

ESSAY

Planting roots at JMU

Artist-in-residence explores invisible aspects of the natural world BY LAURA KATZMAN

Aclaimed Israeli-American sculptor Dalya Luttwak visited campus as the College of Visual and Performing Arts' Diversity Artist-in-Residence for spring 2010. Luttwak's sculptures reveal invisible dimensions of the natural world and call attention to that which is hidden from our view. By investigating a subterranean universe beyond our ordinary perception, Luttwak's work encourages critical thinking. She asks us not to accept the world at face value, but to dig deeper below its surface in search of greater insight or deeper understanding of its mysteries — its roots.

When the Sawhill Gallery and the School of Art and Art History featured Luttwak's work this semester, I served as curator of her site-responsive exhibition, *Roots: The Hidden Half in Black and White*. The installation included seven large-scale constructions along with an additional work that she placed outside of Duke Hall that will stay up for two years. In a JMU/community arts partnership, Luttwak also installed a work in the Smith House Sculpture Garden at the Arts Council of the Valley in downtown Harrisonburg.

Luttwak was born to European refugees in Israel's Northern Galilee, studied at the prestigious Hebrew University of Jerusalem and moved to the United States in 1972. A world traveler, she made an international reputation in metal jewelry, Judaica, hollowware and small sculpture before embarking on the production of big, welded steel sculptures that recreate the natural color and configuration of plant roots. This new work set the artist on a more philosophical path of exploration.

Her linear structures are based on actual roots that she digs out of the earth — some collected from her world travels and others from in and around her lush garden in Chevy Chase, Md. For her Sawhill exhibition, Luttwak painted the roots stark black and white in response to the industrial character of the space. She painted the outdoor works bright red: *Red Bamboo-Grass* at the Arts Council of the Valley interacts with the spirals of JMU art professor Sukjin Choi's ground installation. And *Mangrove* graces



Dalya Luttwak (inset, far left) bases her linear structures (like *Bamboo-Grass*, above) on the roots of plants that she digs out of the earth — some collected from her world travels and others from her lush garden. The School of Art and Art History hosted *Roots: The Hidden Half in Black and White*, an exhibition by the Israeli-American sculptor from Feb. 15 to April 2.

Duke Hall's front porch, contrasting and enlivening the imposing concrete space of the art building. Luttwak's root sculptures thus respond not only to the natural world but also to the more synthetic, constructed settings in which her art is displayed.



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JMU students look at *Parsnip-Vegetable*, one of the works in Dalya Luttwak’s exhibition in Sawhill Gallery. Luttwak’s opening reception and gallery talk drew many from JMU’s arts community.

The artist’s aim is to unearth that which is hidden — psychologically and physically — from our ordinary field of vision and daily experiences. With this series, she seeks “to uncover the hidden structures and shapes of the roots of different plants, exploring differences and relationships between the parts above ground and the parts below.” Her motive, she says, “is to uncover and discover roots even when they are hidden, indeed especially when they are hidden.”

Luttwak draws inspiration from the hidden stories of her own family, persecuted Jews who fled Czechoslovakia for Palestine on the eve of World War II, and from the hidden dimensions of our natural/physical environment. She is interested in what lies beneath the ground or below the surface — metaphors for the unconscious/subconscious, or hidden thoughts, intentions and meanings. Her works compel us to contemplate all that we cannot see in the world and, by extension, all that we cannot know.

Luttwak’s campus visit thus transformed not just exhibition space but also the minds

and perceptions of professors, students and all who viewed her art. Her exhibition and public art project for JMU and Harrisonburg exemplify how a visiting artist-in-residence can contribute to the university and its environs. A visiting artist’s classes and critiques, which expand upon what the art curriculum and art faculty already offer, make an impact on many facets of campus life.

Inspiring and involving students

The Luttwak project began in late fall 2008, after I was delighted to “discover” her work in a solo exhibition at the American University Museum and presented an exhibition proposal to JMU School of Art and Art History Director Leslie Bellavance and Sawhill Gallery Director Gary Freeburg. In multiple visits to Luttwak’s studio, I conducted interviews with the artist. In other visits, undergraduate interns and graduate assistants filmed her at work — forging and welding steel, forcefully manipulating it into her winding, wiry structures. One graphic design major edited this footage into a short film

about the artist, while a photography major designed a 360-degree virtual tour of the exhibition for Sawhill’s Web site. Media arts

and design students sought local press, radio and television coverage for the project. Others helped to deconstruct, pack, transport, reassemble and secure sculptures in indoor and outdoor locations — learning the fine art of installation design from Gary Freeburg, a master photographer, installer and lighting expert. The students’ projects extended and enhanced Luttwak’s presence on campus — and gave her work even deeper roots in the JMU arts community.

In a cross-disciplinary collaborative effort, students and professors assisted the artist in transforming the look of the gallery into that of an underground environment, in which “roots” hang from the ceiling, spill onto the floor and crawl up the walls in a shadow-filled space that is at once haunting, whimsical and mysteriously beautiful.

Over the course of the past year, Luttwak made several trips to JMU to measure and assess the Sawhill, Duke and valley arts council spaces to design her site-specific works. She sketched her ideas

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on gallery floor plans and made small graphite drawings to figure out how to transform tiny, delicate root segments into her large steel sculptures. She spoke with JMU faculty, administrators and arts council staff to familiarize herself with the needs and culture of the community, and became intensely involved in every stage of the process. Luttwak conducted a test drive in November 2009, installing in Sawhill a few sculptures-in-progress to see how best to attach works to the ceiling and existing walls and how to suspend an additional floating wall. She worked with photographers to document this practice installation and to create images that would facilitate her own construction process and Sawhill Gallery publicity.

Luttwak was in residence at JMU the week of March 15. In addition to giving an artist's talk, she made presentations to the classes of several JMU professors — Mark Rooker's Metal class, Greg Stewart's Sculpture class and Bill Wightman's Art Criticism class. She spoke to Corinne Diop's Graduate Studio class and conducted nine critiques for the M.F.A./M.A. candidates in sculpture, painting, photography, ceramics and mixed media. Students in Tommy Thompson's Photojournalism class interviewed Luttwak, who later returned to JMU on March 27 and contributed to my curator's gallery talk.

Off campus, Luttwak attended a March 17 reception in her honor hosted by the Arts Council of the Valley, where she installed *Red Bamboo-Grass*. This was the result of a fruitful collaboration between the JMU School of Art and Art History and the arts council, which is directed by public art expert Cecilia Carter Brown. This collaboration will foster future art exchanges between JMU and the city and will contribute to an ongoing discussion by JMU's Public Art Taskforce — an ad-hoc committee of faculty members and administrators that brainstorms about developing a public art program at JMU.

Art's significance in a well-rounded education

Art enthusiasts and viewers of varying backgrounds are drawn to Luttwak's sculp-



(Above): Detail of *Silver Maple-Tree*, an artwork by College of Visual and Performing Arts' Diversity Artist-in-Residence Dalya Luttwak.

tures since everyone has roots and can relate to their literal and symbolic associations to home, land, past, family, ancestry and genealogy. Her work appeals to people with biological and botanical interests as she is attentive to the intricacies and structures of real root systems. Those more aesthetically inclined find delight in the distortions and manipulations she makes from root source to final sculpture, for it is in the transformations in size, scale, color, material, texture and context where the meaning and metaphoric significance of her works lie.

Luttwak's dynamic structures encompass dualities (or dichotomies) of abstraction and

representation, science and art, the hidden and the visible, and the personal and the universal. She offers a model for young artists who want to experiment with abstraction and nonliteral modes of representation but who also want their work to engage autobiographical content, cultural identity and family history.

It has been a rewarding experience to work with Dalya Luttwak. The College of Visual and Performing Arts and the JMU Office of Diversity generously funded her project. Such support indicates the JMU administration's recognition of the importance of the visual arts to ensure a well-rounded education. In a time of budget cuts, such support also speaks to the university's recognition of the visual arts' significance to the cultural welfare of the campus and community. It is heartening when university leaders acknowledge how in lean times artists (through their works and words) can boost morale, offer hope and envision new worlds and new possibilities that nonartists cannot always see or imagine. ❧

* Watch an interview with JMU's diversity artist-in-residence at www.jmu.edu/news/FlashFeature-Luttwak.shtml or visit Luttwak's Web site at www.dalyaluttwak.com.



Luttwak's sculpture *Red Bamboo-Grass* for the Arts Council of the Valley is displayed on Main Street. (Inset): Luttwak bends rebar in her Chevy Chase, Md., studio. Her root sculptures respond not only to the natural world but also to their constructed exhibit settings.