

## Artist Statement: Judy Bales

Judy Bales is a multi-disciplinary artist who focuses on sculpture for the body, or “artwear,” mixed-media installation, and public art. In her work, she utilizes found, recycled, and/or repurposed materials in an ongoing effort to reveal beauty in unlikely places and stretch (sometimes literally) conventional notions of what constitutes art.

Bales’ artwear, an extension of her long-time work and study in fiber art, takes the form of whimsical costumes—often used in performance art events or installations—and parodies of haute couture that exaggerate the outlandish extremes of high fashion. Her “Plastic Couture” is a series of garments made from plastic bags, plastic window screens, and other salvaged materials. One of the pieces, a cape-dress constructed of about 6,000 zip ties, epitomizes the fundamental idea behind her artwear: objects of warmth and lyricism created from functional materials not typically associated with art.

“Certain materials attract me, just because of the shape, the texture, some instinctual appeal,” says Bales. “Every piece begins with me playing or improvising with the material: manipulating and mutating it—discovering its properties and limitations. The cape-dress idea came to me when I had a bunch of zip ties and noticed that when connected, they looked fluffy and feathery, like plumage, but definitely *not* comfortable.”

Her installations—stunning, abstract tableaus composed of forms that are by turns jagged/chaotic and geometrical—continue in this vein. With various combinations of fiber, metal, wood, and other materials, she takes seemingly intractable disparities between the visual and the tactile, between the industrial and the aesthetic, and reconciles them in favor of *beauty*.

“Many artists utilize non-traditional materials, but for me it’s critical to transcend the material per se and the novelty of using it in an odd way, to create something that’s striking, something that makes the audience re-imagine beauty and actually realize that art can be created from *anything*.”

In addition to the intimate, wildly individualistic work Bales has done in the realm of fine arts, she has also distinguished herself through multiple commissions garnered in the very different world of public art, specifically the sculptural and design elements she has contributed to trail and highway bridges in Iowa and Arizona. In numerous projects—such as her relief designs of local flora integrated into the piers and columns of the 35th Avenue and Salt River Bridge in Phoenix—she has worked with engineers, architects, and public art commissions to, again, conjure beauty from functional objects.

Bales, who received both her BFA and MFA degrees from the University of Georgia, majored in painting as an undergraduate and completed her post-graduate work in fiber art. This combination of very distinct even unlike disciplines has served her well and helps to explain her unique work. While closer to a fiber artist in her choice of materials, she approaches her art more like an abstract painter, relying on improvisation and painterly techniques rather than the more precise, controlled approach traditionally favored by fiber artists.

The broad range of Judy Bales’ work is clearly unified by a sensibility that asserts the power of an artist to create beauty from anything, and convey that simple but vital truth to an audience. By manipulating materials in ways and for contexts for which they were never intended, whether mangling the precise configuration of a plastic grid or turning a demure thrift shop dress into a cotton-and-steel amalgamation of otherworldly fashion, she embraces creative transformation and a form of subversion that’s never less than alluring and whimsical, and always nourishing to the imagination.

## Duke Riley: Proposal/Artist Statement

“Timescope: A Maritime Phantasm” is a mixed-media, interactive work intended for installation exclusively at the water's edge of Socrates Sculpture Park. The main element of the piece would be a coin-operated observation scope, modified with a video player/monitor inside, and placed in a fixed position pointing out at the water. The scope would be facing northwest, in sight of the tip of Mill Rock Island. When activated (with a special token), the machine would play a video loop of an empty lifeboat--constructed by the artist--floating in the same spot at which the scope is pointed; in other words, the viewer would look into the scope and see a pre-recorded video of the actual spot in front of him/her.

“Timescope” would be a site-specific exploration of the park's distinct ecology, particularly the island and waterways in its immediate vicinity. Also, this riparian installation would invoke the area's rich maritime history and its related folklore. These elements would be conveyed through a mock tourist plaque (planted beside the scope) with a narrative that includes basic facts about the area and its history, and an overview of long-standing mythologies (along with the addition of new, fabricated ones).

Socrates, which sits upon the East River, is just south of where the river merges with the Harlem River and the Long Island Sound. The point where these three bodies of water merge forms an area known as Hell Gate. Mill Rock Island lies directly in the center of this area.

Hell Gate is so named because the various bodies of water, with their different tidal patterns, create strong, unpredictable currents that have caused numerous boat- and shipwrecks in the past. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an average of 1,000 wrecks annually in Hell Gate. To alleviate this problem, in 1885 the Army detonated 300,000 pounds of explosives on and around the three most treacherous obstacles in Hell Gate: Flood Island, Great Mill Rock, and Little Mill Rock islands. After the massive detonation--supposedly the largest non-nuclear explosion in history--the three islands formed into one, which became known as Mill Rock Island.

The most famous Hell Gate shipwreck was that of hussar (pirate) ship that sank on November 23, 1780; seventy of its 200 crew members drowned. Also, the ship was carrying stolen gold worth more than a billion dollars by today's standards. That precious cargo has never been recovered.

The lifeboat in the video loop suggests the viewer is peering back through history at some small piece of a mysterious puzzle. Is the boat from the wrecked pirate ship? What happened to the missing crew members? Where's the gold? It makes an urban folk tale come alive in a far more subtle way than say a literal reenactment (like the pirate ship battle that takes place every hour in front of the Treasure Island hotel-casino in Las Vegas). The element of fantasy inherent in “Timescope” is allusive rather than spectacular; it is grounded (figuratively) in historical fact, and grounded (literally) in an authentic site.

The fantasy derives from the site-specific, multimedia dimensions of the piece working in tandem to warp the sanctity of time and space, and to blur the boundaries between representation and reality. The viewer, for example, looks through the scope at a simulated vestige of a historical event; when the viewer steps away from the scope, he/she is engaged with a pseudo tourist attraction. Even the supposed authenticity of the site itself is dubious; it provides a less than adequate approximation of history because the original three islands--the area's one-time natural environment--are gone, completely transformed after the event by an industrial process. Through and through, “Timescope” is art masquerading as tourism in the service of purveying pure mythology.

## Artist Statement

I work in a variety of media--including sculpture, mosaic, installation, and site-specific performance. I have been steadily expanding my palette of techniques and concepts to create a new visual narrative that includes a complex series of artifacts and "happenings" which revolve around urban/maritime mythologies.

The juxtaposition of styles, materials, and subject matter is central to my work and practice. One of my signature concepts is the use of modern, industrial materials, such as Plexiglas and vinyl tile, to create pieces whose subject matter (e.g., maritime portraits and scenarios) and format suggest traditional scrimshaw. Also, within the content of these pieces are juxtapositions between historical subjects—pirates, merchants, etc.—and industrial elements, like oil refineries and urban detritus.

I use combinations of found organic materials (e.g., driftwood, animal matter, etc.) and inorganic materials (such as pigments made from industrial materials) to create mixed media works whose essential subject is the conflicted, interdependent relationship between natural and urban habitats. The materials and specific combinations are intended, in part, to give some of my pieces the look and feel of historical artifacts, and suggest connections between history and contemporaneity.

My work is eclectic and draws from a multitude of artistic influences. It is part of the rich continuum of art, such as the Italian Arte Povera movement of the '60s, that has scavenged the overlapping, often colliding realms of nature and industry for material and inspiration. Also, the Chicago School (particularly H.C. Westerman) and New England maritime folk art are major influences. The artists representing these movements often functioned as anthropologists or historians; they also emphasized craft and complex, serial narratives composed in diverse, but distinct formats.

The realm of graffiti and tattoo artists, along with some obscure but influential strains of neo-dada (e.g., fluxus) and punk-influenced art, provides an important context for my work. The work I'm doing now, in urban mythologies, is rooted in a counter-cultural sensibility. It explores the possibility of unearthing terra incognita, or secretive, unsanctioned areas along the New York City waterfront; islands of intrigue and anarchy--with their own history and artifacts--surrounded by the hyper-developed, overly-explored city.