



MING FAY

canutopia

May 12, 2012 – February 10, 2013

GROUNDS FOR SCULPTURE



INTRODUCTION

The parallels are striking, the symbolism serendipitous. Grounds For Sculpture, today a lush dreamscape of a sculpture park, vividly imagined and painstakingly built by artist Seward Johnson on the barren site of the abandoned State Fairgrounds, opened its gates in 1992. Exactly 20 years later it dedicates the opening of a voluminous East Gallery by filling it with the phantasmal flora and fauna creations from the life work of the incomparable artist Ming Fay. Fay calls his spirited installation *Canutopia*... *Can-utopia* as much a question as a title, and one just as aptly asked of its honored host.

Our shared aspirations answer, "Yes!"

Welcome to a world of organic transformation, peppered with flights of human fancy. Welcome to intimations of a new beginnings from gardens as ancient and fabled as Eden itself. Welcome to quizzical questions about what your senses really tell you and where we techno-modern, restive souls actually fit into a teeming, timeless universe. Is it real? Is it possible? Is it good? Can it last? *Can-utopia*?

Maybe all we can say is, "Maybe....with care."

We are deeply grateful to the fearless Ming Fay who saw the potential of this immense and rather spartan space to become fertile soil and setting for his endlessly imagined garden of delights. And we thank our founder and the Johnson Arts and Education Foundation for building a remarkable space where we can now showcase art, performance, and events in ways we only once imagined. We offer it to you now and for years to come and with the reverberating question *Can-u-topia*?

I hope the answer will always be, "Let's try."

David Miller
Executive Director
Grounds For Sculpture

Publication Data: 1000 copies printed on the occasion of the exhibition Ming Fay: *Canutopia*, which inaugurates the opening of the East Gallery, Seward Johnson Center for the Arts, Grounds For Sculpture, Inc.

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Published by Grounds For Sculpture.

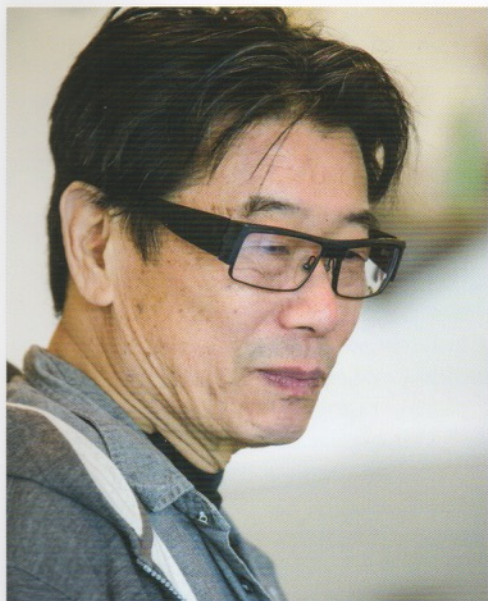
ISBN 978-0-9665644-3-3

Art Direction: Coby Green-Rifkin
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MING FAY'S **canutopia**

The garden that I have created is a mindset where I cultivate an imagined place for mystical forms to exist in a sculptural landscape.'

—Ming Fay



Over the course of Ming Fay's long and impressive artistic career, the primary inspiration for his work has been the relationship between mankind and nature. *Canutopia* — a retrospective of sorts — is composed of sculptures Fay has created during the past 30 years. The personal and artistic path he forged that has led him to create this major installation is a clear testament to the deeply held values that connect all of Fay's work. Complex both metaphorically and visually, *Canutopia* is a feast for the eyes, the mind, and the spirit.

Born in Shanghai in 1943, Fay grew up in Hong Kong, a cosmopolitan environment suffused with both Eastern and Western cultures and influences. Early on, he envisioned his artistic future in the United States and, in 1961 at the age of 18, he won a scholarship to the Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio. Fay went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute and a master of fine arts degree from the University of California-Santa Barbara, where he learned to create large scale, abstract steel sculptures.

In the early 1970s, Fay moved to New York City, another multi-cultural cosmopolitan center, because he felt the city

had a unique energy important to his work as an artist. At that time, New York was burgeoning with post-modern art movements, such as Minimalism, Pop Art, Hyper-realism, Process Art, and others. Fay came to thoroughly understand the styles of these movements as well as their underlying issues, and he flourished in an atmosphere that encouraged experimentation. Fay also befriended other young Chinese artists educated in the U.S. and found a direct link with his heritage through the people and shops of Chinatown.

However stimulating, this was also a time of hardship for Fay. With little money and limited studio space, he gave up working in steel and sought his own materials and methods. Newspapers were abundant and cheap, so he began experimenting with papier maché. He made wire armatures and layered paper over them to give them shape and form, similar to the way he made paper lanterns and kites as a boy. Papier maché was then applied over the structures, to which Fay also added gauze, plaster, acrylic polymer, or pigment. He articulated their skins by working and painting the surfaces. In time, Fay incorporated other materials, such as tubing, rhoplex, spray foam, wood, hemp, pigments, and hydrocal, and in some cases more permanent materials such as bronze, glass, and ceramic.



Fay's discerning observations and his cross-cultural perspective led him to the central theme he would explore through his work over the next several decades — the relationship of mankind with the other living things of nature. As he walked by the Chinatown fruit stands, he observed that the bins piled high with beautiful shapes, colors, and textures were seen by passersby simply as food. They did not appreciate that fruits are in fact the reproducing components of plants, their means of propagation, nor that mankind has had a long, intertwined symbolic association with them — something deeply embedded in Chinese culture.

While Western culture tends to view nature as something to be dominated by mankind, the Chinese philosophy of Taoism holds that humans are but one component in a broad spectrum, non-hierarchical natural world. Fay's awareness of the symbiotic relationship between human and plant life launched him on a path of exploring the symbolic and mythological meanings of fruits and other plant forms and finding ways of communicating their layered meanings through his work.

Initially, Fay selected fruits based on their meaning in Chinese folklore. Pears represent prosperity and long, healthy relationships; oranges, wealth and good fortune; cherries, love and female sexuality; peaches, longevity; plums, strength in the face of difficulties; and so on. He first created a large scale version of a pear which, was not the re-creation of a single pear, but a distillation of a succession of pears that ripened, rotted, and were regenerated. He created more gigantic sculptures — peaches, plums, oranges, and cherries — forms re-sized and re-worked from the natural objects that inspired them.

The physicality of his sculptures, their large scale and dramatic presence, is a Western trait, but the intent, the layers of meaning that animate the sculptures, is Chinese. Fay scaled up and transformed the fruits into artworks manifesting their myriad associations — nourishment and pleasure, myth and magic. As viewers, we cannot approach his sculptures as we do their natural counterparts; that is, in terms of meeting our physical needs and desires. Their size alone confers upon them a status that we must consider in a different way. The sensuous shapes and elegant surfaces encourage our eyes



to linger over them, generating a resonance tinged with notes of intimacy, humor, and irony. The hyper-real artworks eventually direct our focus back on the objects that inspired them, to look at them with new eyes.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Fay added peppers, pea pods, nuts, and other plant forms to his iconography as well as seed pods that guard their inner treasures with tough skins, prickles, or horns. The ling pod was of particular interest to him because it was viewed in such opposite ways by Eastern and Western cultures. To Western eyes, this botanical oddity looked sinister and was given names such as goat-horned devil, bull demon, and flying bat. In China, however, the bat is a lucky animal, and the pod is simply known as the ling nut, containing the seed of the water chestnut. Fay's interests also turned to sea creatures, such as fish, mussels, and octopus, as well as to rhinoceros horns and medicinal herbs. Again the shops in Chinatown provided a wealth of shapes and information about the various actual, mythical, or magical attributes of the animals and plants.

As thoughts on his own mortality emerged, Fay explored the nature of relics, both natural and cultural. He traveled to the seashore and gathered battered shells and coral, fish bones, shark teeth, and many other specimens. Elsewhere he collected dried up nut shells and even wishbones, which he fabricated in many sizes. He created imaginary fossils such as the skulls of creatures long extinct, and funerary artifacts reminiscent of ancient civilizations.

Like botanists and gardeners who breed plants with new characteristics, Fay began his own artistic intervention by reworking nature's forms to generate previously unknown species. About this process, Fay explains:

I consider myself a scientist of sorts and my studio a laboratory. I continually research and collect natural forms that have specific symbolisms, usages, and aesthetic intrigue. The artwork is an outgrowth of my inventory of seeds, herbs, bones, and mysterious objects that people present to me for examination. In time I decipher some of their usages both metaphorically and literally and start to investigate new forms that I have heard about but never seen.²

In the early 2000s, Fay increasingly viewed the hybridizing process as a personal metaphor and he himself as an offspring of the same mosaic of forces that continually alter the fabric of society and nature. He states:

As I went deeper into the realm of symbolic plant forms that fulfilled human needs or desires, I started to invent and make my own discoveries of forms related to concepts of reproduction, rejuvenation, and other human desires. These hybrid inventions, while still realistic in form, do not represent a specific natural species. They are often the result of a composite of characteristics and contain personal or a collaged symbolism.³

This perspective is clearly evident in Fay's *Monkey Pots*, a series of work featured prominently in the *Canutopia* installation. The monkey pot tree is native to South America, and the name of the fruit refers to the fact that the nuts inside are so enticing to monkeys that their heads often become stuck in the pot while trying to get them out. For Fay, the monkey pots and their seeds became a metaphor for people trapped in their desires. The *Monkey Pots* he creates are similar in scale to those in nature, but Fay's renditions bulge and swell with gooey, lava-like layers of candy and cake icing colors. Their chunks of foam, shiny paint, paper and gauze layered over partially exposed wire frameworks overtly call attention to the process of their creation, stressing the artist's role as an agent of human intervention in the natural world.





In the spirit of intervention, Fay became interested in "...creating a new species of the magical tree, which bears miraculous ideas as its fruit."⁴ He eventually focused on the tree of life, an enduring concept in world religions, philosophies, and mythologies since ancient times. The tree of life is a metaphor for the common bond of all life, the connecting of all forms of creation. Fay produced several installations on this theme, both as exhibitions and as commissioned works. For some, he laminated actual seeds between two pieces of translucent hemp or rice paper to create the beautiful, variously shaped leaves.

Fay has been conjoining his motifs in elaborate environmental installations of mythical gardens since the 1990s. He sees parallels between the work of the gardener and the artist, each of whom respectfully studies, cultivates, and modifies nature to draw out

its power and mystery, its beauty and wealth. As he states: "In recent years, my work has focused on the concept of the garden as symbol of abundance, paradise and the location for the ultimate desirable state of being. . ."⁵ The tree of life is central to *Canutopia*, which is by far Fay's most ambitious garden installation in both scope and concept. He invented the title for this imaginary place by merging the words "canopy" and "utopia." This complex piece represents Fay's vision for a future in which humans and nature coexist in harmony.

Throughout the center of the East Gallery, suspended forms hang, drape, and link together to create a floating forest canopy, lush and teeming with fanciful objects and shapes. Branches and vines support a tangle of berries, bean pods, monkey pots, insects, sea creatures, tiny human figures, hybrid botanicals, and many other



forms, all festooned with fluttering white, green, gold, and red leaves. It is a fantastic array of forms that sway and swirl on currents of air, shimmering with symbolism and invoking mysterious, magical energies.

The tangled vitality of the canopy is mediated by the placement around the gallery perimeter of relatively sedentary, larger scale objects, such as fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts, bones, sea shells, and hybrid botanicals. Tableaux of objects, in various sizes and ranging from familiar to strange, sit on rough platforms. One shelf, supported by slender tree trunks, is composed primarily of enormous brown pods, including a winged maple seed, a coconut, a twisted honey locust pod, a peanut, and an anise star, as well as a primitive human-like root figure.

At a lower level, sensuously curved, colossal shapes of hybrid pea pods are precariously posed on small wooden ledges. Others forms are arranged on shelves above the gallery's doors and windows: tall, green and red cactus-like shapes, smooth-skinned peppers, an orange, and many hybrid forms. By his subtle positioning of the individual components in contextual relationships, Fay creates a rippling, resonating chorus of meaning. These objects seem to have forged alliances and, whether standing or reclining, they watch over the activity of the canopy. Nearby are a large chunk of calcified coral, sculptures evoking mysterious ancient ruins, and skulls of unidentifiable creatures — elegies on the succession of life.

Across the gallery, a long expanse of wall is articulated by an irregular pattern of relatively austere forms that serve as visual and metaphorical counterpoint to the colorful array of work suspended throughout the center. These broken sea shells, crab claws, pieces of bone, curved horns, shark teeth, fish bones, black ling seed pods, jagged hybrid forms, and other objects, some of which protrude menacingly from the wall, are like signs or glyphs, loaded with meaning if only we can decipher them. They are layered composites of the reality and memory of the timeless forces of nature.

Canutopia holds a balance of many messages in a sublime allegory of the natural world, ever-changing in a cycle of birth, growth, death, decay, and rebirth. Fay's garden invites us to contemplate the processes that govern all living things of nature alike: we are more like plants than not. *Canutopia* further speaks to the desire to control our cultural environment while remaining open to the inevitability and unknowable effects of cross-cultural influences.

Like all great artists, Fay communicates through his work his multifaceted insights about the historical moment we share. The circumstances of his life have given Fay a unique and visionary perspective. He is of both the East and the West, of both the 20th century and the 21st. He is both scientist and artist, who loves the energy of the city he has chosen as his home as well as the fantastic garden he endlessly tends in his imagination.

As we wander through *Canutopia*, it soon becomes clear that we are separated from the glorious canopy floating between earth and sky — it is just out of our reach. Ming Fay presents us with an enchanting, mesmerizing vision of utopia, but we, as humanity, must make a concerted effort to earn our place in it. Only we can determine the appropriate actions required to reach this state of blissful belonging. Fay intends the experience of *Canutopia* to be transformative, redirecting our conception of the world and showing us the way to a renewing and fulfilling place. It stands as a profoundly optimistic work and a generous gift of wisdom and goodwill.

Virginia Oberlin Steel
Curator of Museum Exhibitions





END NOTES

- 1 Artist's Statement, mingfay.com
- 2 Hybrid Inventions, minfay.com
- 3 Hybrid Inventions, minfay.com
- 4 Martin, Barbara. "Ming Fay: Nature, Symbol, and Myth Inspire Public Art." *WP Magazine*, Spring 2004: 12-15
- 5 Artist's Statement, mingfay.com

BIOGRAPHY

- 1943 Born, Shanghai, China
1963 Diploma, Columbus College of Art and Design, Columbus, OH
1967 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Sculpture, Kansas City Institute of Art, Kansas City, MO
1970 Master of Fine Arts, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Full Circle*, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
2010 *Ming Fay on Orchard Street*, Lesley Heller Workspace, New York, NY
Out of the Jungle, Gallery 456, New York, NY
2008 *Jungle Tango*, Eight Modern Gallery, Santa Fe, NM*
Ming Fay, Lesley Heller Workspace, New York, NY
2007 *Floating Reeds*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, China*
2006 *Silent Exile (with Chihung Yang)*, Two Times Thirteen Gallery, New York, NY
Monkey Pots: A New Species from Ming Fay's Lab, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
2005 *Ramapo Garden of Desire*, Kresge Gallery, Ramapo College, Mahwah, NJ*
2004 *From Concept to Reality*, Cuchifritos Art Gallery, Artist Alliance, New York, NY
Money Tree & Monkey Pots, Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA*
2002 *Hidden Seed Garden*, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong*
2000 *Qian and Bao*, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
1998 *Garden of Qian*, Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, New York, NY*
1997 *Lings*, Queens Museum of Art at Bulova Center, Queens, NY*
Earthly Delights, Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, NY
1996 *A Feast for the Eyes*, Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI*
Mid-nite Porridge, Broadway Windows, New York University, New York, NY
Veins of the Spiral, Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY
1994 *Matter into Spirit*, Kim Foster Gallery, New York, NY*
From the Garden, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong
Extended Curves, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
1993 *Existential Attainment*, Lungmen Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
1991 *Nature Reborn: From Archaeology to Science Fiction*, Exit Art, New York, NY
Images from Beyond, Butters Gallery, Portland, OR
1990 *Objects from Nature*, Chinese American Arts Council, New York, NY
Bell Sprouts, Petrosino Park, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, NY
1989 *Journey into Nature*, Gallery at Bristol-Myers Squibb, Lawrenceville, NJ
Elixirs, Alternative Museum, New York, NY
1988 *Ming Fay*, Gallery Triform, Taipei, Taiwan
Elixirs, Alternative Museum, New York, NY
1986 *Ming Fay: Recent Works*, Institute for Promotion of Chinese Culture, Hong Kong*
1985 *Ming Fay*, Artspace, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO*
Drawings for Sculpture, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong
1984 *Ming Fay*, Broadway Windows, New York University, New York, NY
1980 *Allan Frumkin Gallery*, Chicago International Art Exposition, Chicago, IL
* Catalog

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Boom Box*, Abrazo Interno Gallery, Clemente Soto Véllez Center, New York, NY
2010 *Connection: Nature*, Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, Brookville, NY
2009 *Here and Now*, Museum of Chinese in America, New York, NY*
Unbound, China Square Gallery, New York, NY
2008 *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond*, Museum of Art, Hong Kong*
Back to the Garden: Daily Life to Spiritual Vision, Crossing Art, Queens, NY
183rd Annual, National Academy Museum, New York, NY
2007 *Keep the Change*, Nathan Cumming Foundation, New York, NY
Town & Country, Lesley Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2006 *Fifth International Biennial Ink*, He Xiangning Museum, Shenzhen, China
Transplant Transculture, Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, Bronx, NY
East Transplanted West, Burger Gallery, Kean University, Union, NJ*
2005 *Neutral, The Lab: Gallery*, New York, NY
Material Terrain, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO
MTA Art for Transit, UBS Gallery, New York, NY
2004 *Lodz Biennale*, Museum of International Art, Lodz, Poland
Crosscurrents in the Mainstream, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
Hearing Voices: Personal Narratives, Gallery at Bristol-Myers Squibb, Lawrenceville, NJ
Metamorphosis, Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI
2003 *Food Matters*, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY*
Serene Beauty, Jamaica Center for Arts, Jamaica, NY

- 2002 *To Scale*, The Rotunda Gallery, BRIC, Brooklyn, NY
2001 *All Terrain*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA*
Harvest, Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ
2000 *Abundant Invention*, Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, Bronx, NY*
Art Nature/Nurture, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, WI
Environmentally Concerned, Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York, NY*
The End, Exit Art, New York, NY
1999 *As Far as the Eye Can See*, Savannah College of Art, Atlanta, GA*
1998 *Metaphors: Inspirations and Folklores*, Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY
Paper: The State of Connection, Bergstrom-Mahler Museum, Neenah, WI
1997 *Biennial Exhibition of Public Art*, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY*
Gardens of Urban Delight, Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY
Ancient Emblems/Contemporary Signifiers, Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ
1996 *Posing Reality: Contemporary Still Life Painting and Sculpture*, Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
Mutations of Ink and Paper, Taipei Gallery, New York, NY*
1995 *Elusive Source*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*
Undetermined Origins, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
1994 *Totems and Other Structures*, Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, PA
Fabricated Nature, Boise Art Museum, Boise, ID*
The Garden of Sculptural Delights, Exit Art, New York, NY
1993 *Diverse Representations II*, Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ
Spring/Summer Invitational, Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ
Diverse Disclosures, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, NY
1992 *The Hybrid State*, Exit Art, New York, NY*
1991 *Artists of Conscience*, Alternative Museum, New York, NY*
World Disorder, The Cultural Space, New York, NY
1990 *Selections*, Artists Space, New York, NY
Still Life and Its Borders, Wilson Arts Center, Rochester, NY
Occupation and Resistance, Alternative Museum, New York, NY
The Decade Show, Epoxy Art Group, The New Museum, New York, NY
1989 *Made in New York*, Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, Easton, PA
Power Struggle, Spaces Gallery, Cleveland, OH*
1987 *New York: New Venue*, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC*
1985 *Drawings for Sculpture*, Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong
* Catalog

PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS

- 2009 Chicago Public Art Program, O'Hare International Airport, Terminal 2 (in process), Chicago, IL
2005 *Whitehall Crossing*, Whitehall Ferry Terminal, Staten Island Ferry, Cultural Affairs Department, New York, NY
2004 *Goldilocks*, Tivoli Building, Redevelopment Authority, Philadelphia, PA
Pillar Arc, Federal Court House, General Services Administration, Seattle, WA
Delancey Orchard and *Shad Crossing*, Delancey/Essex Subway Station, Metropolitan Transit Authority, New York, NY
2003 *Arbol Magico*, Lluber Park, Department of Transportation & Public Works, Yauco, Puerto Rico
2002 *Ginkoberry Gwa*, Oregon Convention Center, Portland, OR
1999 Lippman Arcade Project, NYC Economic Development Corporation, Queens, NY
1998 Staten Island Ferry Terminal Project, Cultural Affairs Department, New York, NY
1997 Public Art Fund Project, Phipps Housing, The Bronx, New York, NY
1995 *Spiral Ears*, Philadelphia Criminal Justice Center, Philadelphia, PA
1990 *Leaf Gate, Keys Flight, Seed of Elm, The Spirit of the Elm, Elm in Bloom, Sprouting Buds*, P.S. 7, Elmhurst, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, Queens, NY

AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

- 2000 Artist-in-Residence, Rinehart School of Sculpture, Master of Fine Arts Program, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
2008 Sculpture Award, National Academy of Art, New York, NY
2007 Fellowship in Sculpture, New York Foundation for the Arts, New York, NY
2004 National Endowment for the Arts Grant, Commission Proposal Support
1995 Arts/Industry Residency Program, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Kohler, WI
1994 MidAtlantic Arts Foundation Grant, Residency Program, Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
1994 Residency Program, UrbanGlass: New York Center for Contemporary Glass, Brooklyn, NY
1992 Arts Partners Program, Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund, New York, NY

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- Sozanski, Edward J. "Ming Fay at the Painted Bride." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* [PA] 14 October 1996. Print.
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PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- City Museum of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, CN
- China Club, Hong Kong, CN
- Conrad Hilton Hotel, Hong Kong, CN
- Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, MO
- Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
- Howard Plaza Hotel, Taipei, Taiwan
- Columbus College of Art and Design, Columbus, OH
- Columbus Gallery of Fine Art, Columbus, OH
- Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, TX
- John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
- Sidney Lewis Foundation, Richmond, VA
- Mobil Oil Corporation, New York, NY
- J.P. Morgan, Hong Kong, CN
- Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA
- Prudential Insurance Company, Los Angeles, CA
- R. J. Reynolds Corporation, Salem, NC
- Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
- Ten Main Center, Kansas City, MO
- Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ





Grounds For Sculpture (GFS), located in Hamilton Township NJ near Princeton (midway between Philadelphia and New York), is a 42-acre Sculpture Park and arboretum featuring more than 270 sculptures and thousands of unique flower and tree specimens. In addition GFS also has five indoor museum galleries with rotating exhibitions, workshops for children and adults, concerts, performances, day-long festivals, extraordinary dining and shopping for every budget.

Easily accessible by car and rail, the not-for-profit GFS was founded by Seward Johnson to promote an understanding and appreciation of contemporary sculpture and has been enchanting visitors since 1992. The outdoor collection includes works by such renowned artists as Red Grooms, Clement Meadmore, Anthony Caro, Beverly Pepper, Kiki Smith and George Segal.

GFS is open Tuesday–Sunday year-round, 10AM–6PM.
Visit groundsforsculpture.org for more information.

Funding for the project was provided in part by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Johnson Arts and Education Foundation, and many others.

