



## Locally Influenced, Globally Present

BY REBECCA KONYA | PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE RACINE ART MUSEUM

Trees and nature have always inspired Joan Backes, a Milwaukee-born artist who has earned international acclaim over the course of her career.

Backes' awareness of her natural surroundings is clearly evident in her work, which crosses a variety of mediums, including painting and sculpting. And while she's had shows all over the world, from Germany to Argentina to New York, her work is largely based on her experiences in Wisconsin.

"Growing up in Wisconsin has significantly influenced my art," says the Milwaukee native, who has been creating art since she was 5 years old.

Currently, Backes' artwork is on display in the Racine Art Museum's Windows on Fifth Gallery. The yearlong exhibition, "Falling Leaves and Painted Branches," is a collection of laminated leaves and painted branches arranged into compelling vignettes that marry the color, shape and pattern of the natural materials.

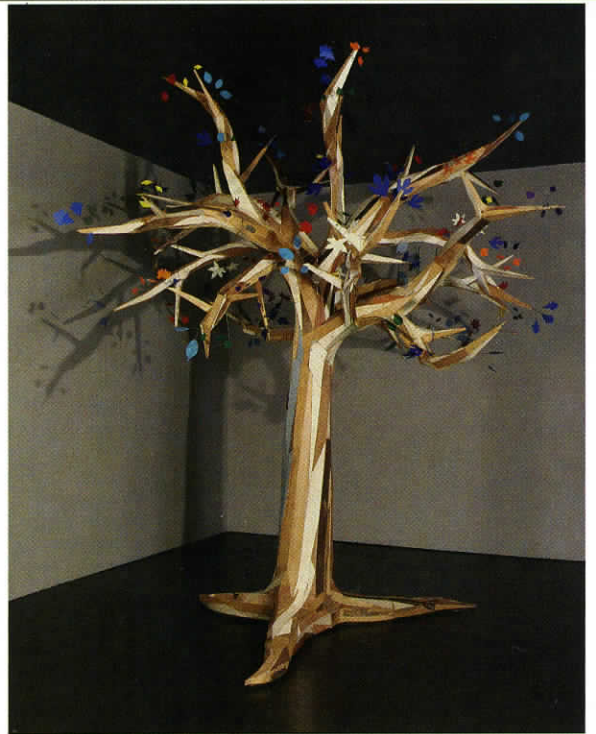
"I love the idea of falling leaves," says Backes, who estimates she used at least 4,000 leaves for the RAM installation. "There are 262 small strands of leaves and 68 large strands."

**"It's a different experience viewing the installation inside and outside. It's nature as an idea of how it relates to space."**

— Lena Vigna,  
curator of exhibitions for RAM

Backes, who began using leaves in her artwork in 2000, collects leaves from around the world, including Thailand, Norway and Australia. The branches used in the RAM installation were gathered from the grounds of the nearby Wustum Museum of Fine Arts.

"We liked that the installation was global and local at the same time," says Lena Vigna, curator of exhibitions for RAM.





Above: The "Falling Leaves and Painted Branches" installation is on view at the Racine Art Museum through July 24.

Left: "Multi-Species Tree" is part of the Racine Art Museum's permanent collection.

Bottom: "North Sea Cairn"

Although "Falling Leaves and Painted Branches" isn't the first hanging leaves piece Backes has created for a window exhibit, Vigna says the RAM's Windows on Fifth Gallery was a much grander endeavor. The challenging gallery space, which has six large windows and measures 90 feet long by 10 feet high and 3 feet deep, is almost entirely backed by a floor-to-ceiling frosted glass wall to which nothing can be attached.

"It's a complicated space, especially when you have to consider how to hang artwork," Vigna explains.

Despite the challenges the space presented, Vigna says Backes' installation works well with the frosted glass divider.

"It's a different experience viewing the installation inside and outside," she explains. "It's nature as an idea of how it relates to space."

Along with the current window exhibition, the RAM's permanent collection includes several other works by Backes. The most recent acquisition is the "Multi-Species Tree," which is on display in a gallery adjacent to the Windows installation. Standing 12 feet tall, "Multi-Species Tree" combines recycled wood and acrylic leaves.

"The tree trunk and branches are made from recycled wood that I dumpster-dove for in Boston," says Backes.



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