

Susan Giles

Scenic Overlook

Hyde Park**ARTCENTER**

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Scenic Overlook installation view



Scenic Overlook installation view

Hyde Park Art Center is deeply honored to present this catalogue celebrating Susan Giles' 2015 exhibition of large-scale sculptures, *Scenic Overlook*.

During her ten month tenure in the Jackman Goldwasser Residency, Susan spent countless hours in her studio on the second floor of the Art Center advancing what has been a 20-year investigation into architecture, tourism and the physicality of place. We are proud to be able to support her at this pivotal moment in her career through this ambitious, and truly monumental, exhibition.

Fellow artists, students, friends, staff, and visitors relished the opportunity to interact with Susan during her time here at the Art Center through open studios, artist talks, and gallery tours. Around the bases of her tower sculptures, beside the pedestals of her smaller related sculptures, and within the walls of her studio, many have gathered in discussion, observation, and consideration, and have departed with new ways of thinking about their relationship to place in a world that is evermore connected on a global scale.

It is our hope that this catalogue will serve as a lasting document of Susan's exploration into architecture and identity as well as provide source material for continued conversation and introspection around these ideas.

We are grateful for the support of the Illinois Arts Council Agency and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events for the City of Chicago (DCASE) provided to Susan. We also want to offer a special thanks to Sebastian Campos, Luis and Cecilia Campos, Caroline Stearns and Rebecca Eaton at THE MISSION for being such staunch supporters of Susan's work. Their collective contributions helped us in providing the opportunity to realize this catalogue.

Kate Lorenz
Executive Director
Hyde Park Art Center



In the early 20th century, the Futurists identified the aerial perspective as a source of visual power. The then-novel ability to peer down from a great height upon a city was considered to be both technologically and conceptually revolutionary. A century later, cities continue to think vertically, building enormous towers not only to transmit signals for communications media, but as iconic architectural structures to express the city's progressive status in a global context. The tourist easily recognizes these structures, which act as metonymic representations of place while offering stunning panoptic views from their observation decks. *Scenic Overlook* explores this ever-present desire to view ourselves, both literally and metaphorically, from above.

My installation is designed for the main gallery of the Hyde Park Art Center. *Scenic Overlook* consists of four large sculptures representing the world's tallest towers, ranging in scale from 20 to 23 feet in length. Each sculpture is built of lightweight birch plywood with red oak seaming and mounted on a

steel tripod. The structures support and position the towers at various angles so that when a viewer stands at a specific point on the balcony overlooking the gallery, the towers can all be seen, simultaneously, from a direct bird's-eye perspective. When viewed from the main gallery the towers dynamically intersect the space and point to the location on the balcony where this unique perspective is available.

By disrupting the spatial predictability of viewing towers, the installation provides viewers with familiar iconic tourist architecture, however they are presented from an impossible perspective. Like so many tourist sites, these sculptures direct the viewer's gaze, yet instead of being pointed to the site, the site points back — challenging viewers to critically examine their positions as tourists. Cities promote their towers as a way of comprehensively seeing and, therefore, knowing a place, but the extreme height also serves to emphasize one's disconnection from that place.

Susan Giles
Project Statement

Kaminarimon Gate/cantilever

2015
concrete and paper
17 inches x 9 inches x 7 inches



Minarets/bridge, 2015, concrete and paper, 17 inches x 1 inch x 21 1/4 inches



St. Peter's Basilica/platform, 2014, concrete and paper, 8 inches x 9 inches x 5 1/2 inches

Spire Structure 1

2015

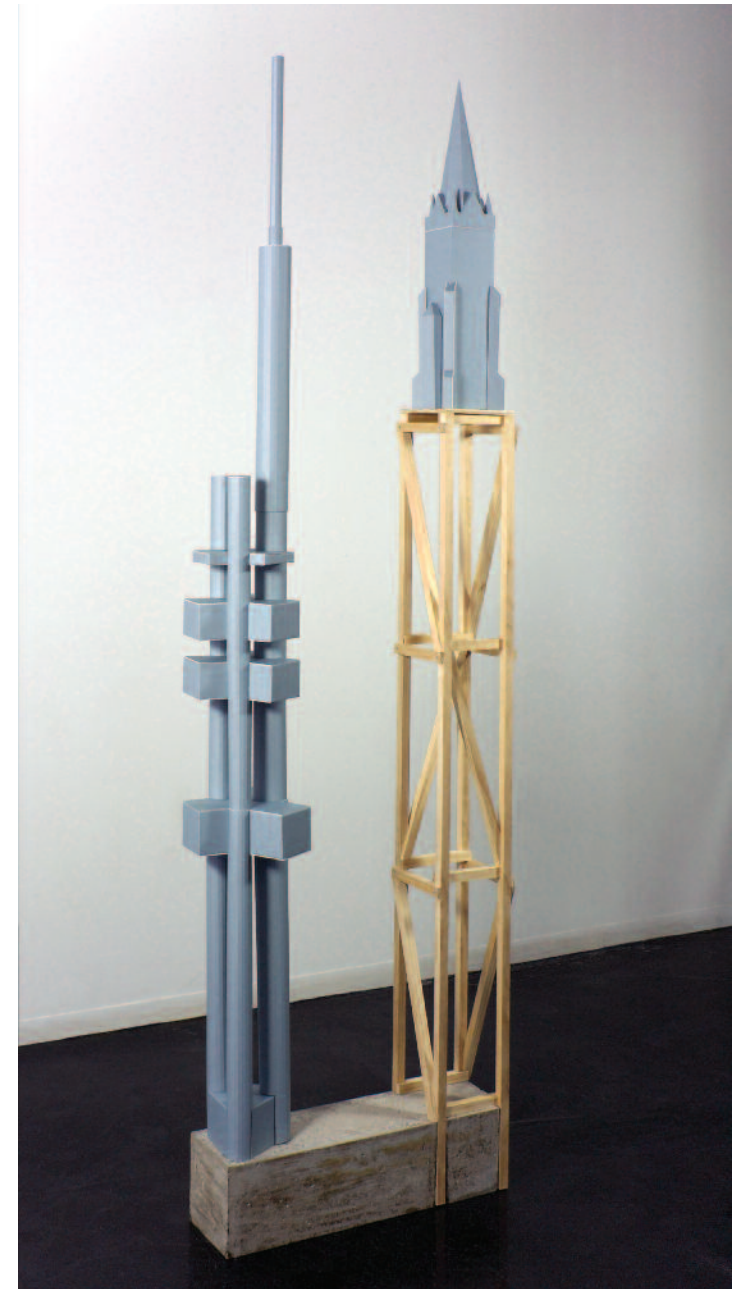
concrete, paper, basswood
40 inches x 3 inches x 5 inches



Prague Towers/scaffold

2015

archival cardboard, concrete, wood
88 ¾ inches x 24 inches x 7 ¼ inches



by KATE SIERZPUTOWSKI

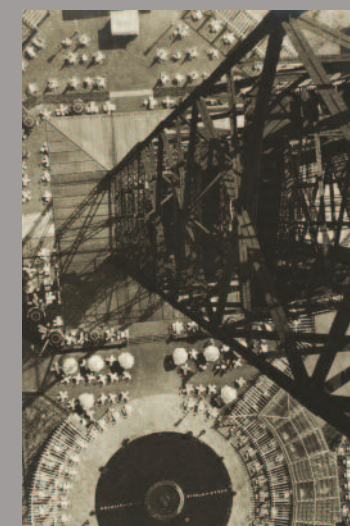
WE ARE THE SEARS TOWER. That is how we are perceived when others look upon Chicago. We are the architectural structures, the peaks built on top of us that project our topography upward to the vantage of other cities. These massive structures are impossible for those to digest down below, inhabitants and tourists alike must envelop them from afar or within. You can't look up: your neck is strained, the top is blurred, other buildings block its ascension into the sky. You must look down to engage the building — down upon yourself and the city structure that seems to lie flat below. You climb the tower, you conquer the tower, you buy a small charm to own the tower. Your comprehension of the tower now includes a decorative fudge in its form.

Through social media you can disseminate your experience of each grand structure you've mounted in a foreign city, catalogued end-points predetermined by Fodor's. You capture each building's facade to your iPhone's library, a collective pool proving to Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter that you've ticked each structure off your list. Bring your selfie stick to extend yourself further into the air and capture your conquest with a stainless steel pole that allows 51 extra inches of height. Augment your gesture to imitate the very building you stand. Make your present position concrete to the world as you reach tall like a steeple, your selfie stick stickin' it to the heavens.

This desire to capture, manipulate, and own architecture is the driving force behind the scale of Susan Giles' intricate sculptures. Her miniature buildings mimic the form of a souvenir, allowing a perceived ownership of the architectural forms tourists collect as objects of their travels. Giles gives a tangibility to these buildings formed out of drawing paper, allowing one to imagine they have been manipulated by their own hand, designed for their own home. The sculptures lay perched upon or skewed atop concrete — the materials a balance of potential ideas against the realities of a bleak quotidian material. The concrete reflects the grounding features of a city perpetually passed over by tourists, the viaducts and columns that lay far below the commonly photographed spires, minarets, and antennae that yearn to poke through the sky above.



Google Earth Screen Shot
Canton Tower



László Moholy-Nagy
Berlin Radio Tower
1928
Silver gelatin print

Each structure within *Points in Space* is formulated through publicly available patterns or a composite of images shared via social media, pictures Giles gathers from Google Street View. Each sculpture becomes an open-sourced depiction of the original structure, a model removed from the ownership of the architects and cities that plotted their presence. Within the exhibition the sculptures exist as interpretations of the public view, how the everyday tourist chooses to remember the structures they visit by focusing on iconic features. Giles focuses on the structures that are easily remembered, those seen over and over again in travel books and friends' Facebook albums. Reproducing these common buildings she focuses on our obsession with owning the view from the top, be it racing to concretize the highest dot in our collective skyline or simply purchasing a tower's tiny replica from the 103rd-story gift shop.

KATE SIERZPUTOWSKI is a Chicago-based writer and arts journalist who regularly contributes to *Hyperallergic*, *Colossal*, *Newcity*, and *Rabbit Hole Magazine*. Fascinated by artists' studio processes, she founded the website *INSIDE\WITHIN* to physically explore the creative spaces of emerging and established artists.

Scenic Overlook installation view



Outpost by Lou Mallozzi, performance with telescope, microphone and loudspeakers

Tower Bridge/bridge

2014

concrete and paper

10 ³/₄ inches x 44 inches x 2 inches



Skytree/tower, 2014, concrete and paper, 19 inches x 17 inches x 2 3/4 inches



Arc De Triomphe/viaduct, 2014, concrete and paper, 20 1/2 inches x 9 inches x 3 inches

by ALLISON PETERS QUINN

Spires, arches, and architectural fragments define the language through which interdisciplinary artist Susan Giles communicates our technology-driven worldview.

She makes sculptures, installations, and video work to examine our relationship to known architecture and geographic locations: how we identify with the two and how the two tend to define us. Often reducing the scale of monumental or historic buildings to a model, the souvenir-size and generalized features of her sculptures suggest such iconic structures have lost all cultural meaning and context. The disjointed experience of time, place and self that result from our growing reliance on technology is explored through three series of artworks, including the Spliced sculptures, Paper & Concrete sculptures and the Tower sculptures. Simply by changing our perspective of iconic architecture—through a different scale, angle, material, or level of detail—Giles’ artwork evokes multiple associations, critiques, and realizations about our place in the world and communicates a noticeable shift in our perception of the built environment.

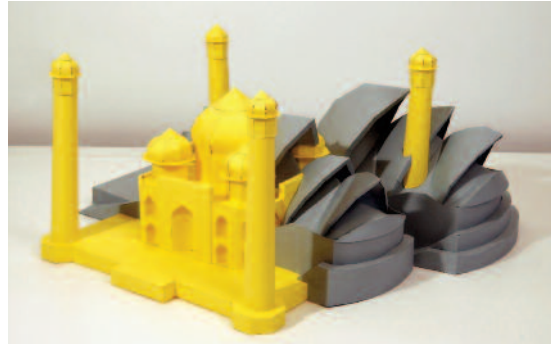
Spanning the Industrial Revolution to the Digital Revolution, technology continues to alter the way we understand the world. Screen-based media, in the form of internet, phone, and television provide information about other cultures and geographies through a public archive of images and information. Art historian Claire Bishop has written about the many ways digital technology is shaping the structure of non-digital art practices today, like sculpture, as much as digital art.¹ In response to the internet’s rapid production of material in any subject matter, artists turn toward making sculptures that Bishop called “unmonumental” and “precarious,” or well-crafted and delicate, to emphasize tactile and spatial presence that is absent in the digital sphere. Bishop also recognized that with the ease of research, storing content, and obtaining a vast array of information through screen-based media, the artists’ intention of repurposing objects or images from culture is to recontextualize their meaning in society. This repurposing is different from previous generations of appropriation like pop art that addressed consumerism. For Giles, iconic buildings are repurposed into paper sculptures to test their cultural relevance in this era of universal consciousness promoted through tourism. The trajectory of technology is deeply engrained in Giles’ practice and expressed in her sculptures through a complex exploration of perspective.

The process of making artwork for Susan Giles is dependent upon the internet mediating our worldview. To start, she decides what buildings to recreate by web searching the most photographed buildings (or cliché travel icons) with an interest in representing a variety of global architectural styles. Most of the buildings presented in her work she has never seen in person. She uses the virtual mapping tool Google Earth to generate a 360° view of the structure and produce

source images of the building she references. She renders her ideas directly in 3D by building paper models before creating the finished work in a more durable cardstock paper, wood, or cast concrete. Each artwork is meticulously constructed, which reflects an attention to fine detail instilled in her from an early practice in ceramics.

Giles also incorporates personal travel images found online to round out her spatial understanding of the buildings. This treasure trove of digital images presents multiple perspectives from various sources of the same structure, including images taken from above, from street level, at different distances and times of day. In the Paper & Concrete series featuring *Arc de Triomphe* (pg.23) and *St. Peter’s Basilica/platform* (pg.11), Giles transforms the immaterial shadow into a concrete substructure. A composite form of several daytime views turned into one shadow, the concrete section anchors and tilts the structure with an unsettling effect. Synchronizing many vistas of a destination into one sculpture approaches the same realization of snapshot tourism that artist Zoe Leonard presents through 4,000 postcards of Niagara Falls found online or at flea markets²; There is no original visual experience of a popular travel site. For Giles, the steady stream of tourists’ images that pop up in her search results verify this age-old compulsion for people to document architecture, travel, and their self in relation to the two. The photograph and the keepsake statuette contribute to the index of memory and symbolize the desire not to forget an ephemeral experience, like a shadow.

Alternating between 2D and 3D information to create the artwork also manifests itself in viewing the sculptures. Giles presents her small sculptures on low pedestals to direct our view from above, referencing the aerial perspective in internet images used to compose the sculptures. The models contain geometric features that flatten from certain vantage points. The Spliced sculptures combine architectural models by inserting one into the body of the other. These hybrid structures showcase an unlikely fusion of institutions, as seen in *Taj Mahal and Sydney Opera House* (pg.26), merging seventeenth-century mausoleum with twentieth-century concert hall. The leveling of architectural styles is pushed in a vertical orientation more recently in *Prague Tower/scaffold* (pg.14), which features two buildings from the City of Spires. The sculpture orients the spire of the tallest television tower built in the 1980s with the steeple of Church of Saint Prokopios built a century earlier, on the same horizon line. Their proximity raises comparisons with the opposite generational values the buildings represent. Giles skillfully conflates architecture from alternative geographies, histories, and diverse styles into one sculpture that embodies the democratizing ability of the internet.



The Tower sculptures follow the same process as described with the smaller sculptures, but go a step further to communicate the influence of technology on a psychological level. Giles increases the size of the model to be many times larger than human scale causing the viewer to adjust to the sculpture's physicality. Her visual strategy is reminiscent of the work of artist Guillaume Leblon, who exaggerates the scale and reorients the form of signature architectural features to alter our spatial perception of them, often with a ominous tone.³ The tower/skyscraper is a stereotypical emblem of technological advancement, national power and prosperity. Towers provide tourists an aerial view of the city, yet they disrupt the cityscape. There is a certain violence of these skyscrapers as they loom over everything else in the urban landscape and jut out from the city's skyline. Through the Tower sculptures, Giles examines the contradictions of these structures and proposes the pursuit for a deeper understanding of these constructed spaces. Architect and activist, Leslie Kanes Weisman writes, "Our collective failure to notice and acknowledge how buildings are designed and used to support the social purposes they are meant to serve—including the maintenance of social inequality—guarantees that we will never do anything to change discriminatory design."⁴ Giles follows this feminist critique of urban architecture through the lens of digital images to locate the moment of disjuncture between body and architecture.

A shift occurred in Giles' work when she presented *Crumpled Spire* at THE MISSION in 2011. A large skeletal wood sculpture folded into and across the gallery, making it more of an installation than an object. The artwork was based on an unrealized skyscraper by architect Santiago Calatrava intended to be the tallest tower in Chicago—and the US—before the economic bust in 2008 prohibited its construction. Giles' abstraction of the building infuses the core structure of the building with anthropomorphic gesture as it sprawled across the floor, gasping like our bank accounts. There was something satisfying in seeing this symbol of capitalism and machine politics suffer the same losses as the people who would have had to look at it every day. Similarly, the digital video *Pulling Out The*

Words, made the same year, depicts the loss of language to describe a spatial experience. In response to Giles' stark edit of the dialogue of individuals describing a landscape, we feel the speakers' frustration expressed through insufficient hand gestures and awkward vocal sounds. The void of words in the video parallels the bare quality of the sculpture marking the need for mediation between the body and our designed surroundings. The ideas sketched out in space in *Crumpled Spire* are made more substantial in the sequential large installation *Scenic Overlook* at Hyde Park Art Center.



The four major sculptures presented as an installation in the exhibition *Scenic Overlook* expand the use of perspective in Giles' work to address the literal and metaphorical forms of observation. The act of observation requires a subject and an object to reach a better understanding through carefully looking at something over an extended period of time. Giles introduces custom-designed and manufactured tripods into her work, which create the base for the wooden model and emphasize the activity of looking through lens-based technology, like a camera or a telescope. Skyscrapers categorized as observation towers combine the technological hubris associated with building the tallest structure and public access to multiple viewpoints of a city at once, much like an analog version of Google Earth. Observation towers, on the other hand, are zoned non-residential architecture with a primary purpose to provide viewing decks and transmit telecommunications. The view is most likely one way—top down—like the capitalist business model they epitomize. In this series of work, Giles interprets the forms of the tallest observation towers in the world as of 2015, including (in order of tallest): Tokyo Skytree (Japan, architect: Nikken Sekkei), Canton Tower (China, architect: Mark Hemel and Barbara Kuit), CN Tower (Canada, architect: John Andrews), and Ostankino Tower (Russia, architect: Nikolai Nikitin). Exhibited together, the sculptures create a strange conversation by uniting different nations and conflicting politics in the same field, which renders them sterile and indistinct.

Dynamically intersecting the space, the Tower sculptures highlight the multiple perspectives in the gallery while replicating the observation function of the original architecture. The sculptures are actually hollow vessels made from varnished modular components seamlessly screwed together, signifying the empty symbols of national identity they have become. Panels of light birch are edge-banded in red oak and maintain a line-drawing quality. Each architect's signature building morphs to a silhouette as if our memory has already diluted the image of the real building. The warm, natural quality of the wood contradicts the hard steel of a skyscraper that is present in the tripod mount. The material and precision of its construction raises comparisons with an expertly crafted model airplane. In a post-9/11 world, the mention of tower and airplane in the same sentence sends shivers down the spine. The menacing tone is enhanced by the inescapable resemblance between these structures and missiles. Each missile-as-tower is groundless, suspended nearly six feet from the ground and fixed in a diagonal position as if to blast off. An international skyscraper as a weapon causes us to consider the weight of international trade policies on a nation's economy as a powerful form of warfare.

Surveillance is another form of warfare. All of the sculpture's spires are fixed on one location like surveillance cameras that point at a space or passageway of concern. The angle of the sculptures encourages the viewer to go up to the viewing balcony or observation deck that overlooks the gallery. There, Giles offers a singular optical experience from this viewing point. The voluminous sculptures collapse in space to two-dimensional floating nonagons and octagons. Close up, the tips of the sculptures appear like floating eyes returning our gaze. The irises and pupils are constructed out of the geometric designs and shades of wood. Who is looking at whom? The aerial view offered from the balcony relates to the circular perspective obtained from an observation tower. Michel Foucault's analysis of the panopticon comes to mind as a control mechanism to maintain a gendered, racial imbalance of power through architecture. By empowering the viewer to gaze directly back at the tower, the installation retains a hopeful sentiment that the insight in to other cultures and societies we gain through visiting other countries may one day lead to better understanding and equality between nations.

A close study of artwork produced by Susan Giles over the past decade verifies an ambitious new direction in her practice. Her ongoing assessment of the connection among tourism, architecture, and identity through small sculptures has expanded exponentially with the increased scale and immersive installation of her Tower sculptures. Bringing the role of technology in her practice to the forefront proves the contemporary relevance of her work and compels us to

consider the psychological effects of the unavoidable mediated experience of time, place, and culture. We exist in a spectacular society, as Guy Debord predicted, where our energy is easily routed to diversions like travel and entertainment, while distracting us from addressing the real issues of societal power at play. The savvy comparison of different architecture spanning centuries and geographies in Giles work cause us to confront the architecture that motivates tourism as symbols of power that run the world. If telecommunication towers have truly replaced cathedrals, what does that say about society? Perhaps media has become a twenty-first century denomination and screens are our alter of worship.

WORKS CITED

1) Claire Bishop, *Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media*, Artforum (September 2012)

2) Zoe Leonard, *You see I am here after all*, 2008, 4000 vintage postcards, installation dimensions vary, exhibited at Dia Beacon (NY), September 21, 2008 - January 9, 2011. The exhibition press release describes the installation: "Leonard presents several thousand vintage postcards of Niagara Falls, dating from the early 1900s to the 1950s ... En masse, they reflect decades of changing technologies during which the motif of the Falls, shot from a few standard vantage points, was revisioned: hand-colored, over-painted, cropped, or otherwise manipulated in accordance with changing notions of truth and taste. Organized by viewpoint and installed in grids, the ensemble unfolds along the wall like a Chinese scroll with one renowned vista succeeded by another."

3) Guillaume Leblon, *Mur Barasti* (2004), installation exhibited at Frac Bourgogne (France), January 24 - March 27, 2004. As described in the exhibition press release, *Mur Barasti* "extended between two walls and is based on a roof conceived by Egyptian architect, Hassan Fathy. The viewer, hesitating between an apparently familiar world and one which escapes any immediate perception of it, acquires a feeling that Freud calls 'strange anxiety.'"

4) Weisman, Leslie Krane. *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (1994), Illini Book Editions, USA. P. 35

ALLISON PETERS QUINN is Director of Exhibition & Residency Programs at the Hyde Park Art Center and curator of *Scenic Overlook*.

Susan Giles is an artist working in sculpture and video. She has a MFA from Northwestern University and a MA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Giles' work has shown in Chicago at THE MISSION, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Renaissance Society, as well as Mixed Greens in New York and Galeria Valle Orti in Valencia, Spain, among others. She has received several grants and awards, including a 2014-2015 Jackman Goldwasser Residency at the Hyde Park Art Center, an Individual Artist Project Grant from DCASE in 2015, awards from the Illinois Arts Council in 2014 and 2009, a 2005 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award and a 1998 Fulbright Grant to Indonesia to conduct research on the intersection of tourism and culture in Bali. She has recently accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Contemporary Practices at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Works in the Exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center

Tokyo Skytree

2013
wood and steel
11 feet 4 inches x 24 feet x 5 feet 8 inches
Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Canton Tower

2014
wood and steel
13 feet 7 inches x 22 feet 4 inches
x 5 feet 6 inches
Photo: Tom Van Eynde

CN Tower

2013
wood and steel
13 feet 9 inches x 18 feet 10 inches
x 5 feet 8 inches
Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Ostankino Tower

2014
wood and steel
16 feet 8 inches x 15 feet 7 inches
x 5 feet 11 inches
Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Arc De Triomphe/viaduct

2014
concrete and paper
20 1/2 inches x 9 inches x 3 inches

Tower Bridge/bridge

2014
concrete and paper
10 3/4 inches x 44 inches x 2 inches

Skytree/tower

2014
concrete and paper
19 inches x 17 inches x 2 3/4 inches

Outpost by Lou Mallozzi

performance with telescope, microphone
and loudspeakers
Photo: Kendal Karmanian,
courtesy of Hyde Park Art Center

Works in the Concurrent Exhibition at THE MISSION

Prague Towers/scaffold

2015
archival cardboard,
concrete, wood
88 3/4 inches x 24 inches x 7 1/4 inches
Photo: Kip Wilkinson

Minarets/bridge

2015
concrete and paper
17 inches x 1 inches x 21 1/4 inches
Photo: Kip Wilkinson

Kaminarimon Gate/cantilever

2015
concrete and paper
17 inches x 9 inches x 7 inches

St. Peter's Basilica/platform

2014
concrete and paper
8 inches x 9 inches x 5 1/2 inches
Photo: Kip Wilkinson

Spire Structure 1

2015
concrete, paper, basswood
40 inches x 3 inches x 5 inches

All works courtesy of THE MISSION Gallery Chicago.



Scenic Overlook installation view

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Hyde Park Art Center is a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. The Art Center is funded in part by the: Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Field Foundation of Illinois; Harpo Foundation; Harper Court Arts Council; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Irving Harris Foundation; The Joyce Foundation; Leo S. Guthman Fund; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; Polk Bros. Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of people like you.

Susan Giles *Scenic Overlook*

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Susan Giles *Points in Space*

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