



**SUSPENDED  
MOTIONELLEN  
STEINFELD**



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the pleasures of being part of a museum for several decades is seeing artists evolve. They hone their skills, explore new ideas, experiment, and sometimes adopt new media. Each distinctive artistic voice gets conveyed in both consistent and mutable ways. Thus, we have come to know Ellen Steinfeld and proudly present a selection of her sculpture and watercolor paintings in our galleries. Ellen and her husband, Edward, have lent artworks from their home and studio. There would be no exhibition without their enthusiastic participation—for which we are most grateful. We also wish to thank the anonymous lenders who are willing to share their artwork with an appreciative public. One of the sculptures is lent from the renowned Hauptmann Woodward Medical Research Institute in Buffalo.

The galleries in which the exhibition is presented were created thanks to the financial support of magnanimous patrons. The Charles Cary Rumsey Gallery is named after the Buffalo-born sculptor and polo player, and is made possible with funds from the Mary A. H. Rumsey Endowment, which was established in 1985 to create a dedicated sculpture gallery and the first curator's position since the museum's inauguration in 1966. The Sylvia L. Rosen Gallery for Fine Art in Craft Media is named for the ceramicist, educator, and college alumna, Sylvia L. Rosen, who with her husband, Nathan, started an endowment in 1987. The Norman E. Mack, II Rotunda is named for the late patron of the arts who donated artworks and funds to preserve the museum's future.

Museums, being educational, not-for-profit institutions, rely tremendously on the patronage of membership. One of the Burchfield Penney Art Center's great friends and patrons is Nancy Belfer, who is a professor emerita of design at SUNY Buffalo State and an artist who works with many forms of fiber and paper. She created the Nancy B. Belfer Endowment for Fine Art in the Fiber Media to help support exhibitions and programs. We are grateful for her support this exhibition and catalog.

Other members and friends have also contributed to the exhibition's success, including Robert Shibley and Lynda Schneekloth, as well as anonymous donors, and the talented, dedicated staff of the Center and our gifted design team, White Bicycle. We are proud to produce an exhibition that celebrates both sculpture and watercolor painting as the museum is poised to stake its claim as a national resource center for watercolor.

Nancy Weekly

*Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator*

*Burchfield Penney Art Center*

[1] (cover) *Spring* (detail), 2012; watercolor on paper diptych, 30" x 46"

[2] (at left) *Dancing Spirit*, 2009; Steel, 48" x 17" x 18"

[3] (under flap) *Yellow Leaves* (detail), 2012; watercolor on paper diptych, 23" x 60"



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## SUSPENDED MOTION ELLEN STEINFELD

BY NANCY WEEKLY

Ellen Steinfeld has had a long presence in Western New York, and her work has become known throughout North America through exhibitions, public installations, and commissions. Her monumental sculpture, *Hope*, (1998)—in the grand foyer of Buffalo’s Roswell Park Cancer Institute—inspires patients, visitors and medical staff every day. Sculpture exhibitions in public spaces, such as the Buffalo Niagara International Airport, have greeted thousands of residents and travelers. Selected by ABSOLUT® Vodka to represent New York State, she created a painting that reached a global market through prominent publications in a campaign that raised money for AIDS research. She has always demonstrated an ability to tackle different media with verve.

Fascinated with dance and motion, Steinfeld, over the course of her career, has created dramatic works to reflect life at its most stirring and capricious moments. [4] With this theme, the exhibition features prime examples of the artist’s sculptures in concert with her watercolor paintings, which break from the tradition of realism so often associated with the medium.

Music and movement inform Steinfeld’s sense of rhythm and balance in three-dimensional steel compositions, whether they are subtly monochromatic or bright with color. These vertical constructions of disks, spirals, hemispheres, and other forms, chart the arabesques, pirouettes and grand leaps as abstract gestures in an artist’s form of choreography. Her conceptual figures suggest movement through space accompanied by music—tracing time metaphorically—reminiscent of art history’s dancers and acrobats by Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Alexander Calder.

Steinfeld takes a bold approach to watercolor painting. In many of her large works, abstract patterns advance over several sheets of paper. While some watercolors exploit the white of the paper as light-filled space for floating organic and geometric shapes, others are densely filled with saturated hues and black forms that suggest a humid, pungent and mysterious evening landscape.

This unusual combination of media in an exhibition represents the variety in Steinfeld’s aesthetic repertoire—each medium relates to the other through a language of form, gesture and color, melding beauty and drama. While her artwork has been presented in thematic exhibitions at the Center since 1981, this is her first solo exhibition in our museum. As curator, I also relate Steinfeld’s compositional design to ideas put forth in educator Howard Gardner’s concept of kinesthetic intelligence, as well as choreographer Rudolf Laban’s system for diagramming movement, which provide alternative access points to appreciating the artwork for its aesthetic merits.

[4] *Dancer 4*, 2012; Steel, pigment, 39" x 17" x 12"

## IMPRESSIONS & ASSOCIATIONS

In an interview in 2004, Steinfeld answered curator Michael J. Beam's questions about the rapport between viewers and her work by saying that she supports the idea of subjectivity:

*Although the artist conceives of the work in a certain way, art is ultimately about what the viewer reads into the piece through his or her own interpretations. It is a conversation between the artist's intent and the perspectives that viewers bring to the experience of the piece.*

As curator of this exhibition, I have taken that as an invitation to provide my perspective on her artwork, based on decades of observation, as well as my own appreciation of dance and watercolor. At the same time, I hope that when you view the exhibition, the play between sculpture and painting will inspire your own associations and my words might act as a libretto of sorts, playing in the musical stream.

Reflecting a long professional association, I will refer to the artist as Ellen, as it seems more appropriate. What follows are some of the impressions and associations Ellen's sculpture and watercolors have triggered for me.

Ellen was a painter when she moved to this area. Previously she had lived in Ann Arbor, Mich.; Washington, D.C.; Syracuse, N.Y.; and Pittsburgh, Pa., where she earned a B.F.A. in painting from Carnegie Mellon University and a Master of Education from the University of Pittsburgh.

The first acrylic painting I saw by her, titled *A Conversation with Apollo* (1981), was a large canvas that presaged the spatial play that her sculpture would later fulfill. Although flatly painted like an Alex Katz portrait, the overall image suggests deeper space as a view through a building's aperture, with a stork perched on the ledge, making it clear that the European-style window has no glass. A young dark-haired woman, who could be the artist, sits at a table leaning over a cup of coffee, gazing at an armless, stone statue of Apollo, the Greek god of music, prophecy, archery, poetry, dance and light, among other realms. Revered by shepherds, Apollo protected flocks from wolves (which surround him in Ellen's painting). Fifteen birds, mostly pigeons, perch on shallow shelves of gridded walls that enclose the imaginary space for this dreamlike encounter. The mute antique sculpture communicates solely through his ghostlike presence—silent, though encouraging as inspiration. That nod to classicism, to the history of art, to music and dance, will continue to permeate subsequent developments.

Over the years, Ellen's paintings became more three-dimensional. Heavy pigment applied to cutout layers of wood existed in an ambiguous world being part bas-relief, part flat design, held together with linear elements and intense color. It was no surprise that sculpture, with its challenge to design in three dimensions, gradually became her passion. Yet she continued to paint, draw, and explore other media, such as making paper with colored pulps that solidified her subject matter. Clearly Ellen wanted to go beyond the surface—with both her media and her symbolic imagery.

The allure of dance has brought world-class performances to the Buffalo Niagara region and nearby Toronto, with a peak of activity during the 1970s and 1980s, when government subsidies helped to keep ticket prices affordable. Troupes performing here included the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, Bolshoi Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Eliot Feld Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, New York City Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, Pilobolus, and White Oak Dance Project, among many others.

Artpark was an especially accessible venue, with free lawn tickets making it possible for anyone to view both classical and contemporary dance. There, for example, Twyla Tharp presented "In the Upper Room," a work in progress with music by Philip Glass, and she choreographed works specifically for Mikhail Baryshnikoff, such as "Pergolesi." This superstar danced in many local venues with different partners and troupes, yet his moving solo performances demonstrated his phenomenal talent and the ability to express himself in a historic range of choreographic genres.

Other internationally famous dancers who performed here include Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, Suzanne Farrell, Geoffrey Holder, Bill T. Jones, Gelsey Kirkland, Peter Martins, and Moses Pendleton, to name just a few. Neglia Ballet, Elaine Gardner's Pick of the Crop, LehrerDance, and Zodiaque Dance Company are some of our regional troupes who dance and collaborate with local musicians on unique works. It is easy to surmise that our area has a rich dance history—one that inspires an interrelationship between the physical and the psychological that appears at the heart of Ellen's art.

In 1983, Howard Gardner, then co-director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, proposed a theory of multiple intelligences that challenged the parameters of IQ (Intelligence Quotient) testing. He felt it was too limited by focusing on only two categories: linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. In Gardner's groundbreaking book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), and in subsequent studies with research associate Jessica Davis that put the theory into practice, he proposed that people learn and process information in different ways that demonstrate *seven* types of intelligences. (Gardner suggested additional intelligences and approaches to their use in schools, museums and the "wider world" in his book *Intelligence Reframed*, published in 1999.) Among the original seven is the "bodily kinesthetic" intelligence "in which the body serves as the agent for solving problems or fashioning products," which can be seen in dancers and mechanics.

Does Ellen Steinfeld have a "bodily kinesthetic intelligence?" Surely she has a sense of movement that carries into 3-D form. Titles like *Tango* (2006), *Pirouette* (2010), *Dancer* (2006) and *Dancing Spirit* (2009) overtly prove the artist's intention for us to interpret the swirling lines and geometric forms as kinesthetic energy of humans moving through space. The tango is synonymous with passion, seduction, and iconic dramatic gestures. A red-violet heart hovers over two united blue circles in Ellen's colorful abstraction of lovers in *Tango* (2006). Pirouettes, although performed in both classical and modern dance, are typically a balletic demonstration of balance, skill and stamina, especially when many turns are performed

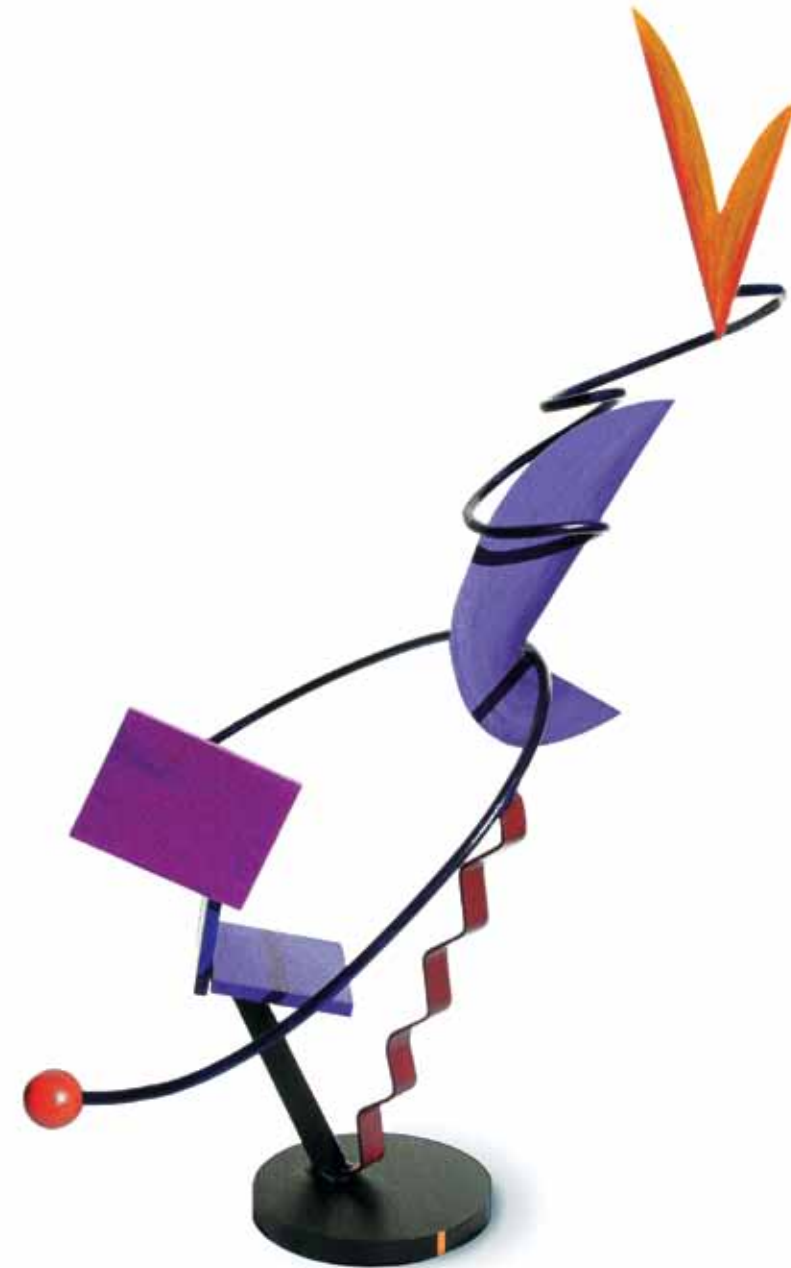


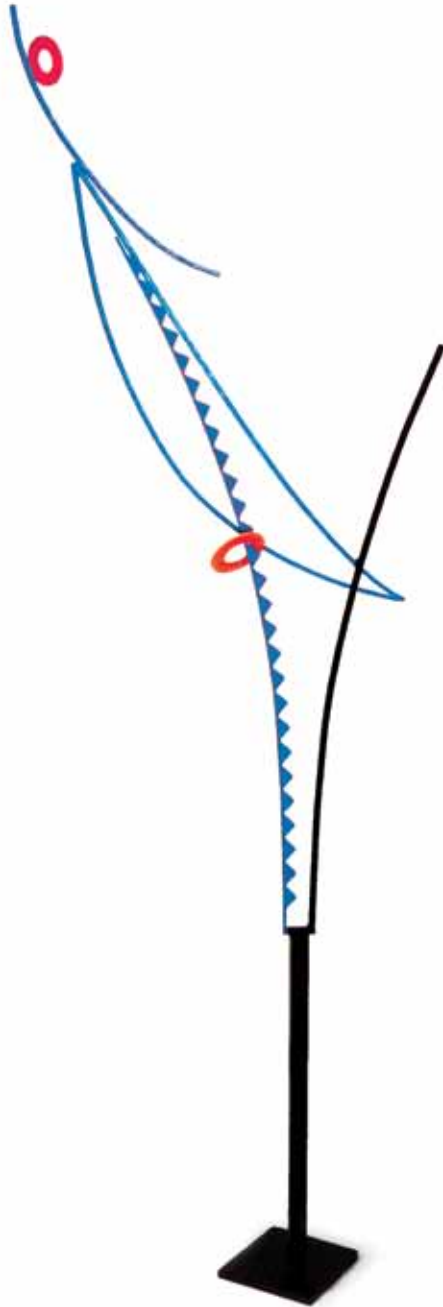
*en pointe*. Like an algebraic equation, curves and semicircles balance the upper and lower halves of *Pirouette*'s whirling, monochromatic "figure."

While dancers have been depicted in art for millennia, the French Impressionist master Edgar Degas (1834–1917) was the first to capture the breadth of dancers' human character in his pastels, paintings and sculptures. He studied dancers in practice, on stage, and in repose—using their lithe bodies to represent athletic exertion, passion, beauty and adolescence (as in his bronze of the impudent *Little Dancer, 14 Years Old*, 1880). In his two-dimensional works, he mimicked the arbitrary cropping from the nascent art of photography to create unique compositions. In Degas' iconic painting, *Prima Ballerina* (1878), the soloist emerges from the wings of a cave-like set, balanced on one foot, her arms gracefully extended, her neck tied with a black velvet ribbon, her chin raised and head tilted to transmit her *jouissance* to the audience. She might be compared to Ellen's *Dancer 2* (2006) balanced *en pointe* (on the tip of a chartreuse ballet slipper) as she performs an organic arabesque with blue leaf limbs. Or she might be compared to *Little Bird* (2003) [6], with its zigzag stairs substituting for stage scenery as she glides above the floor. Yet *Little Bird* might be more literal—a goldfinch or tanager flying through the air, defying gravity in ways that the Black Swan and other dancers can never achieve.

Some artists use dance to express sexuality more overtly. For example, consider *The Dance of Life* (1900) by Norwegian painter and printmaker Edvard Munch (1863–1944). In the dramatic moonlit scene, a group of people dance on the lawn by a body of water. All the men wear black suits, while most of the women wear long white dresses. In the foreground a young woman dressed in a lacy, embellished white gown represents innocence, content to be single as she reaches toward small pink flowers. In the center, a man holds his dancing partner—a woman in a fiery red gown that flows over their feet. Their bodies meld, yet their dispassionate expressions convey neither ardor nor commitment. Nearby, a leering oaf overpowers his partner who bends backward in a fruitless attempt to avoid his aggressive embrace. Finally, a morose woman in black—a widow or resigned loner—stares judgmentally toward the center couple in disapproval. Munch said that he wanted "to create, or at least lay the foundations of, an art that gives something to humanity. An art that arrests and engages. An art created of one's innermost heart."

Without the nihilism or Nordic diffidence associated with Munch, Ellen could be said to hold similar goals. She employs a language of symbols to suggest human experiences. When her sculpture's scale exceeds human proportions, as in *Circus, Soar* [7], or *Flux* (2012), the message commands attention. We walk around these sculptures more acutely cognizant of our place in the world and relationship to others. We move toward the sculpture, step back, and view details from varying perspectives. We become engaged with a static object that paradoxically suggests movement through the trajectory of its lines, its spirals, sliding diagonals, stepped columns, and ovoid shapes, often balanced on a single point. Here the art of welding and the science of cantilevering forms create the tense moment when a moving object seems to be frozen just before it eludes us, floats away, or falls.





Dancers, harlequins, and acrobats were featured in a touring exhibition, *Matisse Picasso*, shown in London, Paris and New York in 2002–2003. It provided an incredible opportunity to compare artwork by Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and to explore their competitive, yet parallel careers in innovation and aesthetic creativity. Among the pairings of works were Matisse’s *Nasturtiums with Dance II* (1912) with Picasso’s *The Three Dancers* (1925), which each position a room’s space and objects in relation to, respectively, virtual dancers in a painting within a painting and an abstract trio joyously dancing like mythological Graces. Another interesting comparison unites a gouache and collaged paper work titled *Creole Dancer* (possibly Josephine Baker) by Henri Matisse, and the bronze sculpture, *Woman in the Garden* by Pablo Picasso; both are more than 80 inches high. Their vocabulary of forms work equivalently in both media—just as Ellen’s forms can be understood in two- and three-dimensional realizations.

Yet another interesting connection to Picasso comes through *LIFE* magazine and the Albanian American photographer Gjon Mili (1904–1984). In 1949, Mili photographed Picasso drawing with a tiny light in a darkened room. His lively, gestural drawings of a centaur and other subjects vanished as soon as they were made; but then reappeared, floating in the air, only after darkroom printing. A special edition of *LIFE* magazine devoted to Picasso reproduced the drawings in 1968. Mili had previously photographed an ice skater’s patterns using this method.

Later, working with Harold Edgerton (1904–1984) in innovative lighting experiments using stroboscopic instruments and electronic flash, Mili photographed ballet dancer Patricia McBride in a sweeping rhythm, and an anonymous nude woman descending a staircase, tracing the patterns of their movements into a single photographic image. [The latter demonstrated his indebtedness to Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), shown at the historic *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, known as the “Armory Show,” held in New York in 1913—when it changed the course of modern art in the U.S.] These filmic images are condensed versions of what had been pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) in his series *Animal Locomotion* (1877–78) that included progressive still images of nude humans in motion. His scientific study of motion served as an aid to artists in understanding the mechanics of anatomy. I think these attempts at visualizing human movement—the creative drawing of a master, the expert movement by an accomplished dancer—relate to Ellen’s more contemporary efforts.

Hungarian Rudolf Laban (1879–1958) created a dance notation system for diagramming movement. His holistic approach incorporated a number of spiritual concepts. He is considered a pioneer in modern dance for his work as a choreographer, movement theorist and teacher. He founded the Laban Art of Movement Guild in 1945 and the Art of Movement Studio in 1946 with his partner Lisa Ullmann. Today, the Laban/Bartenieff & Somatic Studies International offers “modular certification programs” in Laban Movement Analysis and BodyMind Practice™ in Vancouver and Toronto. Some of the figurative geometry of Ellen’s sculpture functions like “Labanotation” because they both codify and diagram movement.



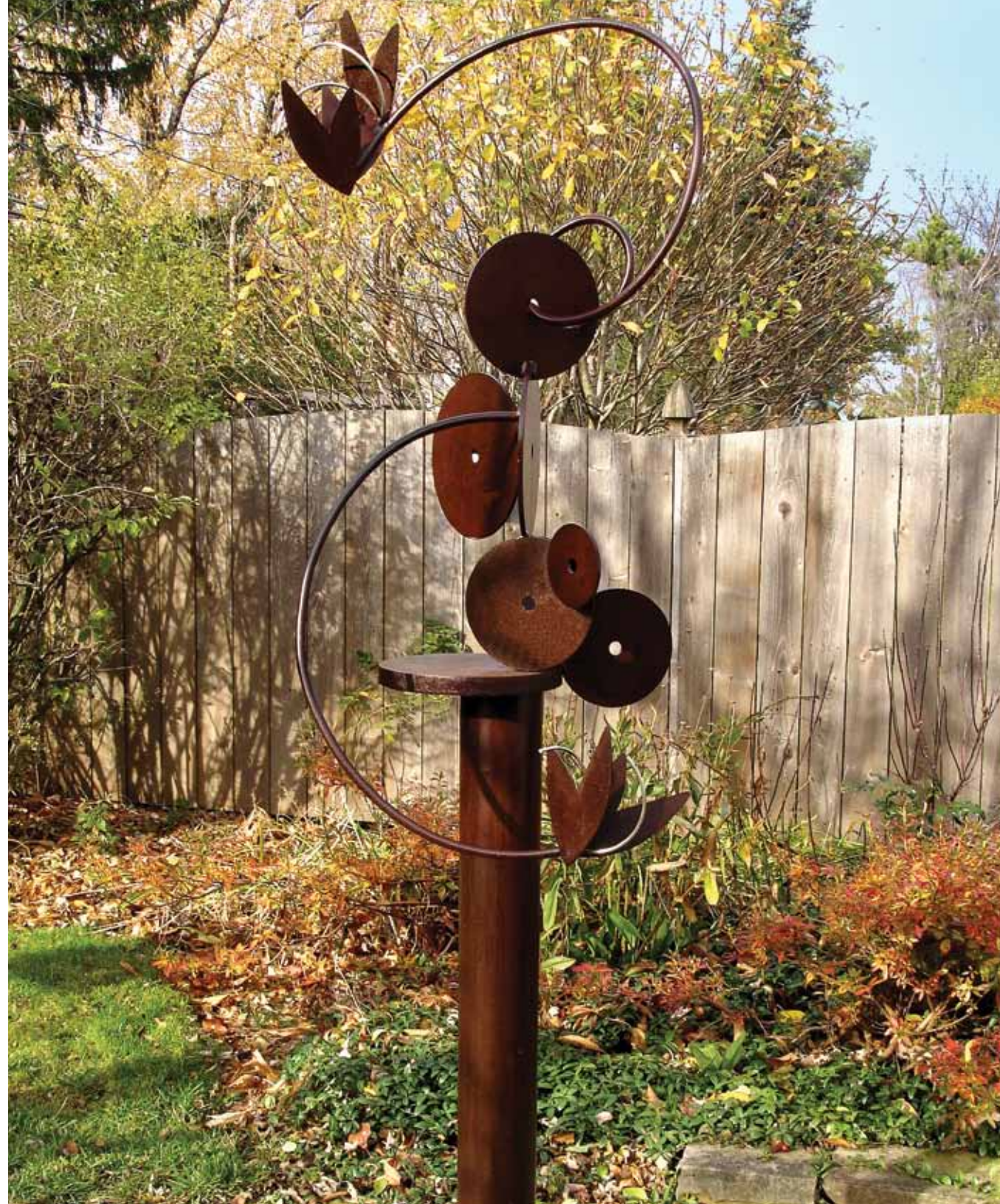
One wonders if Duchamp inspired Alexander Calder (1898–1976) to invent mobiles that literally set abstract forms in motion. *The Brass Family* (1929) of twisted wire acrobats and *Le Cirque* (1926–31) were Calder's early ideas for “drawing with metal” and mechanical sculpture on a small scale. His later gargantuan stabiles composed of steel—painted monochromatic in black, red-orange or gray—overwhelm, yet amuse us with their arches and curved forms derived from the natural realm, suggestive of benevolent creatures and harmonious families. Ellen's large neutral-palette sculptures, such as *Circus* (2011) and *Tangle* (2006) [8] share Calder's aesthetic of movement and simplicity of forms combined with an almost childlike sense of delight.

Her newest work, *Flux* (2012) [9], plays homage to Calder and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Its primary assemblage of black aspiring and circular forms are ornamented by a trio of shapes in primary colors: a yellow crescent moon, a red disk and a slightly smaller blue disk. Flux, as defined in the *Merriam-Webster's dictionary*, can mean “a continuous moving on or passing by (as of a stream)” or “a continued flow.” Taking that into consideration, I read the sculpture as an allegory for the lunar cycle. Six forms express celestial objects; three are solid, two are perforated, and one just a sliver. Five black linear elements reference the arc of movement in daily moonrise and moonset, as well as rotational relationships between the red sun and blue earth. Their relative positions affect the appearance of the crescent moon—the largest object visible here—which is often associated with love and longing.

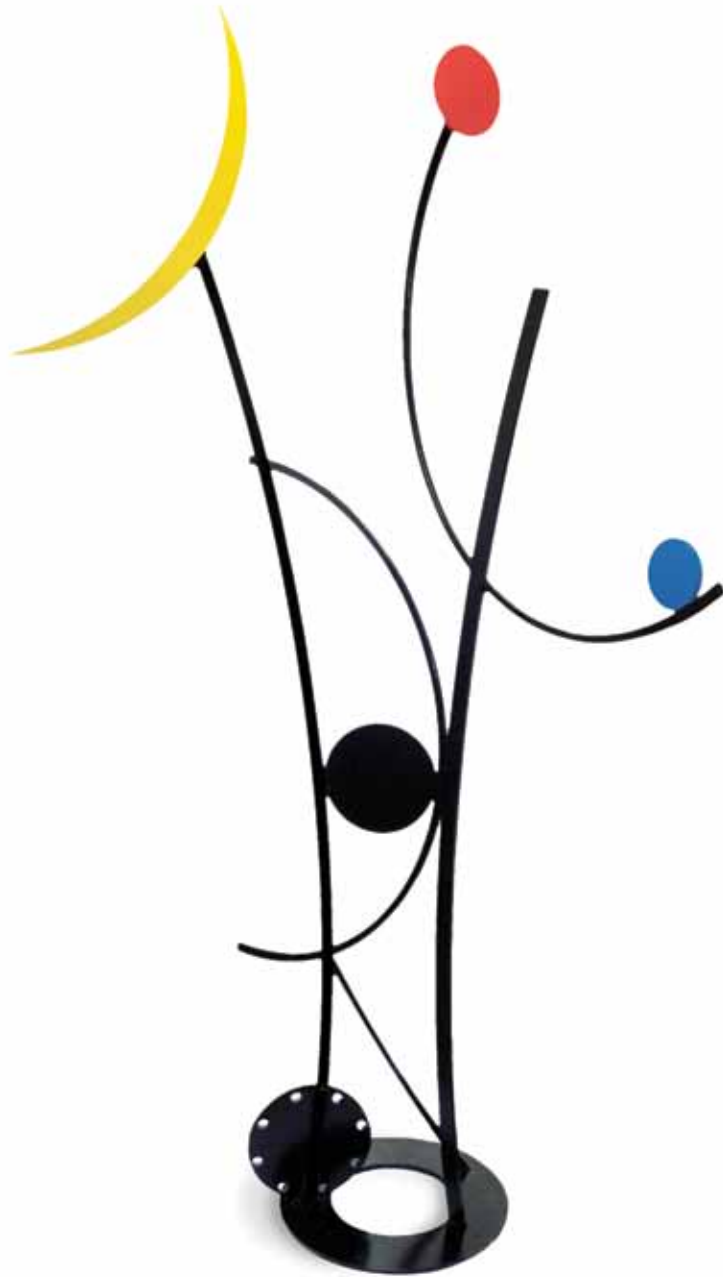
Leading from the night sky, readjust your focus to the terrestrial realm with Ellen's evocative watercolor paintings *Green Flower* (2008), *Garden Path* (2009) [5], and *Night Shade* (2010). These sumptuous landscapes magnify vividly colored plants and cloak them in evening's dark mantle. You become intrigued, but apprehensive, unable to decipher a path through the thicket. The works are reminiscent of paintings by Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), especially *The Dream* (1910). In this moonlit landscape of blue lotus, palms, and exotic plants, a nude woman reclines comfortably on a velvet sofa, looking out toward lions, a snake, and birds nestled nearby. For her paintings, Ellen uses a vocabulary of shapes derived from the natural realm filtered through the lens of abstraction for greater emotional impact.

The artist admitted that she began without knowing “the rules” of watercolor painting. Her intuitive approach, based no doubt on her love of pure, intense color, was to squeeze large quantities of pigment on paper to get a saturated effect. She does not wet the 300-lb. weight Arches paper, so color will not be diluted and so she can control the sharpness of linear elements. Some of her first works, such as *Red Bush* (2007) [10], recall the early modernist paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) and Arthur Dove (1880–1946) in their perfectly composed simplicity. The work is sensuous.

Over the years, Ellen became interested in different kinds of layering and transparency, as well as the idea of composing on multiple sheets of paper, perhaps as a result of her commission in 2001–2002 for 16 large stained-glass windows for a church in Detroit. The multiple-panel paintings range from diptychs to nine sections to provide an idea of continuity, an extension of the abstract narrative beyond the



[8] *Tangle*, 2006; Steel, patina and stainless, 78" x 28" x 26"



picture plane. As with many rectilinear artworks, these paintings lend themselves to being perceived as windows. However, instead of being windows on the real world, they are windows onto an imaginary, symbolic world. It is a surreal world affiliated with the familiar forms from her sculpture. For example, the diptych *Yellow Leaves* (2012) presents discrete elements, like the red lotus, on a pure white ground, among and beneath tracery of threadlike stems, tender blossoms, floating petals, and leaves. The painting makes you feel like you have entered a poem or a song. Whatever implied movement belongs to a fourth dimension—something intangible, comforting, uplifting.

Finally, I leave you with the words of Gjon Mili, commenting on his portrait of Russian-born, American composer, Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971). He wrote: “Art is regulated energy: the calligraphy of the spirit.” Consider how this reflects the art of Ellen Steinfeld.

*Nancy Weekly is head of collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator, Burchfield Penney Art Center; and Burchfield Penney Instructor in Museum Studies, SUNY Buffalo State.*

#### POSTSCRIPT

In 2012, Sharyn Rohlfen Udall published a remarkable study, *Dance and American Art: A Long Embrace*. She explores “why [visual] artists have been drawn to dance and dancers” and frames the examples in cultural contexts that trace American consciousness and ethnic diversity, the evolution of attitudes about the body, the legacy of Romanticism, and influence of modernity. I regret that I did not discover this book in time to use it for my commentary, which just scratches the surface of a fascinating topic that Dr. Udall has fully explicated.



[10] *Red Bush* (detail), 2007; Watercolor on paper, 20" x 27"

Anchored by its Charles E. Burchfield collections, the Burchfield Penney is the International Center for Watercolor. Resources include works in the permanent collection, archival holdings, and related reference collections in the E. H. Butler Library and the Art Conservation Department at SUNY Buffalo State. The Center is dedicated to the study and advancement of the watercolor medium.



**BURCHFIELD PENNEY  
ART CENTER**

*at SUNY Buffalo State*

Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, the Burchfield Penney Art Center is a museum dedicated to the art and vision of Charles E. Burchfield and distinguished artists of Buffalo Niagara and Western New York State. Through its affiliation with SUNY Buffalo State, the museum encourages learning and celebrates our richly creative and diverse community. The Burchfield Penney Art Center is supported in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, and Erie County. Additional support is provided by Buffalo State, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, the James Carey Evans Endowment, and Burchfield Penney members and friends.



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