

**Joan
Backes:
Falling
Leaves
and
Painted
Branches**

All of my work comes from growing up in Wisconsin – [I can remember being on a] riverbed near bridges where I would gather clay to take home to make things as a kid.

–Joan Backes, 2011

Milwaukee-born artist Joan Backes is acutely aware of her natural surroundings. She focuses her attention to detail and demonstrates a sensitivity for materials to the study of trees, both in part and in whole. ***Falling Leaves and Painted Branches*** marries the natural color, shape, and pattern of leaves and branches with human interference as the artist arranges these found natural materials in poetic and compelling vignettes in Racine Art Museum's Windows on 5th gallery.

Backes' work is a meditation with nature that emphasizes the idea of place. It has taken the form of paintings, installation, ceramics, drawing, photography, printmaking, and sculpture. Regardless of the media used, she engages in a process that incorporates looking, gathering, thinking, and re-contextualizing. Backes lavishes care and attention on the things she uses—giving value to the organic and the ephemeral, such as leaves and tree branches, as well as to fine art materials like paint and ink. She has an ability to connect with her chosen media in a way that is personal yet she makes work that is also universal in its connection to nature.



Joan Backes
Falling Leaves (detail), 2015
Found leaves and filament
11 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet
Courtesy of the Artist
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist

Backes also has the ability to make the familiar seem unfamiliar, playing to human curiosity and thereby encouraging an extended experience. For example, her paintings of tree bark magnify the surface to a point where it is almost unrecognizable. At the same time, Backes taps into the character of bark so well that it is possible to understand what it is. The parts and pieces of leaves and branches that she offers in her window installation do not form a whole tree—and at first, may seem abstracted and unusual—yet there is no doubt in the end about what she references.

The hanging leaves and branches in RAM's windows are an extension of work the artist has done in other venues—creating carpets of leaves in New Jersey, Rhode Island, Finland, Iceland, Italy, and Scotland, as well as a hanging piece for the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. Backes travels for these installations and other residency projects. Her migrations encourage gathering and collecting from various locales and she can end up with examples from multiple venues in a single installation. Backes presses and laminates the leaves and can re-use them for other installations. Not only does it reflect her personal experience, it creates a layering of information. The leaves almost become metaphors for human existence with the potential for many different types, represented in diverse configurations.

Racine Art Museum
441 Main Street
Downtown Racine
262.638.8300
ramart.org



Backes creates a harmonious and poetic space as she consciously organizes the leaves—very carefully selecting what goes where. Initially, viewers could be reminded of random leaves that fall to the ground in the natural life cycle of trees. But the artist’s ordering and careful placement also underscores our complex relationship with the natural world where humans are both observers and interlopers—balancing between interfering with the natural order and staying “hands off.” The human/natural world dynamic mixes reverence and apathy, closeness and distance, awe and intimacy.

While Backes does not force a subtext regarding recycling, sustainability, or material re-use, she does purposefully include found materials in her installations. Concerns about the fate of our environment encourage the artist to address it, yet her tone is gentle and poetic—purposeful but not overpowering. Her lifelong romance with the natural world is combined with a collector’s sensibility as she incorporates the found flora and fauna from around the world into her large projects.

As Backes suggests, “I’m hoping that people come toward a piece and find something that they enjoy and like. And maybe then they will start thinking about the environment, about why I’m creating that work.”

The installation for RAM’s windows combines leaves Backes has collected in various locales and branches that are gathered from the grounds of RAM’s Wustum Museum of Fine Arts and then painted. Sourcing the branches from Wustum—a site that is really the beginning of Racine Art Museum—is a poetic gesture that underscores the artist’s interest in place.

I have often worked with recycled materials. Multi-Species Tree is made of recycled wood...The tree has been an important image...When I was a child, all of the trees on my street were cut down because of Dutch Elm disease. I could not find my home because everything was altered.

—Joan Backes, 2015

While the artist’s **Falling Leaves and Painted Branches** is only on view at RAM for a year, there are other works by Backes in the museum’s collection. One of these pieces is on view in a gallery adjacent to the Windows installation. Standing 12 feet tall and measuring ten feet across at its widest, *Multi-Species Tree* combines recycled wood and acrylic leaves. When Backes paints bark or “clones” leaves in plastic as she did for this work, there is irony in the act. Her tree is a blending, a hybrid—where the natural and the manmade are again brought into close contact. The tree is represented at an interesting stage—is it at the beginning of its life cycle or the end?

Backes has her BA from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, her MA from the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and her MFA from Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions and been the focus of over 20 solo exhibitions since 1990. Awarded multiple Fulbright grants, she is featured in public collections around the world including: the Aberdeen Art Galleries and Museum, Aberdeen, Scotland; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Milwaukee Art Museum; Racine Art Museum; and Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland.

While Backes lives in the United States with studios in New York and Providence, Rhode Island, she is often traveling and installing exhibitions internationally.

Lena Vigna
Curator of Exhibitions



(above)
Joan Backes
Falling Leaves (detail), 2015
Found leaves and filament
11 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet
Courtesy of the Artist
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist

(right)
Joan Backes
Falling Leaves (detail), 2015
Found leaves and filament
11 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet
Courtesy of the Artist
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist