



Bill Gilbert, *Erosion Ortiz Red*, 10' x 15' x 12', adobe, juniper, 1981.

BILL GILBERT

DAVID L. BELL

I first saw Bill Gilbert surrounded by one of his installations in progress, *Erosion Ortiz Red*, which ultimately was awarded first prize at the New Mexico Crafts Exhibition of the Santa Fe Festival of the Arts last year. His lanky figure emerging from the construction of juniper, willow and clay, he appeared as a child at work on a play fort in the woods, or a beaver surprised while building a dam. The installation itself took the form of a roughly triangular framework of upright and horizontal lengths of dead juniper that supported a sort of hammock of interlaced willow branches overlaid with raw adobe.

Conspicuously non-functional in the context of a crafts exhibition, *Erosion Ortiz Red* nevertheless transcended any suggestion of artifice or funk and, from its white-walled corner, emanated the same integrity of intention as a fine bird's nest. For all its bravura, it was finally modest; and while temporary by nature, it seemed to derive from some prototype that promised never to go out of style.

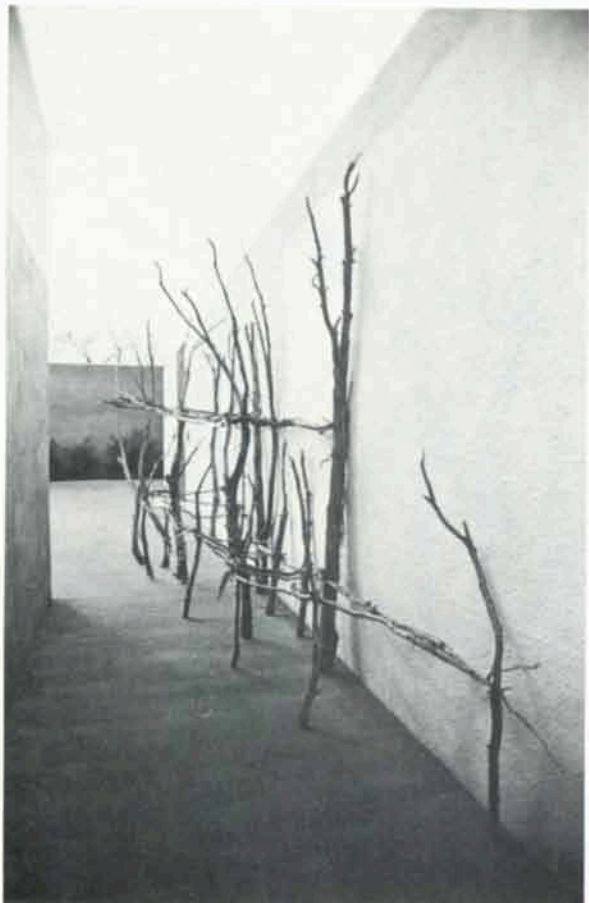
Some people say that art is man's bid for immortality, and for those who apply durability as a criterion to given works of art, short-lived constructions such as Gilbert's must pose a dilemma that can be resolved only by acceptance of the truth that the impulse, not the object, is the issue. Gilbert spoke to the matter and some of its implications in a statement made in connection with a 1981 exhibition, "Clay Alternatives," at the

Fischer Gallery of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles:

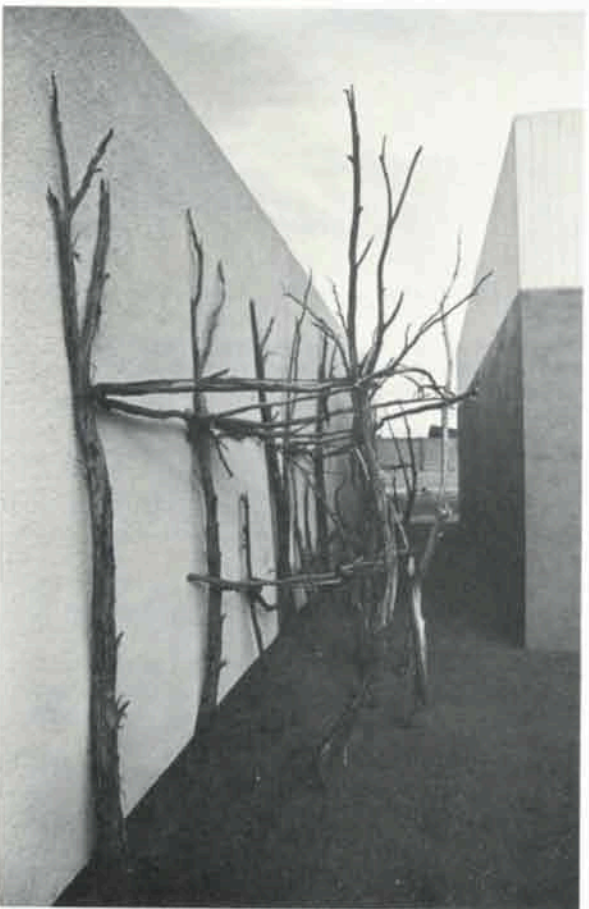
For any sculptor, the choice of medium carries a major portion of the work's statement. I chose clay ten years ago primarily for its directness as earth. In many ways this choice was a reaction against the technology—and that technology's worship of immortality—that made the insanity of Vietnam possible. I opted for a material that reflected a closer association with the earth and the elements in an attempt to open a more humble dialogue with our world... this dialogue has led... towards a more fluid apprehension of matter in space; matter as a combination of particle and wave. I have chosen the format of installation for its ability to invoke the fragility of the massive, and the impermanence of the permanent, implied by this theory of matter.

Beyond that, and as though to temper the sobriety of theoretical statement, Gilbert has said of his juniper installations, "I got into this because I had to build a fence, frankly." That task, the construction of a coyote fence on his property in Cerrillos with wood gathered in the nearby Ortiz Mountains, was routine to a lifestyle that encompasses homesteading, construction work, teaching and art.

Born in Connecticut in 1950, Gilbert began making pottery at Swathmore College in 1970. By the mid-1970s, in California, he had moved to a more sculptural handling of ceramics and began to incorporate ceramic elements in larger sculptural works of wood, which were widely shown in the west. Continuing his studies in Montana from 1976 to 1978, he turned from



Bill Gilbert, *Native New Mexico Installation*, Hoshour Gallery, exterior.



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clay to adobe, finding the latter better suited to the expression of the earth forms that continued to interest him. Drawn by adobe, he moved to New Mexico in 1979, and there discovered the hardy, statuesque and equally characteristic juniper.

"I follow the arroyos to find dead wood," he says. "Once you begin to find the big stuff, you know you'll find more, some of it on the ground and some of it standing."

The quality of the found pervaded two installations of juniper, willow and tamarisk created by Gilbert last year, *Ortiz Installation* and *Ortiz Installation II*, the former at Shidoni in Tesuque and the latter outside the Linda Durham Gallery on Santa Fe's Canyon Road. Surrounded and overhung by cottonwood trees, and bordered on one side by a fence of end-cut logs, the Shidoni piece was, from a distance, inseparable from its surroundings. As one approached the northwest corner of the field in which it stood, however, upright and interlaced forms began to emerge. While in harmony with the natural vegetation, those forms clearly represented a purposeful act, much as a footbridge of vines might appear in relation to its jungle habitat.

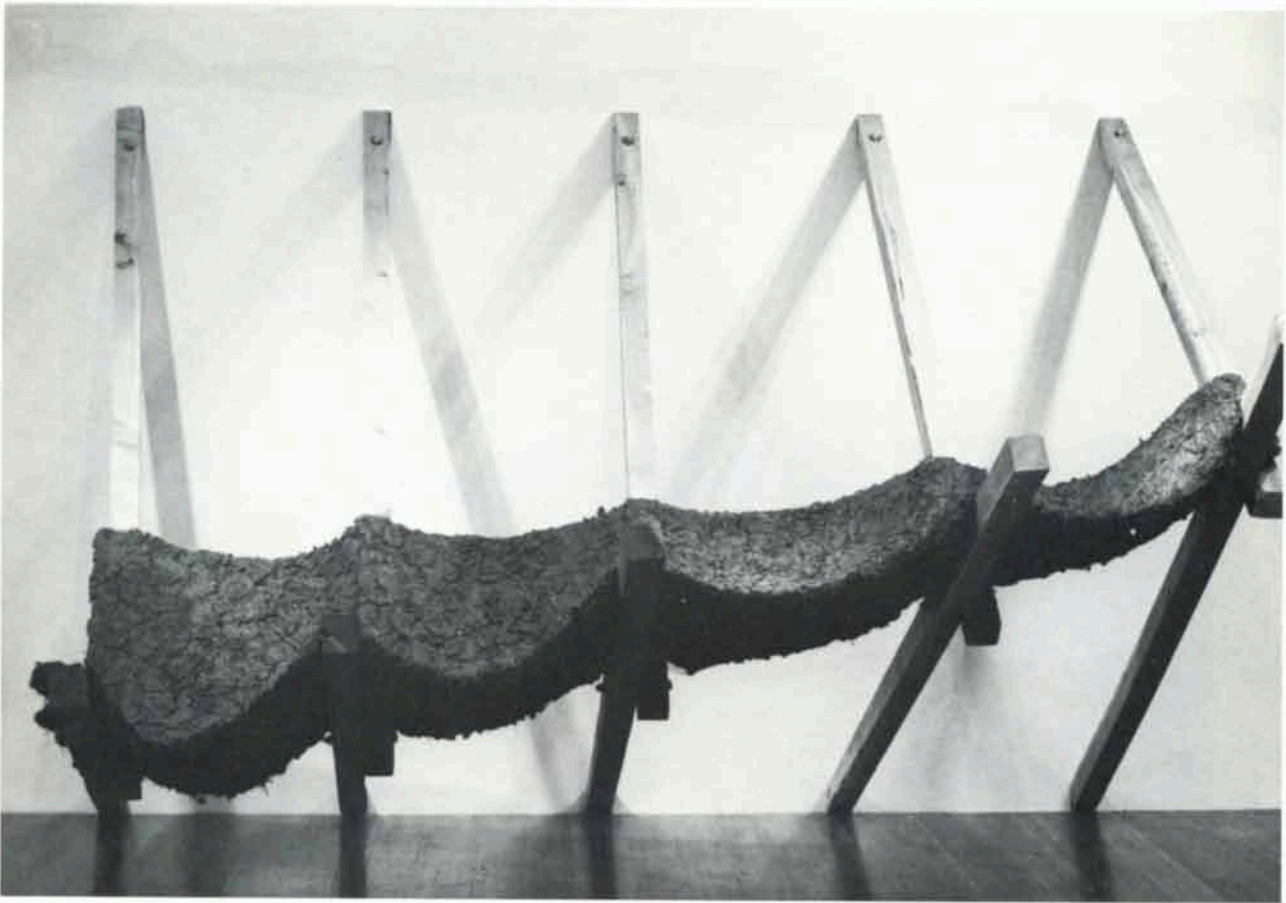
The Durham installation is likewise overhung by trees and bordered by plantings. It carries the suggestion, partly owing to its proximity to the old brick school building that now houses the gallery, of a corral or the backyard shelters that children so often build, elaborate and finally abandon, perhaps in re-enactment of the domestic habits of nomadic, early man.

The impulse to play is, in fact, central to Gilbert's work, not as parody or even so much as wit but rather in the sense that young animals and children only faintly draw the line between work, play or combat, correctly sensing that all are extensions by degree of a central life force whose expression may equally be a fence, an embrace, or what we have come to call works of art.

The same integrated and fundamentally constructive energy informed Gilbert's most ambitious work to date, the *Native New Mexico Installation* that filled the three rooms of the Hoshour Gallery in Albuquerque last March. Choreographed as a journey through the aligned and skylighted spaces with their white walls and hardwood floors, a lattice-work of juniper alternately opened and closed to present certain options and inevitabilities of passage. Secured by baling wire that recalled the artist's fence-building activities, trunks and branches were arranged at the entry to form a sort of Y-shaped double turnstile. From there they converged to define a single path that conducted to the second room, where it bypassed a low tangle of branches. In the third room, a clearing narrowed to a leftward-veering pathway, while to the right a causeway of interlaced branches covered with adobe led upward as though beyond the confines of the building. That egressive challenge to architectural space, while necessarily tempered by the lower ceiling height of the rear room, nevertheless was reinforced by a juniper installation in the alley flanking the building. Playing against interior microcosm and outdoor macrocosm, juniper comprised a lifeline like the viewer's own. Or, for that matter, like the progressive squares of hopscotch, the inevitable course of the Yellow Brick Road, or the seductive perspective of an Easter Egg diorama.

Once again, life was play, a mutable game whose immortality lies in that very flux, as weather-silvered and textured wood is seen now against itself and now against the white void of the gallery wall. In a gentle transposition, the artist extended the spirit of nature by an infusion of his own, with none of the sense of appropriation or manipulation that sometimes characterizes such work. Bypassing the distinctions between man and nature, art and craft, and permanence and temporality, distinctions that are symptomatic of a sensibility alienated from art as an integral part of life, *Native New Mexico Installation* gave expression to Gilbert's perception of their integration. □

William Gilbert is represented by the Hoshour Gallery, Albuquerque, N.M.



Bill Gilbert, *Blanket*, 12' x 5' x 8'. adobe and wood.

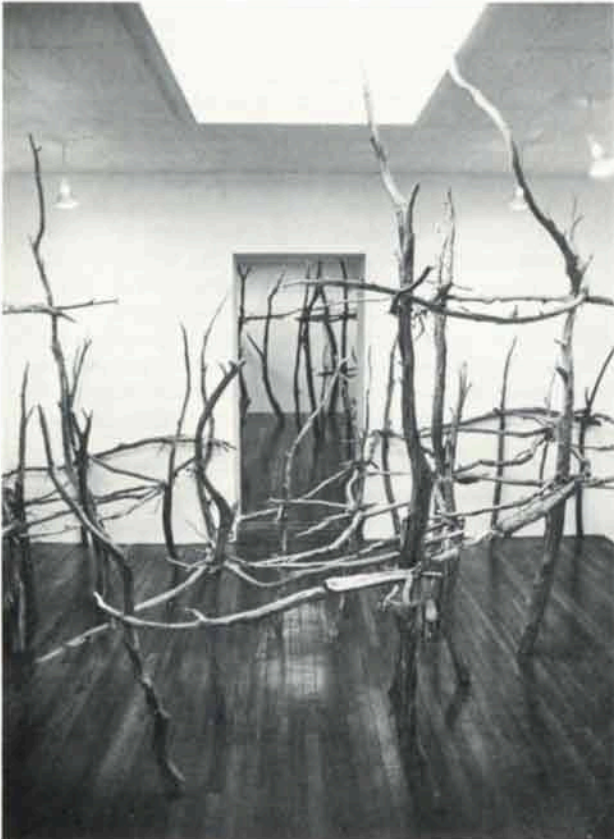


Bill Gilbert, *Ortiz Installation*, 15' x 45' x 30'. juniper, willow, tamarisk. 1981, Shidoni.

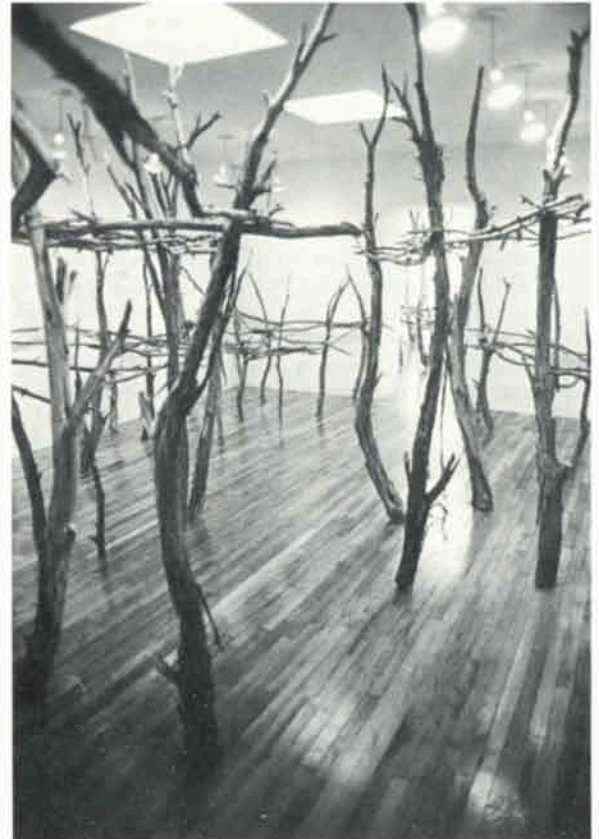


Bill Gilbert, *Native New Mexico Installation*, Hoshour Gallery, front room.

photos: Bernard Plossu



Native New Mexico Installation, Hoshour Gallery, middle room.



Native New Mexico Installation, Hoshour Gallery, back room.