

## Thanks Giving, by Pegi Christiansen

By Pegi Christiansen, Art City contributor

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*(Note from Mary Louise Schumacher: I'd like to introduce Pegi Christiansen, who many of you will know because of her involvement with [In:Site](#), the temporary public art group, and the Performance Art Showcase, which she's championed for years. Pegi is also a performance artist and artist model. She's reflected on her role as the latter in many ways over the years. Pegi came to a session at the Journal Sentinel that gallery owners, museum officials and arts groups were invited to. At that meeting, I asked: What would happen if we all committed ourselves to open, rigorous, meaningful engagement about art in Milwaukee? Her response was to volunteer to write regularly for Art City. This is her first contribution. Thank you Pegi).*

Sometimes, Milwaukee gets it right. The Menomonee River Valley is my notion of nirvana. Yes, there are natural retreats in this state I adore that do not abut a major freeway. Yet the urban wilderness in the valley has everything. It has the river and the railroad, reeds and rust cheek to jowl.

Thanks to Melissa Cook, Department of Natural Resources manager of the Valley's [Hank Aaron State Trail \(HAST\)](#), and Annemarie Sawkins, chair of the Friends of the Hank Aaron State Trail public art committee, last month a piece of permanent public art was installed at the beginning of the art loop that starts at 13th and Canal Streets.

["A Place to Sit"](#) (shown) by local artist kathryn e. martin is site specific. Her careful analysis of the location resulted in a sterling piece that will speak to generations to come. "A Place to Sit," where you literally can sit, encourages you to honor Wisconsin's American Indian tribes, reflect on the Menomonee River and look ahead.

West near 25th Street is one of my favorite spots on the HAST. It is by the ["Bird Bike,"](#) a piece of temporary public art Emily Belknap and Bridget Frances Quinn installed as part of a [Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design](#) public art class in 2006. You can sit on the decaying bike too, pedal, and make a mechanical bird's wings move. It is a simple reminder that we can always make a difference. To the right by the river is horsetail bamboo and wild grapes. To the left is a Department of Public Works facility with rows of big yellow trucks.

For months people have been asking me about art on the trail just east of Dersé, a manufacturer of high-tech trade show exhibitions. The environmental art installation is made of arching willow limbs and branches interlaced with felt above a pattern of stones on the ground (shown, below).



This piece appeared due to a grant the Milwaukee Arts Board awarded to [Walker's Point Center for the Arts](#). Kate Bradley, WPCA education director, collaborated with Florida artist Barbara Nelson-Fuqua and Milwaukee's Roy Staab to design it. For the past two summers, children in WPCA's Summer Youth Camp have constructed and reconstructed it. Titled, "The Only Thing Constant is Change," the children have watched nature, humanity, and their efforts alter the piece over time. Bradley says they would ask, "Do we really have to stop?" at the end of the day. Bradley plans to keep "Change" going in 2010.

The lesson of the Valley is one I learned from Brian Reilly, manager of the redevelopment for the Department of City Development. Brian taught me that the way to heal cities is to embrace conservation. This means everything is left on the table: the past, the present and the future. It means the intersection of industry, community, nature, recreation and art. Nancy Aten, a landscape

restorationist who oversees projects along the HAST for Menomonee Valley Partners, has chronicled this fusion on [her web album](#) since 2002.



I believe in giving thanks at Thanksgiving, and I am grateful to the vision and passion of so many people to make the valley a place to visit again and again.