

Barbara Westfall

*Nature and Culture*, 1992

UW-Madison Memorial Union Gallery, Madison, WI

Box elder trees, Canada thistle, barbed wire, sickle blades and paint

20' x 20'

*"Nature and Culture"*, is a mixed media installation created by artist Barbara Westfall at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Union Gallery, which emphasizes the destructive effects of human intervention on the environment. Long, sharp-toothed farm machinery blades frame the gallery entrance, and the ominous tone carries through this oddly lyrical construction. Stepping into the gallery past weather beaten wood fences that lead into a thicket of young trees denuded of branches, the trees bear a strange new fruit. The "fruits" are blades of grain-cutting machinery, and undulating through the branch tops is a tangle of barbed wire. One might see this as nature choked off by mindless machinery, but the notion that lingers is of mutations of technological and organic chemistry that have evolved, as so many vulnerable life forms have, into something more self-defending.

Among the thicket of trees, hung from the gallery walls, are living bundles of thistle, burdock and stinging nettle. Westfall's statement notes how these tenaciously armored trees and plants inhabit Wisconsin's post-prairie/oak savannah landscape, after years of disturbance and abandonment from development and farming. A pungent aroma pervades this strange scene, the natural emissions of these prickly plants. The weapon-like installation retains a muted beauty, even a delicacy, especially in the wisp and seeds that have fallen to the floor.