



SITTING IN ART: A couple contemplates Roberley Bell's 6,000-square-foot installation "Second Nature" in a Chicago park.

Nature's Way

Roberley Bell turns to plants and flowers for latest installation

By Joanne Beck
Daily News Staff Writer

Roberley Bell was getting ready for a trip to Peru a year ago when the phone call came.

It was an invitation to submit a proposal for Chicago's "Art in the Garden" project. The city's first public art project stretches from the lakefront to the inner city.

Artists install artwork while teams of landscaping crews plant flowers, decorative grasses and other plant materials. The Bethany artist is glad she changed her mind and entered an idea, she said.

Her proposal was chosen as one of 20 — out of more than 100 submissions.

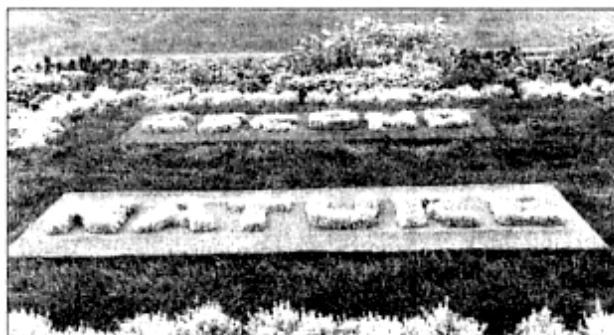
Titled "Second Nature," the 6,000 square-foot piece is created with massive amounts of plantings, including thyme, daylilies, black-eyed Susans, zinnias and coneflowers. It also features a handmade wooden bench, blue astroturf and a small chain-link house. Artists were given \$4,000 for the project, Bell said as her eyes widened.

"I spent a lot more. A lot more," she said.

The words "Second Nature" are spelled out in thyme outside the see-through but securely



Bell



DETAIL: A close-up from "Second Nature."

locked house. Inside, the remainder of her message is also communicated with 3-inch-high thyme plantings. It says "Is Home." Steel plates with cut-out letters were wrapped in the astroturf. Thyme was planted beneath the structure and it filled cut-out spaces to shape the letters. It's a way to illustrate how people have become so comfortable with a form of nature that is self-created and controlled. Wilderness has been replaced by carefully crafted gardens, Bell said.

"'Second Nature' reflects my continuing interest in the garden and the built American landscape as an extension of our domestic space," she said. "The text ... refers to the Roman writer on landscape and gardens, Cicero. His term *Alteram Naturam* refers to a landscape of elements that man has introduced to make nature habitable. The concept of second nature implies there's a

first nature. We're creating a landscape, a controlled environment that is our nature."

She compares the flowers' layout to the floor plan of a house. The bench, she said, allows the viewer to participate and be in the garden.

Bell clearly remembers working on the project for five days in May's pouring rain. Chicago Park District put her up at the Fairmont, a very posh hotel. Every night she'd walk into the place caked in mud, she said.

"I remember coming through the door covered in mud. The doorman would freak," she said.

Bell, 49, who has a master's degree in fine arts from Alfred State College, has traveled extensively and spent her childhood in Latin America and southeast Asia. She moved to western New York about seven years ago and is in her 10th year at Rochester Institute of Technology's art and

design department. It's been this area where she's gained a fuller sense of landscapes, she said.

"Bethany is by far the most pastoral landscape I've lived near," she said. "I've got huge gardens there."

She feels fortunate to have found a fabricator who lives only 10 minutes away. Tom Stringham, owner of Pieces Gallery in Batavia, has collaborated with Bell on four projects. She creates the design and Stringham produces, or fabricates, structures that enable the whole thing to come together. It has provided her with "the best fabricating situation I could have ever asked for," she said.

It's been a mutually satisfying partnership, Stringham said.

"It's exciting," he said from his Main Street gallery. "'Second Nature' took about 40 hours. Fabrication is problem-solving."

Bell has received many grants and fellowships including two from the New York Foundation for the Arts and a Fulbright to the Netherlands. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. She has also completed public site projects in Pittsburgh, Baltimore and New York, the latest of which was selected for Americans in the Arts Public Art Network's 2004 Year in Review.

For information about Art in the Garden, call (312) 742-7529.