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**RAM Windows on Fifth Gallery:  
Wisconsin Artist Joan Backes Brings the Outside In**

Racine, WI July 31, 2015

The Racine Art Museum commissioned Milwaukee-born artist Joan Backes to create a new exhibition for its Windows on Fifth Gallery. Open August 7, 2015 through July 24, 2016, ***Falling Leaves and Painted Branches*** marries the natural color, shape, and pattern of leaves and branches with human interference as the artist arranges these found natural materials in poetic and compelling vignettes. Acutely aware of her natural surroundings, Backes focuses her attention to detail and devotes a sensitivity for materials to the study of trees, both in part and in whole.

Backes' work is a meditation with nature that emphasizes the idea of place. It has taken the form of paintings, installation, ceramics, drawing, photography, printmaking, and sculpture. Regardless of the media used, she engages in a process that incorporates looking, gathering, thinking, and re-contextualizing. Backes lavishes care and attention on the things she uses—giving value to the organic and the ephemeral, such as leaves and tree branches, as well as to fine art materials like paint and ink. She has an ability to connect with her chosen media in a way that is personal yet she makes work that is also universal in its connection to nature.

While Backes does not force a subtext regarding recycling, sustainability, or material re-use, she does purposefully include found materials in her installations. Concerns about the fate of our environment encourage the artist to address it, yet her tone is gentle and poetic—purposeful but not overpowering. Her lifelong romance with the natural world is combined with a collector's sensibility as she incorporates the found flora and fauna from around the world into her large projects.

The installation for RAM's windows combines leaves Backes has collected in various locales and branches that are gathered from the grounds of RAM's Wustum Museum

(more)



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of Fine Arts and then painted. Sourcing the branches from Wustum—a site that is really the beginning of Racine Art Museum—is a poetic gesture that underscores the artist’s interest in place.

While the artist’s *Falling Leaves and Painted Branches* is only on view at RAM for a year, there are other works by Backes in the museum’s collection. One of these pieces will be on view in a gallery adjacent to the Windows installation. Standing 12 feet tall and measuring ten feet across at its widest, *Multi-Species Tree* combines recycled wood and acrylic leaves. When Backes paints bark or “clones” leaves in plastic as she did for this work, there is irony in the act. Her tree is a blending, a hybrid—where the natural and the manmade are again brought into close contact. The tree is represented at an interesting stage—is it at the beginning of its life cycle or the end?

Backes has her BA from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, her MA from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and her MFA from Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions and been the focus of over 20 solo exhibitions since 1990. Awarded multiple Fulbright grants, she is featured in public collections around the world including: the Aberdeen Art Galleries and Museum, Aberdeen, Scotland; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Milwaukee Art Museum; Racine Art Museum; and Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland.

While Backes lives in the United States with studios in New York and Providence, Rhode Island, she is often traveling and installing exhibitions internationally.

**Meet the Artist Event**

On Friday, August 7 at 6:30 pm, Backes will give visitors a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the making of *Falling Leaves and Painted Branches* with RAM Curator of Exhibitions Lena Vigna. This event is during First Friday in downtown Racine when RAM offers free admission from 10:00 am to 9:00 pm along with a free hands-on art project from 4:00 to 8:00 pm. In addition, RAM is offering museum quality artwork by well-known artists available for purchase during the RAM Awesome August Art Sale. Discover unique and delightful pieces for the home or purchase as gifts, all at very affordable prices. Also, guests to the museum are encouraged to dress in steampunk attire.

*This exhibition in RAM’s Windows on Fifth Gallery is made possible by Platinum Sponsors – Karen Johnson Boyd and William B. Boyd, SC Johnson, Windgate Charitable Foundation; Gold Sponsors – Herzfeld Foundation, Johnson Bank, Osborne and Scekcic Family Foundation, Racine Community Foundation, W.T. Walker Group, Inc.; Silver Sponsors – Racine County, Racine United Arts Fund, Real Racine, Runzheimer Foundation, Inc., Wisconsin Arts Board; Bronze Sponsors – EC Styberg Foundation, Educators Credit Union, In Sink Erator, Modine Manufacturing Foundation, The Norbell Foundation, Orkney Springs Retreat, Polyform Products, Inc., Ruud Family Foundation, Inc., Wisconsin Public Radio.*



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Together, the two campuses of the Racine Art Museum, RAM in downtown Racine at 441 Main Street and the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts at 2519 Northwestern Avenue, seek to elevate the stature of contemporary crafts to that of fine art by exhibiting significant works in craft media with painting, sculpture and photography, while providing outstanding educational art programming.

Docent led contemporary craft and architectural tours of the museums are available. Both campuses of the Racine Art Museum, are open Tuesday – Saturday 10:00 am – 5:00 pm, and are closed Mondays, Federal holidays and Easter. RAM is open Sunday Noon – 5:00 pm, while Wustum is closed Sundays. An admission fee of \$5 for adults, with reduced fees for students and seniors, applies at RAM. Admission to Wustum is free. Members are always admitted without charge to either campus.