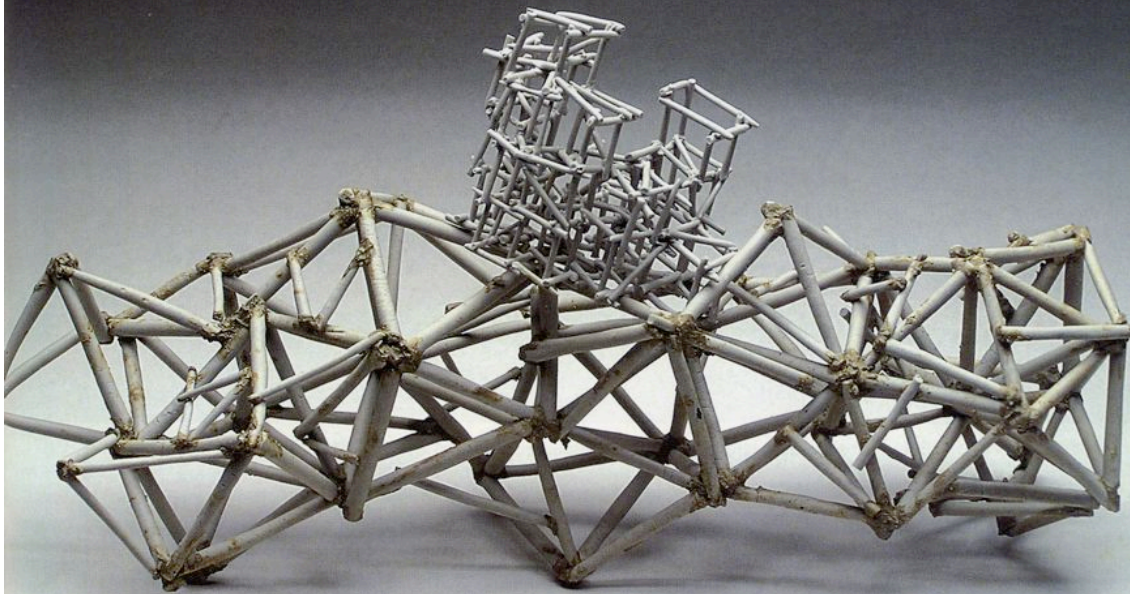


Stanton Hunter Butterfly Migration Grids

Article by Rebecca McGrew

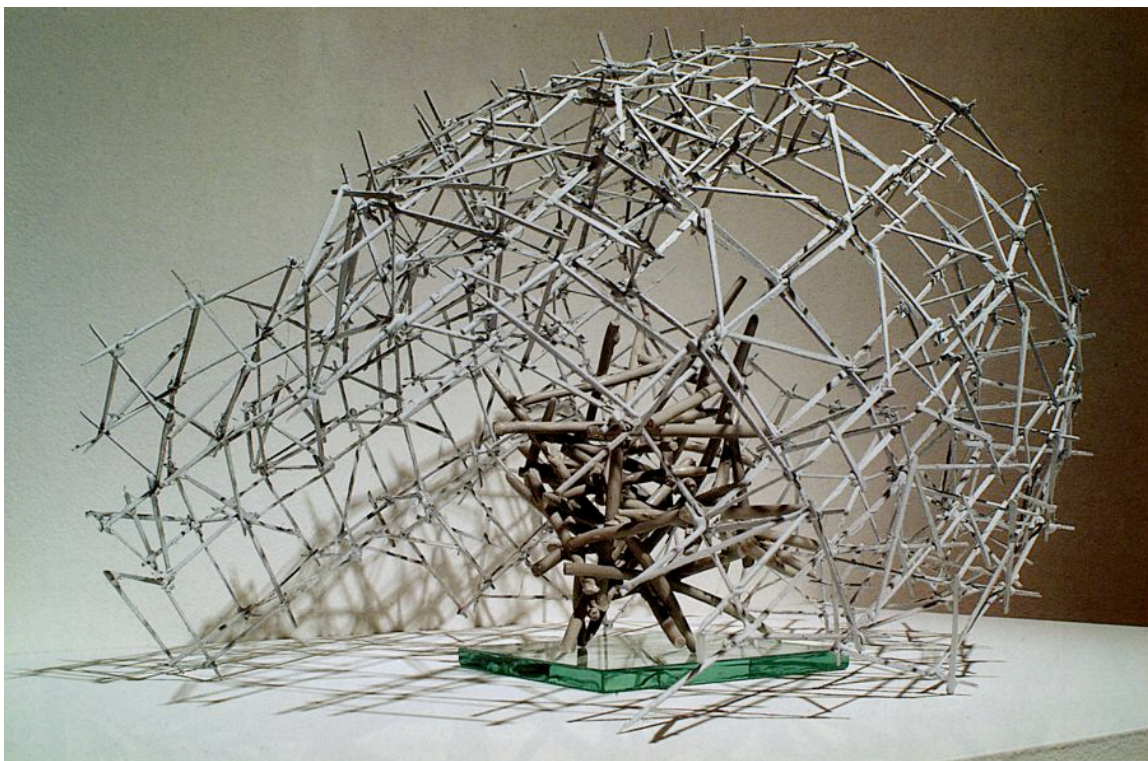


Migration Grid #8. 2006. Clay. 15 x 38 x 10 cm..

IN THE MIGRATION GRIDS SERIES, STANTON HUNTER USES clay – the most terrestrial of materials – to make something immaterial, something celestial. He translates the solidity and permanence of earth into delicate fragile structures that portray ephemeral sky forms. The *Migration Grids* series stemmed from an intriguing article Hunter found discussing how Monarch butterflies use grids composed of ultraviolet light to guide their migration routes. This confluence – Hunter's discovery of a magical aspect of the natural world and his existing sculptural and ceramic work – set the stage for a provocative new body of work which links earthbound materials with hard science and an ethereal concept. He brings together multiple references – nature, science, sculpture, site-specificity, materiality – to investigate ceramics, to explore relations among light and space, to question traditional notions of sculpture and media, and to alter our expectations of art and nature.

From his early work to this most recent project, Hunter has been interested in fusing formal sculptural concerns with natural and organic materials in order to explore the complexity and nature of contemporary reality. By combining a number of sources, he has developed an unusual vocabulary to address the history of modern art through an investigation into sculpture as a medium and to make tangible seemingly intangible and challenging concepts. Hunter's work has ranged from traditional ceramic forms – functional objects like pots and teapots – to sculpture, installation, and site-specific work. In every case, he combines daunting technical skill, a profound commitment to natural elements, and an investigation into the possibilities of the everyday and mundane.

Hunter, after working with traditional vessel forms for several years, began to alter and play with the context and use of these objects. Creating multiples of



Migration Grid #5. 2005. Clay, toothpicks, glass. 30.5 x 40.5 x 30.5 cm.

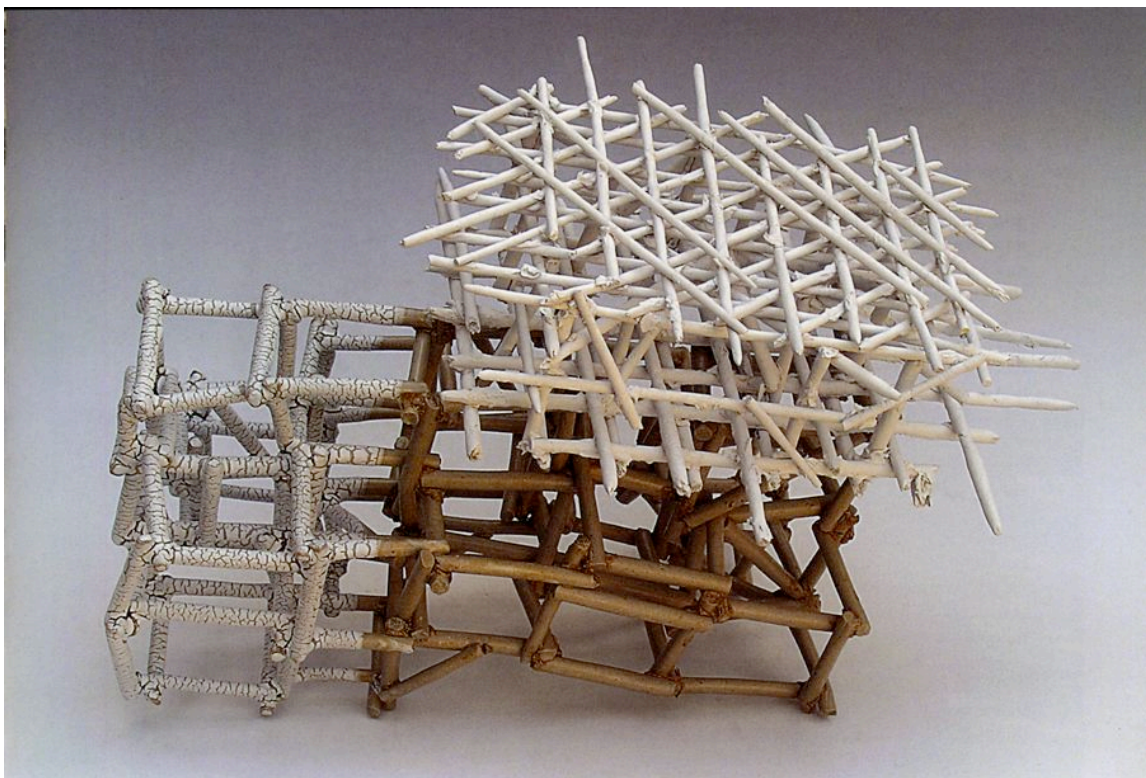
bowls, pots or vases, he would place the objects into a new environment, completely inverting the expectation of the original function. For example, in 1999, for a two-day outdoor exhibition in Pasadena, Hunter, in *Potfield*, arranged several hundred virtually identical turquoise pots in a grid (the artist's first large-scale grid form) in a sparse meadow just off a meandering fire road. The combination of traditional objects in an untraditional setting confounded expectations of the everyday, and blurred boundaries between ceramics, sculpture, installation and site-specific work.

With subsequent work, Hunter expanded his explorations into site-specificity and the relationships between ceramics and nature. His work still included vessels, as well as autonomous sculptural forms, but more frequently he created site-specific projects that referred to the natural environment, specifically, the landscape. In an early artist statement, Hunter located his interest in the "gesture of the natural as it finds its way into interior man-made environments and outdoor settings".

Referencing rivers or faults viewed from high above, streaks of lightning, or paths of tree limb growth, the 'gesture' that first caught his attention was the crack – in walls, the floor, the earth. The shifts in scale and the confusion in perspective focused the artist's attention on the way the smallest of nature's

phenomena could echo the grandest natural event or geological occurrence. Hunter also found the contrast between cracks in man-made materials, such as cement, and naturally occurring cracks in the land a rich area of exploration because of the tension between the natural and the artificial. From 1999-2001 Hunter manipulated found cracks in the gallery setting by painstakingly painting the crevice with a vibrant colour – as seen in *Floor Crack* (2000) – and produced casts of found cracks creating a series of cement tablets with identical cracks – for example, *Untitled (cement river, 2000)*.

The architectural setting of some of these 'cracks' inspired Hunter to create work combining architectural references and vessels. In 2003, for a site-specific exhibition at a restaurant ('Consuming Art' Bistro 1000), he created a comprehensive series of deconstructed bowls, plates, vases, platters, cups and saucers, all glazed to mimic the colours of food. Most significantly, Hunter linked these vessels together with a delicate scaffold-based structure of toothpicks. He later expanded on the use of the toothpick as an architectural motif in *Growing Project* (2004), a site-specific installation at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Art's 'In the Nursery' exhibition. *Growing Project* consisted of toothpick grids that surrounded individual mustard weed plants. The maple colour of the



Migration grid #21. 2007. Clay, paperclay, crawl glaze & house paint. 25.5 x 40.5 x 25.5 cm.

toothpicks echoed the colour of the dried mustard weed, while the grid/scaffolds around the weeds merged the natural with the man-made, hinting at some mysterious process at work. The potential of the grids in combination with natural forms and subject matter intrigued Hunter and he embarked in a new direction, constructing grid-like sculptures from clay.

In his most recent project, the *Migration Grids*, Hunter's work and interests coalesced perfectly, bringing together the use of multiples and grid-based forms, his interest in natural elements, the materiality of ceramics and the conceptual framework of site-specific projects. While Hunter's oeuvre disrupts convenient categories, the history of modern art and sculpture informs the work in subtle ways. Hunter himself cites earth artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Ana Mendieta, Chris Drury and Richard Long as primary influences in their use of organic materials and, in particular, how the earth became a material to manipulate, whether on a grand or intimate scale. Similar to the ways in which many of these artists transform organic materials into works of art, Hunter relates to the material of clay as decomposed rock or landscape that he transforms back to landscape. Hunter also cites photographer Uta Barth with her capturing of shadow, light and space in minimalist images of fragments of organic and inorganic objects

as a particular source for the *Migration Grids*. Hunter responds to the images' fleeting and transitory nature and the play of light and space.

Likewise, the phenomenological and experiential explorations of light and space artists James Turrell (note also Turrell's functional ceramic work, the *Quaker ware*), Doug Wheeler and Olafur Eliasson complement Hunter's attempts to link the ephemeral with the terrestrial in both large-scale environments and smaller objects. Eva Hesse's and Louise Bourgeois's accumulations of organic forms and the repetition of elements are echoed in Hunter's newest work where the objects respond to the seriality and materiality of both of these artists. Hunter may also have a relative soul-mate in Josiah McElheny, another younger artist working with a traditional material more often associated with craft, in McElheny's case, glass. Like Hunter, McElheny is a master craftsman who often works with multiples of seemingly utilitarian objects, repeating similar forms and shapes, and imbuing them with a whole array of conceptual and social implications, ultimately challenging the nature of sculpture.

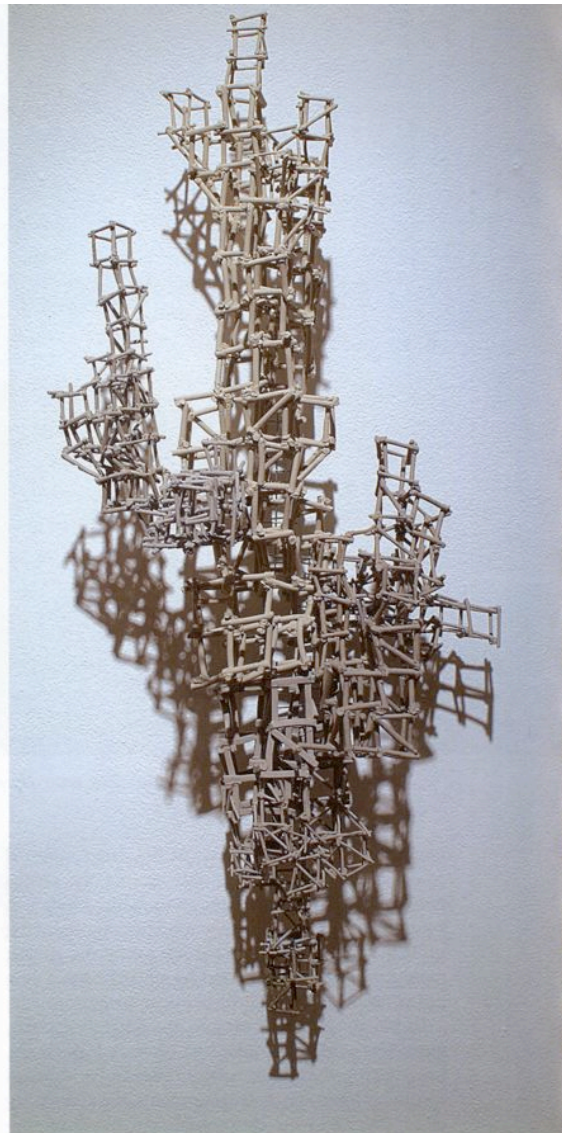
In May 2005, Hunter read an article in the *Los Angeles Times Science File*, which discussed Monarch butterflies' use of a three-dimensional map made of rays of polarised ultraviolet light grids. Although this UV

light is invisible to humans, to butterflies it appears as a grid in the sky that emanates from the sun. As the sun travels east to west across the sky, so does the grid. These grids guide the butterflies on their winter migration route from the US to Mexico's Sierra Madre mountain range. Hunter eventually met with University of California (UC) Irvine biologist Adriana Briscoe and University of Massachusetts neurobiologist Steven Reppert, co-authors of the study, to learn more about the grids. They collaborated on an exhibition of the *Migration Grids* sculptures at UC Irvine that brought together science and the aesthetic response. Briscoe was pleased to see her study have wider repercussions beyond the fields of ecology and evolutionary biology.

Briscoe's research and the science article not only inspired Hunter with how "poetic these grids are and how only these fragile beings can see them", but provided a conceptual underpinning for the work. The scaffold / grid forms evolved into floating forms that merged earth and sky. As Hunter states in a film about the work, "all of a sudden I had this excuse to make grids and scaffoldings and truss-based forms that in normal architecture support things. But these things don't support anything; they need to be supported to stand up. The whole contrast between the earth and sky and mass and no-mass and permanence and ethereal... the contrasts all the way down the line just blow me away."

Each of Hunter's *Migration Grids* – now numbered individually up to #21 – vary immensely. They range in scale and appearance from the most delicate intimate grid composed of perhaps 10 toothpick-sized sticks of clay wedged together in a loosely pyramidal structure placed on glass platforms; to dense, massive accumulations of hundreds of the fragile toothpick-scaled structures piled vertically in a stack 2.1 m (7 ft) high, or arranged horizontally hanging in the air supported by a 3 m (9 ft) long wire cable armature; to much sturdier grids consisting of 60 cm (2 ft) long, 2.5 cm (1 in) diameter tubes piled in "pick-up-stick" configurations that again exist on the wall, floor or moving between the two.

The series *Migration Grids* also draws from architecture, with the intricate simplicity of trusses and scaffoldings as points of departure and with the materiality of mud, glass, wood, cables, and house paint. Hunter painted all the *Migration Grids* sculptures with colours that echo the natural whites and greys of a cloudy sky. The ephemeral quality of the colours and forms in all the grids, whether individually placed on the wall or pedestal, or viewed in an installation, play with the space of the architectural setting and with light and shadow. Each grid stands on its own as a singular object; yet, Hunter also intends each grid to phenomenologically link light, space, the viewer and the environment – connecting



Migration Grid #2. 2005. Clay. 61 x 28 x 20 cm.

the visible world of humans with the invisible grids of the Monarch butterflies. By including references to science and nature, as well as those from the fields of sculpture and ceramics, Stanton Hunter extends the discourse of modernism by injecting it with a magical content, renewing our relationship to both art and the natural world. Hunter's evocative sculptures reveal the intricacies of nature's systems, thus providing a unique forum to address some of the complex issues facing nature and our society today.

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