum and apple prunings, steel wire, and nails; 14 x 23" diameter

Honored as one of two recipients of the 2017 National Basketry Association's Lifetime Achievement Awards, Laky reflects on her artistic trajectory. As "engager" with a cosmopolitan curiosity, she believes that "all of our experiences get internalized, and... it's like a well of resources if we can reach into it." Her passionate interest in language, architecture, nature, geopolitics, and culture began at a young age. In the Hungarian countryside of her childhood, she "deeply connected with nature" and remembers being fascinated by simple, hand-built structures such as fences, scaffolding, and vine trellises. She was always working with her hands, be it building forts with her brother or constructing small structures with toothpicks; later, at UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, she became fascinated by the architecture and engineering of grids, struts, and cable construction.

In 1948, her family was forced to flee the horrors of her native Hungary to the United States. Already fluent in several languages, she absorbed several more during worldwide travels and continues to study today. Her activism for peace and equality blossomed during the age of "Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Black Panthers" while a student at UC Berkeley; her equally strong concerns about waste and degradation, coupled with the burgeoning environmentalist movement of the 1960s, led her to help establish the Environmental Design department at UC Davis, where she taught from 1978 to 2005.

Through material choices, Laky creates a provocative dialogue around these subjects of ongoing concern to her. As a comment

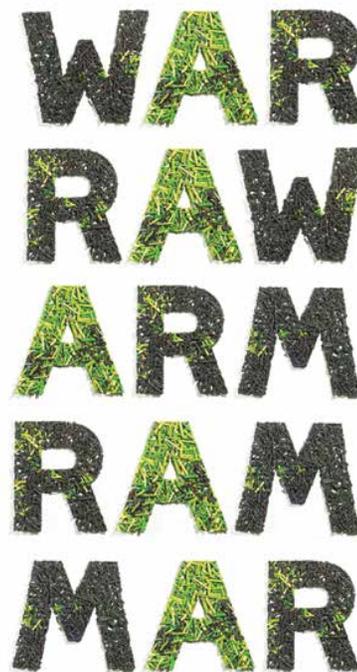




M. LEE PATTERSON

on our culture of waste and (ab)use of nature as our personal resource, she composes with materials harvested from nature and incorporates recycled elements. In particular, branches resonate as “probably one of the first forms of architecture.” Her first vessel, *Kikapu*, dates from 1968 when as a student she noticed the “long, beautiful, rusty red shoots” that UC Berkeley gardeners had pruned and left behind from a London plane tree. She gathered up the twigs, found some string, and bundled them onto her back—a “powerful connection to that long historical tradition of people gathering from the landscape...and making things, houses, and enclosures.”

For 50 years, these unwanted bits of nature have continued to take architectural form in her art. Rather than the young, flexible and uniform shoots most artists prefer to use, she was intrigued by “gnarly, odd-shaped, grotesque shapes...so very eloquent in a strange way. They have a lot of character and...are very different from each other.” By using hardware to create the natural architectural structure, she is presenting “something that looks like nature, but a human being has been here.” For *BF* is an example of human ingenuity and ability to solve structural puzzles that Laky so admires. A geometric construction of almost equilateral triangles, it references Buckminster Fuller’s work on geodesic domes. As with most of her pieces, its hardware remains visible: “Mostly I like the screws sticking out; I think of them as embellishments or jewelry, a brilliant little piece of human ingenuity.”



TOMASO JITA

Laky’s early years of upheaval and displacement and the need to adapt culturally and linguistically could have been a limitation, but instead proved to be a source of inspiration. She explored means of communication—from Chinese calligraphy to Egyptian hieroglyphs—and both its universality and limitations. Noting that her abstract branch forms often looked like letter shapes, she has explored the complexities of written language and sought to challenge viewers’ assumptions about meaning. The words Laky chooses are simple and meant to be read literally, but her materials and method of construction force the viewer to read deeper and understand how deceptive words can be. In her hands, a letter or word becomes a sentence. *That Word* spells ART in three separate, free-standing seven-and-a-half-foot-high letters created from orchard prunings and street tree cuttings, and tied with wire to a welded structure. Provocative, tongue-in-cheek, and laden with meanings, it asks us to ponder age-old questions about what constitutes art and how we can explain it. Perhaps art is just literally and figuratively what we make it.

Other language and symbol pieces, such as the ampersand, the question mark, and international currency signs, look at issues of economic disparity and waste, which Laky has encountered both at home and abroad. For its 2008 “Green Issue,” the *New York Times Magazine* commissioned her to create section titles: *ACT, EAT, INVENT, LEARN, LIVE, MOVE, and BUILD*. Cleverly combining materials, she demonstrated simply and effectively that the medium was indeed the message, and that green solutions might literally be right in our own backyards with better (re)use of materials.

OPPOSITE PAGE *The Willing*; 2010; ash, plastic soldiers, blue concrete screws, and paint; 26 x 23 x 2.5”

THIS PAGE LEFT: *Globalization II: Homogenization*; 2004; apple, commercial wood, plastic soldiers, sheet rock screws, and bullets for building; 32 x 97 x 4”. BELOW: *That Word*; 1989; orchard prunings with electrical wire; approx. 90 x 140 x 48”



JONAS MEYER



BEN BRACKWELL

In 2004 she started the *International Currency Series*, which so far consists of seven examples, including two dollar signs and two cent signs, with the most recent being the new Turkish lira. Their ironic titles, such as *Give and Take* (Chinese Yuan) and *The Willing* (Euro), further engage and challenge the viewer. With *Every Red Cent* Laky humorously plays with our concept of value—a single penny costs one-and-a-half cents to make—but also offers a darker commentary on budgetary priorities.

The ampersand also offered innumerable possibilities for visual dialogue with the viewer: “There are endless forms of ampersand; I have a whole file on my computer of ones that I would love to do.” Not surprisingly, the stories around the creation of the “&” symbol fascinated her: it is “apparently the 27th character in the alphabet” and possibly comes from the word “et” (and in French), or “et cetera” in Latin.

To Laky the ampersand carried even more power than a word, and led her to explore single letters—especially the “elegant and beautiful shape” of Q.

Laky’s “anti-militarist” stance, born in war-torn Hungary and revived at Berkeley, was reawakened in 2003 with the Iraq invasion. While she never wanted to be “too overt,” she did “want people to connect to the war,”



M. JEFF KACHORNE



OPPOSITE PAGE  
 TOP: *Past Tense*; 2004; apple, paint, and copper roofing nails; 22.5 x 22.5 x 3” BOTTOM: *Housing Starts*; 2011; commercial wood molding, nails, and digital print; approx. 24 x 64 x 2”

THIS PAGE: ABOVE: *Why? Devil in the Details*; 2014; commercial wood, plastic soldiers, screws, and paint; 48 x 26 x 7” BELOW: *J’s Move*; 2011; manzanita, paint, and screws; 12 x 48 x 4.5”

and shared her message through words and symbols. *Globalization II—Homogenization* consists of plastic soldiers embedded in cut branches spelling the word WAR. For the next three years, she reworked the piece with anagrams of the word: RAW, RAM, ARM and MAR all extend the meaning and underscore her message. Another rebuilt piece, *Why? Devil in the Details*, is a diabolical question mark with red-painted wood and plastic soldiers that turns a simple, child-like query into an anti-war plea. Plastic soldiers are again the focus of a work in her question mark series, *Choking Hazard*, a parental warning turned deadly.

Laky sees her work as her “best voice,” and she has spread the word as artist, teacher, and mentor: her art is exhibited in numerous private and public collections in Europe, the United States, and Asia and included in over 20 books; she has lectured throughout the United States and in 17 foreign countries; she founded the internationally recognized Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, in Berkeley, and she helped develop an Arts Master Plan for the new 130-acre FDA campus in Maryland.

She notes that today, the “field of textile art provides people with a really broad range of possibilities. It’s very diverse, very interdisciplinary, and reaches into so many different areas; that’s what makes it so rich, intense, and exciting. In addition, human beings can connect to it very readily.” Artists are “stitching with thorns, carving logs, braiding hillsides, drawing with sticks, writing poems on leaves, and growing sculpture” in what represents a healthy response to our cyber age—a return to a more hands-on approach to learning about the world. The outdoors has long been a source of inspiration to artists, but Laky hopes that “present explorations suggest a new relationship, entreat a lighter hand, acknowledge a greater interdependence, and propose a more profound respect for the world we live in—hopefully moving us toward a more sustainable future.”

For more on Gyöngyi Laky’s work and upcoming exhibitions, visit [www.gyongylaky.com](http://www.gyongylaky.com).

Anne Lee co-authored *Encaustic Art in the Twenty-First Century* (2016) and a three-volume series, *Artistry in Fiber* (July 2017) covering wall art, sculpture, and wearable art (all from Schiffer Publishing). Gyöngyi Laky and many other NBO members are featured in *Artistry in Fiber: Sculpture*. In addition, Anne has written articles for *Fiber Art Now* and the *NBO Quarterly Review*.



DWIGHT EGGS, MARY