



# Printer Friendly Article



## Sticks And Stones

### Painter-Sculptor Patricia Beggins Escaped To A Yoga Retreat But Found It Crawling With Art

*Written By Patricia Beggins*



Camel, detail,

#### **By Patricia Beggins**

These sculptures practically made themselves. I was spending three months at an intensive yoga retreat, sequestered from the outside world and unable to communicate through phone or email. I had been through such programs before in India for as long as six months at a stretch, but this time I was in Tennessee at a yoga center surrounded by forest on the Cumberland Plateau.



I was there to experience *silence*, to put myself in the hands of a spiritual teacher I have been following for seven years. I didn't know exactly what it would entail; I only knew that I had to be there. The campus is over 1200 acres, but my world for those 90 days was much smaller. All of the over 200 participants slept on mattresses on the floor of the meditation hall. We showered and kept our luggage in lodges which were a short three minute walk from the hall. Other than that we regularly walked to the dining area and kitchen, and sometimes, for exercise, the group would go about a mile on foot down an unpaved road.



During my short daily walks I noticed that there were many interestingly shaped sticks and roots and natural forms scattered on the ground. The yoga center has been under construction for over three years, so there has been a lot of tree-cutting and clearing of land which has left exposed roots and chunks of wood from grinding stumps and cutting branches. There is also left-over construction debris—nails, bits of wire and string, and occasionally small plastic pieces.

I began to collect these things, and a few times a day I would empty my pockets, storing my treasures on the lower bunk bed where I kept my suitcase. More often than not the things I found were so strongly suggestive that it seemed that they were literally begging me to pick them up and allow them to become, with just a few small adjustments, that which they were meant to be.

**One day someone left a note on my bed. It read: “Please stop gathering things. Just be here.” At first I was taken aback. I thought, “But I am just being here. This is what it looks like for me to be here.”**

For one ten-day period I had my eye on the exposed root of a sapling which had been twisted and damaged by a bulldozer. I walked past it many times a day and, though I had to almost turn myself upside down to see it, I felt certain that it was a perfectly formed elephant's head.

Almost every minute was accounted for during those months. We did over 12 hours of yoga practice each day as well as long sessions of meditation and chanting. The schedule was very tight, so when my project of hunting and gathering evolved into creating sculpture it was tricky to find a little time and a little space in which to work. Just finding a few minutes to get a tool with which to cut the elephant-head sapling was a challenge, and I also had to find glue, scissors, and string. The rule I set for myself was that everything I used had to be something I found on the property, whether it be a natural form or man-made.

**These objects cannot be separated from the conditions under which I created them. For me, their power derives from the fact that I literally had nothing to work with: no time, no space, no materials, and an atmosphere that was opposed to my making them at all. But still they happened.**



I began to work in the ten to twenty minutes at the end of the day while waiting for the showers to get less crowded. I would fire up the glue gun I had found and quickly survey the day's bounty. Because I was so intentional about which things I would pick up, I usually had a clear plan already formulated about what to make. As I finished each piece I would tie a string around it and hang it from the top bunk. Eventually I created a small art gallery with over fifteen pieces hanging over the lower bed. It became a destination



for the people with whom I shared the lodge. The program was quite challenging in every way and though we were in silence it was easy enough to see people's struggles written on their faces. I began to notice and enjoy watching people stop and poke their heads into my impromptu gallery and come out laughing. Eventually, I would find little offerings anonymously left on the bed—a small wasp's nest, a seed pod, or a gnarled stick.

One day someone left a note on my bed. It read: "*Please stop gathering things. Just be here.*" At first I was taken aback. I thought, "But I *am* just being here. This is what it looks like for me to be here." I had been focusing during the program on feeling the silence that underlies everything and I was continually aware of my breath, of each incoming and outgoing breath. I

had become keenly aware of my thoughts, particularly of a tendency to play them like a movie, to use them as entertainment, as a way to slip away from the present moment. Now, with the arrival of the note—*Please stop gathering things!*—I was forced to consider the uses of making art. Was it a compulsion, this way I have of making something out of nothing? Was it a way to not be present, a need to enhance the reality of this moment, which indicated a lack of acceptance of what is?





I pondered all of this as I continued to gather, now surreptitiously, always aware that I could be found out. The sense of possibly being watched added a new and fun dimension to the game. I did briefly decide to 'stop gathering things' but that decision fell by the wayside the first time I happened upon a twisted root that looked *exactly* like a dinosaur. How could I just leave it there? Already I had been marveling at the fact that people had been living in that place for over three years yet no one had noticed these remarkable forms. The very earth was screaming to be seen, practically thrusting its abundance into my hands. And though I could make a case against continuing the project in favor of pure single-minded breath-watching, I could also argue that what I was doing was just a kind of heightened visual awareness which was central to my nature, my very specific way of 'being here'. And as long as I remained aware of how easily it could slide toward compulsion it would be ok. I did end up stopping the actual construction of new pieces when I saw how often we were required to shift our luggage from one area to another. I simply got tired of dismantling the art gallery every few weeks. But I did fill two huge plastic bags full of materials for use when I got home.

These objects cannot be separated from the conditions under which I created them. For me, their power derives from the fact that I literally had nothing to work with: no time, no space, no materials, and an atmosphere that was opposed to my making them at all. But still they happened, and they happened very joyfully, like the best kind of play. I haven't yet settled the question about whether my tendency to create is in opposition to the discipline of pure 'being', but because of this experience I now work with greater awareness.

EDITOR'S NOTE: [Patricia Beggins](#) is a multi-media artist currently living in Atlanta, Georgia

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