

ARTIST PROFILE

State of the Art Gallery

Bill Malis' *Dance with Driftwood*

By ERIN J. SMITH / CASA

REMINISCENT OF GATEWAYS found at entrances to Japanese Shinto shrines, Bill Malis' eleven-foot installation of detritus from the beach rises up out of the red brick offering the viewer a moment's meditation in the midst of the hustle and bustle of State Street.



Bill Malis

"I keep coming back to the driftwood," says Malis. "Even the lowliest elements of our society can be exalted. It can happen to the least of us."

The sculpture on the corner of Victoria and

State retains the formal, stylized feel of the original Shinto design that serves as Malis' inspiration. These gateways, or *torii*, are a familiar part of the Asian landscape and can often be found in Japanese cemeteries. According to Malis, the *torii* shape is "a motif I've been carrying with me for years." The shape is composed of two upright supports and curved bars across the top. Malis has experimented with the *torii* shape over the last fifteen years, beginning with functional pieces of everyday art, including a series of twenty lamps utilizing the design. He has also used the shape in a series of wall pieces. Over the years, it is the size and scale of the motif that has increased significantly, culminating in the eleven-foot sculpture.

The simple yet rigid structure is a perfect frame that emphasizes the resiliency of the natural objects that Malis is attracted to. "It's in the spirit of the wood," says Malis. "Only the strong survive."

Each object in the sculpture has been reclaimed in some way: the supporting structure is wood from an old palette, and one can see aged driftwood made smooth by the forces of ocean waves and sand, as well as nails and tire tread arranged in interesting patterns. Malis views each piece of found wood with a reverence that honors its history. "A piece of wood can start way up in the mountains and end up in the ocean," says the artist. "Invariably, all the weak parts get lost in the process... its strength remains."

Rita Ferri, the Visual Arts Coordinator and co-curator of the collection, describes



Photo by Kimberly Kavish

Enshrined Detritus: Open Frame Series #3 by Bill Malis

the composition as "calligraphic." This is in part due to the Japanese character-like shape of the piece. Additionally, one side of the sculpture is painted completely black, while on the other side the objects are left in their natural form. This creates a striking contrast between the two sides, emphasizing the relationship, inherent in Shintoism, between the sacred and profane, the world of the spirit and that of the everyday.

Malis draws creative inspiration from the items he finds. "I walk down the beach and pieces speak to me," he says. "If I start with a plan, the plan has a way of going in a different direction based on what I find. I call it 'dancing with the wood.' Sometimes I lead and take the wood where it could go, or sometimes the wood leads me and tells me where it wants to go."

Malis, a La Conchita resident, is no stranger to public art and has participated in events throughout his career as an artist. Along with his installation work, Malis is also an accomplished ice sculptor and performs at public events. Malis believes that "Public art provides a way for people to get involved in art one way or another — good or bad. Each [reaction] is a viable response." Malis creates pieces he hopes "strike a visual chord that people can respond to in a positive way."

Enshrined Detritus: Open Frame Series #3 is located on the corner of Victoria and State through Nov 15th. For more information, call 568-3994.