

Peabody Essex Museum blog

## Leafing out with Joan Backes - Peabody Essex Museum blog

By [Meg Winikates](#) / 23 Jan 2015 \_



Joan Backes, “Falling Leaves” installation in “Branching Out,” photo by Caryn Boehm

Walking into [Branching Out: Trees as Art](#) from the Atrium, I always have to stop for a few moments to enjoy the gentle twisting of Joan Backes’ “Falling Leaves” installation. Some days it reminds me of walking through the woods in autumn. Other days it feels like a slow-motion moment from a film, but it never fails to catch my imagination.

I recently had a chance to catch up with the artist, who is currently traveling in Australia, to find out more about her inspirations and what’s up with her new artistic adventures.



Joan Backes, *TREE Paintings* Wave Hill Gallery, New York

*What inspired you to start collecting leaves to use in installations?*

I began collecting leaves in 2000. When I was about to make a “Carpet of Leaves” for a Museum in Iceland, I was considering how to make their surface strong. I remembered waxing them as a child and considered different ways of preserving them so that people could walk on them. I found that laminating made them able to be walked on and it had the effect of making the colors brighter at the same time.



Joan Backes, "Carpet of Leaves," 2008, Chelsea Art Museum, NYC



*How many different countries are currently represented in your leaf collection? Where are you traveling next?*

Including the United States, and many states in this country from California to Massachusetts, there are nine countries represented thus far. I just had an invitational artist residency in Fremantle, Australia and collected leaves there. It was summer there.

*How is your “Falling Leaves” installation at PEM different from your previous?*

My “Falling Leaves” installation is different at the PEM because it is higher than the others, as the space demanded that. And I made a new aluminum frame to hold the installation because the space called for it.

*Do you have a fun story from one of your art installations you can share?*

It was lovely to install the piece at PEM, I had assistants who were wonderful there. A fun story? When I made “Forest House” in Darmstadt, Germany for a Biennial there, many people made revisits to that site. The house was based on the Brothers Grimm fairytales, which my parents read to me as a child. I learned the Brothers Grimm grew up near that location. People use that forest a lot. They ride bikes through it; walk dogs through it; hike through it; and walk and talk through it. The same thing happened when I made “Berliner Häuser” for the Biennial in Berlin, Germany. People kept returning to look at the installation. I got together with one of the couples for dinner that kept returning to the site in Berlin. I found people in Germany to be infected with a good kind of curiosity.



Joan Backes, “Forest House,” 2010, Permanent Installation, Darmstadt, Germany

*What would you recommend as a good starting point for a kid interested in making art with natural materials?*

Use any natural materials possible. I believe that using natural materials, including leaves from all seasons, will give kids a love of nature.



Joan Backes, "Multi-Species Tree," 2009-2011, Permanent Collection Racine Art Museum

*What are you working on next that has you most excited?*

On my recent artist residency in Australia I began making "Recycled Wood Paintings." These paintings, as the title suggests, are made of recycled wood sourced from Australia. I am currently working on a "Recycled Wood Tree" in a shop in Long Island City, NY. It will be completed in 2015. I made an earlier one that is in the permanent collection of the Racine Art Museum in Wisconsin. So when I went to the residency in Fremantle, I knew I wanted to work with recycled wood in some way.



Joan Backes, "Recycled Wood Painting #2," 2014, image courtesy of the artist.

If you want to investigate Joan's leaf artwork further, don't miss our Earth Day vacation week activities in April, when we will try our hands at arranging laminated leaves, inspired by Joan's leaf carpet designs!