

Gyöngy Laky

By Lis Bensley

Visitors to M Stark Gallery, a small, pristine space in Half Moon Bay, are greeted with the bold words INVENT. The piece, titled *Chance Encounter* (2009), forms an apt introduction to Gyöngy Laky's practice of using wood and sticks, but also nails, telephone wire, plastic toys and cast bronze, to make sculpture that is conceptual and environmentally oriented, as layered in meaning as it is constructed, in this case walnut held together with dowels.

Born in Hungary in 1944, she and her family escaped her Soviet-occupied homeland in 1948, landing first in Austria, then Ellis Island, then traveling through the Midwest and eventually settling in Carmel. "Laky's early years are key to who she would become as an artist—crossing boundaries, playing with language, and championing diversity and human rights," writes Mija Riedel in a 2022 monograph provocatively titled *Screwing with Order*, a reference not to sexual etiquette but to the artist's preferred method of joinery.

She grew up in a highly creative family. Her mother painted, played piano and danced; her aunt, a painter and violinist, often entertained Franz Liszt, among other artists, as he composed in her parlor. This artistic saturation accounts for only part of Laky's *modus operandi*. There's also her love of nature, inspired by long walks in Carmel where her parents operated a gallery in which she worked.

Before attending college, Laky spent four years engaged in "self-study," traveling to British Columbia, Europe and India, eventually settling in Paris where she was deeply influenced by artists of color, both from the US and North Africa. On the road, she learned half a dozen languages and steeped herself in jazz --experiences that gave her a vast toolbox of material and ideas. Upon returning, she enrolled as art student at UC Berkeley in 1967, back when it was a hotbed of anti-war protests, free speech and women's rights.

Gyöngy Laky: Invent! presents a group of eight thematic works made between 1985 and 2019 that showcase her fusion of art, activism and wordplay.

One striking sculpture, *Break Time*, (2019) sits on the molding just above the floor as you first walk in. Laky cast a small orchard pruning in bronze, creating an abstracted figure appearing to be relaxing like a Brancusi or a slimmed down Henry Moore. Human beings are both fragile and frightening creatures. How easily we can be destroyed, yet look at all the damage we can do. Or the piece can be read as an inviting section of a resting tree, something well worth saving.

Other works question notions of comfort or functionality. *Field Notes* (2012), a large basket fashioned out of apricot trimmings is held together by vinyl coated nails whose sharp ends protrude into the basket. Laky has credited her basket sculptures to the influence of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, which she envisioned as "upside-down baskets", their beautiful forms made prickly and unusable with inward-facing nails.

Similar to some of Maria Abramovic's more jarring work, particularly *Double Edge*, a ladder with rungs of knife blades, Laky's sculpture *Laura's Quilt* (2007) will send chills up a viewer's spine. Here she's fashioned squares of apple tree trimmings sewed together with nails whose sharp ends point outward, questioning the notion of accepting comfort at face value. Especially now, when so much is going wrong with our world.

Midnight in the 6th (2018) comes from Laky's signs and symbols work. An exclamation point fabricated out of apple, acrylic paint and screws pays homage to Elizabeth Kolbert's ominous work, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. Look closely and you'll see plastic dinosaurs

and animals embedded in the sticks, poignant warnings of the havoc humans are creating to our natural world and all the species that have already gone into extinction. The exclamation point, itself peppered with the dots of red paint covering the ends of the twigs used to make it, certainly gets your attention, first as punctuation, then as an admonition. The message goes further—humans tend to ignore what they can't easily see, a major reason we are failing to significantly address climate change.

Ancestor Tools (2019) pays homage to the primitive tools crafted by our ancestors. Ash branches wrapped in casings of bronze give the work more permanence and formality, elevating basic necessities into works of art. The piece could also be a stab at an indecipherable language, primitive forms of pictographs or a nod toward sign language. While they play on our instinct to find meaning, their illusiveness also frustrates that longing.

Another strong, suggestive piece, playing off Laky's affinity for systems of notation, is *Climate Fugue 21* (2019). Ash branches and paint look like desiccated bones, slowly eroding under a hot sun. Think the bleached-out cow skulls painted by Georgia O'Keeffe. Yet the linear placement of the branches also suggests a cryptic language. Early indecipherable communication from our ancestors or a new foreign language Laky—and we—have yet to learn? The piece's title suggests another climate warning, even if we can't make out exactly what it is telling us. The result of inaction—desiccation—is obvious.

Laki is a master of garnering attention with one element, then deflecting it to something else with another. This gives her work a strong conceptual charge between what is obvious and topical to what is oblique and, at times, enigmatic. With her impeccable craftsmanship and provocative subject matter, she explores both linguistic and conceptual ideas whose deep meaning often depicts riddles or important messages. Look carefully and ponder issues that have no easy solutions. Just what great art should be asking us to do.

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