

Art As Habitat

Nancy Eastman's sculptures of sage and jute are home to birds, foxes, and who knows what else?

Laura Prindiville

The short-grass prairie that dominates the landscape along Colorado's front range is spectacular to behold, but it is disappearing at a rapid pace. Since the late 1800's when settlers first plowed under the fertile grasses to today's mega-developments along the I-25 corridor, this wide expanse has been viewed as a nearly inexhaustible commodity. Today it is in short supply and the plants and wildlife that make their home in the rolling hills are under tremendous pressure. Fortunately, a new crop of conservationists are increasing awareness of the challenges this region faces, both ecologically and culturally.

Nancy Eastman, artist, architect and founder of Art of the Land, a design/build landscape firm in Denver, is one of those people. Eastman has spent her entire life in the Rocky Mountains. Her love of the natural world, the rolling prairie and wide expanses of the high plains in particular, inspired her to try to integrate her connection to the land with her work in art and design. "The land's subtleties... reflect our past human presence," says Eastman. "As an artist, I want to involve the viewer in the aesthetics of our common heritage, and create a link between the community's people, their landscape, agriculture, and history."

Oddly, her design career began indoors. Eastman spent nearly 20 years creating interior spaces for corporations and businesses on Colorado's front range. "I grew up here," says Eastman, "and I've always loved the colors of the outdoors. I went into interior design because I wanted to recreate that sense in indoor spaces, to try to bring nature indoors." After a certain point, she turned her attention to landscape design in part because she felt she needed a more direct connection to the natural landscapes that were her muse. Basically, she wanted to be outdoors.

At Art of the Land, Eastman and her crew work with clients to help them uncover the beauty of the natural world around them, even in small spaces and amidst urban density. They plant native flora and emphasize sustainability, mixing art and science in landscape design. "My work has always been about the environment," says Eastman, whose observations of the interplay of materials in nature serve as the foundation for her design.

Like her design work, Eastman's sculpture is inspired by nature. Her most intriguing artistic ventures are a series of animal habitats made from natural materials. Upon seeing a photo of an artificial



Nancy Eastman also works in other media, including metals, but Nature remains her inspiration.

cactus designed by a group of scientists who intended it to serve as a substitute habitat for threatened birds, Eastman began to experiment on her own. The result is part sculpture, part-yard art, part-foundling home. These shelters are made from sage, dogwood and willow collected in the region and bound together with jute and silk. "The structures are inspired by forms in nature and have a wild aesthetic," she says. They also have a very practical application. Once installed, they become part of the environment. Birds light on the forms to feed on the bugs that bore into the wood she so carefully selected. The sculpture in her own garden served home to fox. As the new inhabitants and exposure to the elements take their toll on the sculptures, the form and color change. They weather and fade and within five to six years, the sculptures collapse entirely and fold back into the landscape.

Eastman's art—her gardens and her sculpture—celebrate the uniqueness and the fragility of the short grass prairie. She preserves the legacy of the high plains landscape and uses its inspiration to create sculptures that honor that landscape in design and constant change.

Most of Eastman's sculptures are created on-site, but examples can be seen on her website at artoftheland.com. Eastman's sculptures range from \$500 up. 🐾