

from, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* by John Beardsley. New York: Cross River Press, Ltd., 1998, third edition, 179-182.



177. Karen McCoy (b.1951). *Floating Pyramid for Providence: A Consideration of Cultural Notions of Wealth and Value*, 1995. 3,000 clamshells, wood, cement, and steel pyramid: 10 x 10 x 8 ft.; steel barge: 12 x 12 x 2 ft. Temporary installation for the exhibition *Convergence 8*, Roger Williams Park, Providence, Rhode Island. Photograph by the artist.

Karen McCoy has also put the temporary installation to provocative use, aspiring to the same rich mixture of allusions. "I always try to let a sense of place shape my work," she says. But that requires more than topography or ecology. "It involves a process of remembering, imagining, and contemplating historical and present-day uses of the land." The complexities of McCoy's ephemeral *Floating Pyramid*, a 1995 project for Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island, are suggested by its subtitle: *A Consideration of Cultural Notions of Wealth and Value*. Ten feet square and eight feet tall, the pyramid was made of clamshells piled on a steel float. For McCoy, the shells were an allusion to wampum – strings of white and purple beads made from whelk and quahog shells that were the traditional currency of Native Americans in the region. At the same time, they suggested the importance of shellfish to the New England economy. The pyramid made multiple references: to a shell mound, possibly a burial, found by archaeologists at nearby Warwick; to the "triangle trade," in which slaves were shipped to the Caribbean and traded for molasses that was made into rum in the American colonies, which was in turn traded for slaves in Africa; and to a triadic theory of property value, in which land is appraised according to who owns it, who uses it, and who profits from it. Though she admitted that "not all these references are something the casual observer will take in," McCoy hoped the visual appeal of the sculpture would lure people into contemplating cultural differences in how worth is perceived.

An earlier project, *Considering Mother's Mantle*, was also formed in response to the many physical and cultural layers of the landscape in which it was made – Stone Quarry Hill Art Park at Cazenovia, near Syracuse, New York. It began with McCoy's observation of the many lines that traversed the site. She made note of a pattern of marsh grasses in a

pond, which grew out of glacial grooves oriented north to south in the bedrock. Looking out over the landscape, she saw these lines echoed in the grid of farm fields. Taking a compass and some string, she staked out a grid over the water and rearranged spiky arrowhead plants in broken patterns along these lines. She then extended the axes into adjacent fields, transplanting or cutting grasses to mark them. Along the extended lines, she created other visual events, including circles of braided grasses and a cluster of woven grapevines, the latter meant to evoke a Native American dugout that had been found submerged in a local lake. McCoy's title is an illusion to the soil mantle, the thin layer of productive earth that lies over bedrock and that bears the marks of the overlapping, sometimes competing effects of nature and culture.





178. Karen McCoy. *Considering Mother's Mantle: To the Memory of Terry Ryan LeVeque*, 1992. Transplanted arrowhead plants, 40 x 50 ft. Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, New York. Collection of Dorothy and Robert Reister. Photograph by the artist.