

## Sculptor chooses materials that celebrate present

By OWEN McNALLY  
*Courant Staff Writer*

**B**ill Gilbert, a 37-year-old sculptor and Connecticut native who has embraced and is inspired by the American Southwest, loves natural materials.

So strong is Gilbert's passion for the organic that he not only creates highly acclaimed environmental works from aspen saplings, he also lives with his wife and three young children in an adobe house he built with his own hands in Santa Fe, N.M.

"I can get my material by stepping out of my door and cutting aspen saplings. I have chosen to work with natural material like this as a protest against technology and technology's worship of immortality," Gilbert said last week as he began installing a sapling sculpture that will fill the two rooms of the Wadsworth Atheneum's Lions Gallery.

Titled "Bill Gilbert: Aspen Environment,"

the show opens today and runs through Aug. 2 in the Lions Gallery.

Gilbert has created similar natural installations in art centers around the country.

The Nation magazine has compared his sapling installations to "an enchanted forest ... a linear network of subtle rhythm ... delicate and organic ... reminiscent of a breathtaking matchstick construction."

Gilbert was a letter-winning athlete in soccer, swimming and tennis at Hopkins Grammar School, a prestigious prep school in New Haven. His parents had hoped he would follow a traditional middle-class path leading from college to medical school or business, he said.

"My father, who's now retired, was a conservative businessman, but both parents have always been very supportive of my decision to become an artist," he says.

While Gilbert was attending Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania in the late 1960s during the height of the Vietnam War, he got bitten by the art bug and by ceramics in particular.

"Working with clay seemed like a very humble, very connected-to-the-Earth, very rational kind of thing to be doing in a crazy time when the country preached one thing but was doing another in Vietnam," he says.

Gilbert says his works in fragile, organic

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### Art review



# celebrates the present

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materials stress the value of the present and the tangible. This is deliberately in marked contrast to monumental steel sculptures striving after some form of immortality, he says.

Gilbert's sprawling work of limbs and twigs is certainly not your typical museum exhibition. This unusual quality is just one of the factors that delights Lions Gallery Curator Cynthia Bushnell.

"We like shows like this that can be appreciated by both the visually impaired and the sighted — a show that patrons can really interact with.

"This is what Bill is creating — a work you can touch, a work you can get inside of and move around in. It has the tactile element you don't associate with museums where artworks are meant to be looked at and not touched," she says.

### Creates sounds

As patrons walk through Gilbert's woody work, the thin saplings will rattle a bit, creating a sound all their own. Gilbert thinks this sonic effect and other elements give the work certain qualities of performance art.

"You're half-way to performance art in a way because each work is something that happens in a certain space with a certain kind of lighting and even sound. Each work is entirely new.

"Every installation is different and exists only for that site. You have to be able to improvise around variables like the color of the room when you're putting it all together — an act which is a kind of performance in itself.

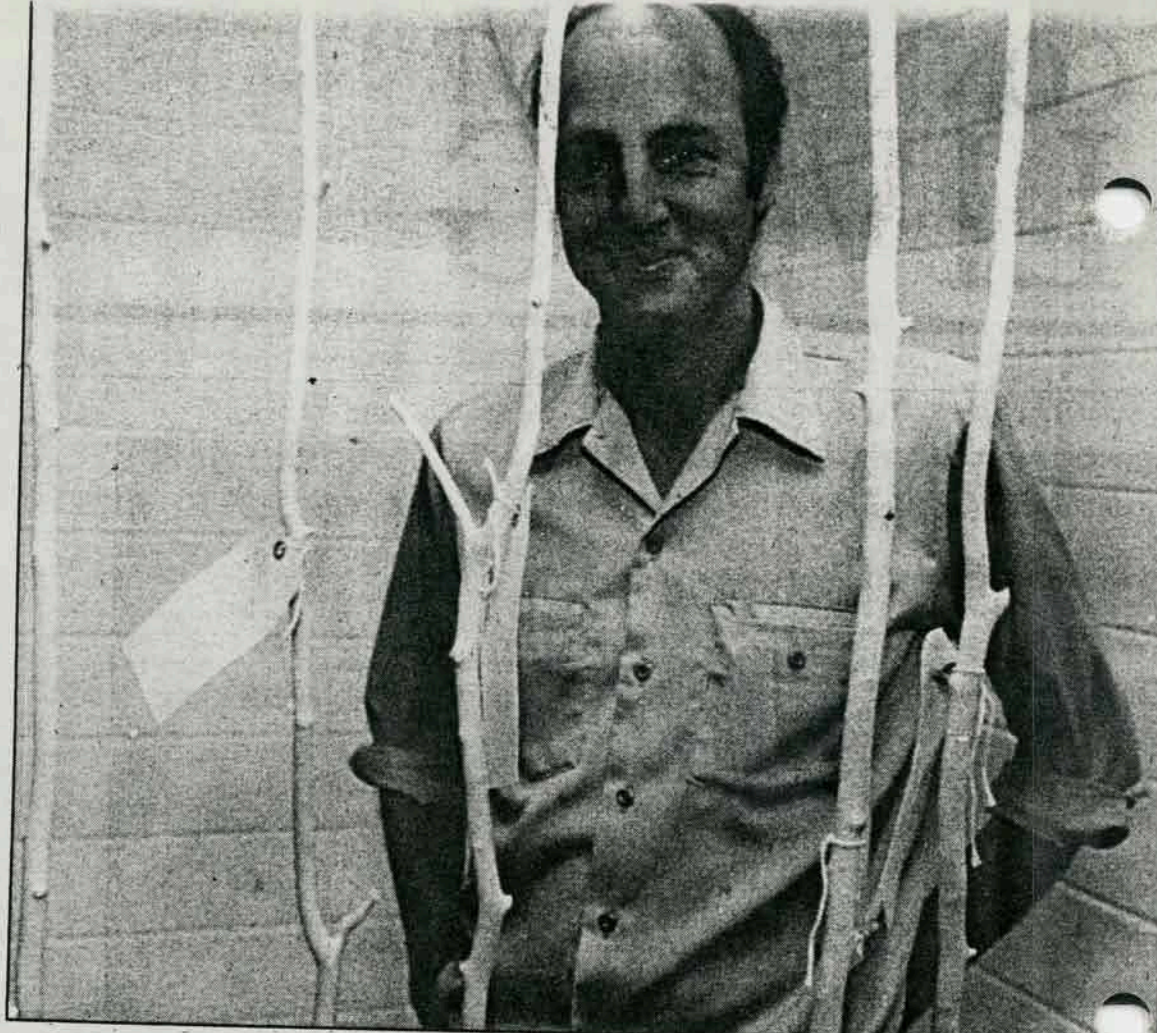
"If you can't ad lib, you just can't do this because no amount of pre-planning will take care of everything you might encounter," he says.

Gilbert, who has been setting up similar on-site works at art centers around the country, says he began working in January on the exhibition in his studio in an old railroad warehouse in Santa Fe.

### Expressionistic shapes

As he talks about the work, he unloads a giant wooden crate packed with saplings of various sizes, each with craggy, expressionistic shapes all their own.

"The Wadsworth sent me a floor plan of the Lions Gallery, which I used when I put the work together in my studio. I've got sheetrock walls that I can move around to simulate the gallery spaces I'll be working in



Sculptor Bill Gilbert stands amid some of the aspen saplings that form his work "Bill Gilbert: Aspen Environment," which is being shown at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. John Long / The Hartford Courant

"Now I'm going to reassemble the work here and see how it goes," he says as he begins suspending the tallest saplings from the ceiling.

Around these tall pieces, he will create various forms with the smaller saplings. Back in Santa Fe, he cut down and peeled each sapling, whittling some down to one-sixteenth of an inch thick.

"I want the work to have flow and rhythm and to have forms similar to the land in Santa Fe with its mesas and table tops," he says as he looks over the gallery space. He has placed pieces of tape to mark the floor in strategic spots.

It looks as if he's about to reassemble a giant, surreal tinker toy as he goes through a giant wooden crate, pulling out numbered pieces that will fit into his overall master plan.

### Focus on materials

"Rather than putting a lot of focus on the artist's craft, my focus is on the material itself," he says. "I wanted to emphasize the sense of place through its native material, not the artist through his facility."

In what he calls "a deliberate reaction against technology," Gilbert has worked with natural materials right from his undergraduate days: first with clay, then clay with wood

and, in more recent years, with his sapling installations.

Gilbert, who has a master of fine arts degree from the University of Montana, looks much at home working with drill, ladder and carpenter's tools.

This isn't surprising; for several years he ran his own construction company, which built adobe homes in the Santa Fe area. In the last year or so, he has put his construction business on the back burner to teach ceramics and an introductory sculpture course at the University of New Mexico, he says.

"Carl Andre says sculpture is about mass, but I say just the opposite," he says.

"I see my work as providing space on which light happens. The saplings are really a three-dimensional palette I choose from.

"And the work itself is experiential because you actually have to go through it and total up all your perceptions. You can't just stand in one spot and see it all," he says.

Does it bother him that when the exhibition is finished his work will be dismantled and will exist only in photographs or in the memory of those who see it?

"This idea of the work being for

the moment is exactly what I want," he says.

### Prefers immediacy

"I want people to slow down and get a sense of the feeling of immediacy, to know that this work is for now and isn't something that they can come back to see 20 years from now," he says.

"That's why I use wood material rather than, say, steel, which creates the false illusion of the object being immortal.

"The natural materials accent the sense of immediacy, the sense of the present, the sense of the real... the kind of consciousness that could prevent a Vietnam or any kind of crazy power trip," he says.

*"Bill Gilbert: Aspen Environment" opens today and runs through Aug. 2 in the Lions Gallery at the Wadsworth Atheneum, 600 Main St. The public is invited to an open house Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. in honor of the exhibition. The Lions Gallery may be entered free through the museum's Avery entrance. The gallery is supported by the Lions Clubs of Hartford and Litchfield counties. It is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. For more information, call 278-2670.*