

## Ephemerality of the Moment:

### A Conversation with Margo Sawyer

by Kate Bonansinga

Margo Sawyer imbues secular places with a sense of the spiritual, questioning the divide between the mundane and the divine. Here she discusses *Ten + One Illuminations* (2000), one of the most recent of her room-sized installations, as well other projects, including her commission for the addition to the Austin Convention Center in Austin, Texas, which is currently being built. Sawyer received her MFA from Yale University in 1982, and in the mid-1990s she visited Japan, supported by a Fulbright Research Grant and a Japan Foundation Fellowship for Artists. During spring 2000 she was artist-in-residence at ArtPace, the foundation for contemporary art in San Antonio, Texas, that commissioned and exhibited *Ten + One Illuminations*. Sawyer is Associate Professor of Art at the University of Texas, Austin.



**Ten + One Illuminations**, 2000. Gold leaf on steel and micro ellipse halogen lights, 11 elements and 11 lights, 15 x 29 x 40 ft. View of work as installed at ArtPace, San Antonio.

**Kate Bonansinga:** *I know that you've had several extended stays in Asia. How does Ten + One Illuminations relate to your experiences there?*

**Margo Sawyer:** I've had a connection to Asia for about 20 years. First, with India, where I've been a couple of times since my year there on a Fulbright Grant in 1982–83, and more recently with Japan. I suppose in general, my work has affinities with the philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism but in a very loose and non-specific way. Recently I've focused on Zen, but Buddhism is very much a part of Hinduism. In *Ten + One Illuminations*, on a superficial level, I used the gold leaf in a way that relates to the temple complex of Kinkaku-ji, which is the Golden Temple in Kyoto. I love what the material does, the way it emits light. I've used gold and silver for years, beginning in India. In fact, *Ten + One Illuminations* does what some of the Indian temples do, particularly the Aholi Temple in the State of Karnatika in South India. It's a very small temple complex, about

the size of a small living room, and very modest. When you walk in, there is a mound on the floor that is the image of a lotus, and in India gods and goddesses always stand on a lotus flower, which symbolizes a deity or the sacred.

**KB:** *So this is a Buddhist temple?*

**MS:** No, it's a Hindu temple, a Shiva temple. What fascinates me about this particular temple is that, as you walk through the space, you're forced to walk onto this lotus

mound on the floor. By the act of stepping onto this lotus, you, as the worshiper, for one moment become deified.

**KB:** *That's very similar to what occurs in Ten + One Illuminations.*

**MS:** Absolutely. The way that the light works in *Ten + One Illuminations* is similar. It doesn't come across in photographs, but when you bend over and look into the large bowls on the floor, particularly the flat dishes, the light is turned up at you in such a way that a momentary and unexpected spark of energy happens. For me it's an energy that feels sacred. It has a power that takes your breath away for a second. I think that quality of spatial and experiential interrelationship is something that I've internalized through looking at ancient temple complexes in India, Burma, Thailand, Egypt, Turkey, Italy, and Japan. It's about looking at and experiencing sacred architecture, taking note of the ancient world, and using that spatial knowledge in a contemporary framework. I'm very committed to that, and I think that on some level I'm more akin to the ancient world than to the contemporary. I'm very committed to a contemporary vocabulary, but the influences are purely from an ancient context.



**Ten + One Illuminations (detail), 2000.** Gold leaf on steel and micro ellipse halogen lights, 11 elements and 11 lights, 15 x 29 x 40 ft.

**KB:** *For Ten + One you overlaid fragile and precious gold leaf on spun steel forms that are very weighty, refined, and regular. How did you make the decision to overlay this inconsistent and fragile material over a consistent and industrial one?*

**MS:** I considered actually plating dishes that would have been luminescent and reflective but would have had a more “overall” effect. In the end it was technically impossible. But wanting to do that generated ideas about what other materials I could use to create a reflectiveness that would also protect the dishes—even though they are big industrial dishes of metal, they're actually vulnerable to rust. The gold is really a sealer, a protection against erosion. It's permanent, though fragile. Once I committed myself to the gold, I had to work with that surface. It's almost like a John McCracken sculpture, where there is a sense of the purity of the finely worked surface. The gold leaf has an articulation that is very much about the hand, the action of the hand. My palette is seemingly minimal, but the evidence of the process gives a different twist. There is a sense of the marking of time through the laying of this gold grid, which holds the light and holds the viewer in a very different way than a Minimalist work, such as one by Donald Judd. My engagement with the surface is similar to what Pollock was doing in his paintings. There is articulation, a busyness, yet also a stillness.



**Elysian Fields,**

1996. 800,000 pachinko balls, wood, burnt wood, bamboo, gold leaf, silver leaf, silk, and tatami, 1.5 x 66 x 26 ft. View of work installed at the Sagacho Exhibit Space, Tokyo.

**KB:** *There's more of a material presence in your work, and in Pollock's work, than in Judd's.*

**MS:** And that relationship between restraint and the willingness to engage in the ephemerality of the moment is something that has come up again and again. The rigor of a Mondrian and the play and the sense of the moment of a Pollock, somehow those two opposites come together in my practice. The restraint is apparent in *Elysian Fields*, *Ten + One Illuminations*, and in the most recent, *Hi No De*. The units themselves are rigorous and individual and specific, yet the way that they're laid down is seemingly of the moment. But there

is logic behind it: it's not easily deciphered, and it embraces both the rigor of the system and the spontaneity of momentary decisions.

**KB:** *Did you have Minimalism in mind when you chose the repeating dish form for Ten + One? Did you want to exploit the power of repetition?*

**MS:** Each work has a collective, a family of a shapes that I choose before I begin. I tend to work with squares and circles. Having been educated in England, the Russian Constructivists, de Stijl, and the Bauhaus were my entry into contemporary work. Later on, I learned of the Minimalists, specifically Judd, which heightened my commitment to the icons of pure abstraction. A square, a circle, a rectangle tend to be visual tools that I look at and rediscover every time I make a work. The conversations go back to that era, to the Minimalist era, and to India and Tantric artwork. In India, the main part of the Shiva temple is sculpted with figures of divine love and sacred mythology. But as you enter the inner, most sacred part of the temple, the architecture and sculpture become pure and abstract. It's symbolic of the sacred union. Here, pure abstraction is a vehicle to the sublime, one that helps us to comprehend the psychological aspects of the divine. It's this aspect of abstraction that I find immensely exciting. I'm looking at the grid structure, the play between how cubic geometry can be both logical and illogical, chaotic and orderly at the same time.



**Presence and Absence,**

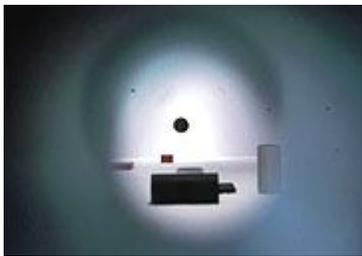
1998. Wood, gypsum board, zinc-

**KB:** *Listening to what you're saying, I've noticed an interesting juxtaposition. You're talking a lot about other-worldly issues that you can't really capture or articulate. Yet you're also talking about very orderly, systematic, geometric, earth-bound concerns and attempting to find some sort of system here in the world that we inhabit. Did you intend for your work to bridge that gap?*

plated steel, anodized aluminum, plaster of Paris, and paint, 8 x 26.5 x 15.25 ft. View of wall.

**MS:** Well, yes. Sculptors dwell in the world; the material here and now is the stuff of articulation. On one level, yes, the work is very grounded, but there is a desire to somehow transcend that and bring in a sense of Other or metaphysical order. This can be transmitted through color, through shape, through quieting down our way of being. When you enter *Ten + One Illuminations*, the first instinct, because you're cloaked in darkness, is to be quiet and still. Also, because you can't really see that well you're not sure if the light is coming from the floor, you're not sure of the dimensional realm that you're entering. There's a sense that you have to be careful, a sense of alertness, a sense of being transported to some other place. It's very much of this world, yet it's not.

**KB:** *Speaking about light and the light source leads us to Hi No De, installed at the Blue Star Gallery in San Antonio, a work based on the rectangle rather than the circle, and on transmitted rather than reflected light. You're playing with light sources, how they affect architectural space and then, in turn, affect the viewer who is within that space.*



**Presence and Absence,**  
1998. Wood, gypsum board, zinc-plated steel, anodized aluminum, plaster of Paris, and paint, 8 x 26.5 x 15.25 ft.  
View through the wall apertures.

**MS:** Definitely, and there is a sense of wanting to animate the architecture. *Hi No De* is a wall, but the wall is also a screen or a window. The space behind it is brightly lit.

**KB:** *Is that a window behind it?*

**MS:** No, it's a wall. The wall that I created with the apertures has a bank of lights on its back side that throws light on the white wall behind the apertured wall. The light then bounces back through the apertures, illuminating them. They are plated with yellow zinc, which has a luminescence to it that changes color. It's like a butterfly wing. There's a play with the light, and the surface detail changes every time you walk around it, which is similar to *Ten + One Illuminations*. There's a dance between the installation and the viewer. It's similar to *Presence and Absence* from 1998, the first time that I used aperture structures, circular tubes of different sizes. The wall looks a little like a star-lit night sky, and you realize that there's something beyond that wall, a brightly lit space. But you cannot physically enter, you can only visit with your mind and your eye. It's a memory space. You have to find the clues to this other place with one eye, since the apertures are one to two inches in diameter, which optically changes how we see and, consequently, conceptualize that inner space. The Chinese and the Japanese create

heaven on earth through their gardens. Not that I'm trying to make heaven, but there is the sense of this other space, a sublime or revered space that we can visit fleetingly.

**KB:** *But in Hi No De, there's nothing beyond that wall.*

**MS:** Just a blank wall opposite, maybe two to three feet away from the edge of the box apertures.

**KB:** *Whereas in Presence and Absence there's something beyond the apertures.*

**MS:** Yes, a room with other elements. You're really seeing something other, whereas in *Hi No De* you're seeing light. But that light forces you to look at the surface treatment of the apertures.



**Blue,**

1998. Wood, tempera paint, glass, gold leaf, and silver leaf on glass, .5 x 12 x 10 ft.

**KB:** *The thing that interests me about this distinction is that in Presence and Absence there is an inaccessible space that you experience in a voyeuristic way, whereas in Hi No De the sacredness of the space surrounds you in the same way that it does in Ten + One Illuminations. You're bringing this other world to us, if we are capable or ready to participate. Another thing that you've mentioned is that Ten + One is the first of your installations where the viewer actually enters and traverses the sculptural objects. In the ones prior to this, Elysian Fields, Blue, and Transformation, the viewer is on the periphery of the installation, which is also the case with Presence and Absence. Will you continue to create rooms that the viewer becomes part of, or will you focus more on pieces that are entities in and of themselves?*

**MS:** I think a merging of the two. In the earlier pieces, where the viewer was at the periphery and looking in on this other world, it's almost as if I didn't want the viewer to pollute that world. What amazed me in *Ten + One Illuminations* was that the mystery did not diminish through the presence of people. It was actually heightened. I could still create this transcendent space but be inclusive. That comes from learning from Asia, specifically the two different types of Japanese garden structures. One is a meditation garden where you sit on the periphery and you look in on this dry, minimal garden that is a tool for meditation. The other is the strolling garden where, in the act of walking, your awareness is heightened through all the senses. That's a new avenue, to create a situation where we are really aware of all that is around us. We quiet down, and then we're really present.



**Blue,**  
1998. Wood, tempera paint,  
glass, gold leaf, and silver leaf on  
glass, .5 x 12 x 10 ft.

**KB:** *The Austin Museum of Art recently purchased a major work of yours, Blue. You felt it was important for you to have a hand in suggesting how this piece be installed. What did you suggest?*

**MS:** The piece changes every time it's installed. There will be a time when I will no longer be here, and so I have to put forward my artistic intention and offer guidelines for placing the work. It's similar to Sol LeWitt's work, where the artist sets a system of action. In LeWitt's case, the texture of the wall surface, the height of the wall, or the hand of the person who installs it can minutely change the interpretation. But the overall concept is the same.

**KB:** *So you stipulated that all of the elements in Blue will always be together and that they will always be on the floor.*

**MS:** Yes, they will always be together on the floor. It's a field of color, like the sky. That is important. It will never be islands of color, like *Ten + One Illuminations*. It stays in a large group. It's loosely influenced by the city of Jodhpur in Rajasthan, India, and the sea of blue and white buildings that compose that city.

**KB:** *We discussed very briefly your choice of materials. In Elysian Fields, created and exhibited in Japan, the primary materials are pachinko balls, which are associated in Japan with popular rather than high culture. What was the reaction to your use of this material in this particular piece?*

**MS:** Pachinko balls are used in a game that is like vertical pinball. There are pachinko parlors all over Japan, and they're very loud, smoke-filled, colorful places. You can earn money or prizes from playing pachinko. It's gambling, and its image is definitely not one of high culture.

**KB:** *And definitely not sacred.*

**MS:** Yes, the antithesis of sacred. I decided that I wanted to use these as a material in a piece for an exhibition that celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Fulbright program. The Fulbright Alumni Association was very cautious about partnering with the pachinko industry, but their opinion was swayed. These sullied objects were elevated to the majesty that I saw they had. The exhibition was silent, tranquil, rich in color. The Japanese artist Yasu Suzuka mentioned that as an outsider coming to Japan, I embraced the collision of the popular and the traditional. I could look at that culture and do things that would culturally be very difficult for a Japanese to



**Hi No De,**  
2000. Yellow zinc-plated  
steel, gypsum board, metal  
studs, paint, and lights, 10 x  
18 x 13 ft.

do, to collide those two worlds together.

**KB:** *So, in Elysian Fields you transformed very mundane materials. In all of your installations you transform very secular, mundane spaces. And then, in turn, perhaps you transform the way the viewer experiences that particular space and, by extension, the entire world around him or her.*

**MS:** That's definitely what I'm trying to do.

**KB:** *With that in mind, I understand that one of your next projects is to conceive art for the Austin Convention Center. Are you going to be able to pursue the goal of creating a greater than common space in a place such as a convention center, where business is conducted, where there's a lot of public access, a lot of activity? How are you going to deal with the difficult problem of making a quiet and special environment?*



**Transformation,**  
1999. Wood, charcoal, Dutch  
gold leaf, and glass (ammo)  
balls,  
2 x 33.75 x 22 ft.

**MS:** It's definitely a challenge and one that is in the realm of hypothesis. The work is a collaboration between the architecture and the artwork. My hope is that the piece will provide a respite from all of the busyness. I'm taking the inherent architectural systems of the building and transforming them into another group of systems. My hope is that viewers might pick up on some of the subtle rhythms through repeated visits. I want to elevate a very mundane part of our world that we never think about as having the ability to feed a contemplative moment. Through this conversation I'm realizing more and more that this is something that I'm constantly trying to do. The mundane, the everyday becomes a moment for consideration.

**KB:** *And that brings you right back to the Japanese gardens. There, piles of rocks make you think about much greater things. So, you can develop some parallels between that and what you're doing with the inner workings of the convention center.*

**MS:** True. The site wall is 30 feet high and 300 feet long. It will be the largest installation that I've ever done and the most public space that I've ever worked in. I've always worked in traditional art spaces. This is a very different arena, and it will be interesting to see if I really can create a sacred moment within this functional area. If I'm successful, I'm sure that it will lead to a reinvestigation of the way I go about building projects.

*Kate Bonansinga is Director of Art Galleries at the University of Texas at El Paso, where Ten + One Illuminations was on view January–February 2001.*