

AHN INTERVIEW:

Zach Pine

“The feeling I have is that I’m following the lead that nature is giving me - that I’m nature’s apprentice - and that it’s a lesson I’m learning.” – Zach Pine

Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, **Zach Pine** has been creating ephemeral abstract sculptures in collaboration with nature for many years. He has a dedicated solo practice of creating in nature, however the majority of his art is created in community with others in the tradition of “social sculpture.” Zach hosts group art making events & workshops, works in schools, provides trainings, and creates participatory installations called *Create-With-Nature Zones* or *Nature Sculpture Arenas*. Healing, seeking balance, valuing interdependence, and accepting uncertainty and impermanence are important themes in his work.

Mary Daniel Hobson: How did you get started making art in connection with nature? What inspired you to work this way?

Zach Pine: During my childhood in the San Francisco Bay Area, my mother took me to the beach quite a bit. I made creations with sand, water, seaweed, rocks, shells, and whatever else I could find. I thought of this as “playing at the beach” and “making stuff,” not “making art in connection with nature.” Looking back, I see that my inspirations and motivations at that time have a lot in common with those fueling my current artistic life, namely a very powerful connection with nature, and a pressing curiosity about the natural world.

Mary Daniel: How have your inspirations and motivations evolved, and how has that affected your art?

Zach: As a child, I was naive to the problems facing the environment, the problems we face as individuals, and to societal problems. I also had not yet experienced the joy and power of community. With more adult understanding, my solo artwork has evolved, and my art practice has expanded to be primarily group work. While I still retain an overarching spirit of playful exploration, my art has increasingly been driven by my personal need to address issues like suffering, loss, and uncertainty. My ephemeral solo works created in nature and with natural materials are a practice for me - in a very tangible way I get to practice the emotional mindset I want to bring into all the parts of my life.

The way I usually make balanced rock sculptures is a good example of this: I start with a confident feeling, believing I can do the impossible, or at least the very improbable! At the same time, I hold in mind the very real possibility that my tower might fall unexpectedly, and I may have to step out of the way quickly. I hold these two ideas in mind simultaneously and without judgment - in a state of equanimity. I focus utterly on what I’m doing in the moment, and try to open my senses as widely and deeply as I can. When things fall apart, I acknowledge, learn, and rebuild. This is a powerful healing and strengthening process for me.

Mary Daniel: You mentioned that your art practice also evolved towards group work?

Zach: As I’ve just described it, my solo practice is clearly a very private one. But during 2003, I realized that creating with nature could serve in other ways. When I was creating in Berkeley, California’s Indian Rock Park, people came by and asked what I was up to, and I started inviting them to join me.

I realized that they were getting some of the benefits I was getting, and I started to see the power of sharing what I was doing, and how much joy there could be in that. Around the same time, my wife convinced me that taking photographs of some of my solo work would be a good idea. I had resisted this for a long time, being wary that taking pictures would contaminate what was such an important personal practice. It turned out she was right - my focus during the creative process is so intense that I totally forget the camera in my backpack. So, I started calling myself an “artist,” and exhibiting some photos as a means to inspire people to look at nature in new ways, and to get people interested in creating with me in a variety of participatory group projects.

I see my group work as being in the tradition of what **Joseph Beuys** called “social sculpture” - the idea that all our creative actions mold and shape the world we live in. The “medium” for my group work is not only the materials from nature, but also all of the participants and all the subsequent actions they might make in the world.

Mary Daniel: Could you share a little bit about your process, both in your solo work and your group work?

Zach: I always do solo work in an outdoor site, and begin by opening my senses and exploring the site. If it’s a site I know well, I often revisit “old friends” but I’m always open to finding some “new friends” too. I find that my initial frame of reference at a site is usually quite large - taking in the sky, the wind, the panoramic and larger spatial qualities of the area, but then I begin touching things with my hands and the scale shrinks down to an “arms length” view. I even have a custom prescription for my glasses that is set for that range.

I almost always begin creating something without making a conscious decision to start, and I sometimes “finish” something the same way. I might pick up a leaf that appeals to me, weave a twig through it, and drop it on the ground without any conscious thought. Often, once I start creating or exploring something small, a “plan” comes to mind and I’ll start following it - but without much attachment. The feeling I have is that I’m following the lead that nature is giving me - that I’m nature’s apprentice - and that it’s a lesson I’m learning.

I also sometimes have the feeling that I’m making myself a gift in two parts - the joy of creating, and the joy of seeing what is being made. Sometimes, once I spend a bit of time on something, my conscious and analytical mind starts coming in, and I infer what my unconscious mind was “working on” when I started. For example, I might see a theme of “healing” or “conflict” in the work, and of course those conscious insights then influence the ongoing creation.

My group work varies a lot. I’ve worked with all sorts of people in all sorts of combinations, from Intel executives to homeless children. Some of my group work is very unstructured, and I aim to allow everyone to experience something similar to my solo practice, but with the additional facet of working collaboratively when it feels right. That’s my approach to large public events like my **annual Earth Day Celebrations on Stinson Beach** in Northern California. In smaller gatherings, I often include or focus on other approaches such as semi-structured exercises with a particular intention. I also lead small skill-focused workshops that are more instructional - such as a rock balancing workshop or a sand globe making workshop. In all my group work, I aim for a playful and spontaneous atmosphere, and I stay open to changes in agenda or approach that seem right - it’s the same mindset I bring to my solo work.



A group creation during a field trip at the Create-With-Nature Zone in UC Berkeley’s Blake Garden in 2009.

One important difference from my solo work is that I often bring nature to people for group work. For example, I created and facilitated a participatory nature sculpture arena at a huge urban street festival in Oakland. I brought in a van full of natural materials, and I created artwork with lots of urban-dwelling people who have little or no contact with nature. Quite a few of the adults called the pine cones I had brought “acorns.” I don’t have a “studio,” but I have a side yard full of materials I can pack up and bring with me for group events.

Mary Daniel: What are some of the beneficial impacts you have seen for people who share this process with you?

Zach: One of the main things I love about my work is that people share with me, in person and in writing, some of the ways they have been inspired. A lot of people have talked about reaching a stronger sense of connection - to nature, to their own sense of being a “natural being,” and a connection with others. In one of my projects, a homeless mother and her daughter created together along the banks of creek near their temporary housing program. The mother told me afterward that she had been reluctant to come - that she was afraid of the creek, afraid she would be bored, and afraid she would not get along with her daughter - but that in the end she was surprised at how they worked well together, had fun, and ended up enjoying the creek. I could see the immediate healing effect that working together creatively with nature had upon their relationship.

Mary Daniel: Can you talk about the role of ephemerality in your work and the fact that most of your work is allowed to be changed and transformed - even destroyed - over time by natural processes?

Zach: In all my work, and in my life, I’m very aware of ephemerality. Of course, some things last longer than others. Some of my solo works have lasted only a few seconds - for example, works created by throwing sand, and some have stayed more or less in place for a few months. As I mentioned, I’ve taken and exhibited photos of some of my solo work. Sometimes people feel like the photos make my work “physically lasting” or “less fragile,” but it doesn’t feel that way to me at all. The photos aren’t the work, and they only last 100 years or so in any case. In all my group work, I emphasize process over product - sometimes we even “recycle” all the creations several times in the course of the event. Despite all this emphasis on process and ephemerality, I hope that all my art is as long lasting as any - both in its influence on people and in service to the natural world. Going back to that experience with the homeless mother and child, the creations we made together are physically gone, but I hope the legacy of our time together is still resonating. I think that nature, and people as natural beings, are at once fragile and powerful. One of my hopes is that the power of collective human action can support what is powerful in nature, and protect and heal what is fragile.

Mary Daniel: What advice do you have for someone who is looking to use creative process to connect more deeply with nature?

Zach: It feels presumptuous to me to give advice about something that is so individual, but I can offer an invitation that some people have found useful: view nature as your teacher and advisor, view yourself as a curious and caring student, as a part of nature, and open to change.

Mary Daniel: What excites you most about your work right now?

Zach: I’m excited about some great collaborations with other organizations and institutions. I’m working to transform greenmuseum.org, which we describe on the website as a “giant collaborative art-making tool.” I’m serving as an artist-in-residence in public schools through **ALICE: Arts and Literacy in Children’s Education** in Oakland, California. I’ve been working within **UC Berkeley’s Blake Garden** to create and maintain a free public *Create-with-Nature* Zone in that garden.

I’ve been collaborating with **Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency** and **Friends of Five Creeks** to provide a *Create-with-Nature* program for homeless children in Berkeley, California, which is funded by the **Open Circle Foundation**. I’ve also been working with the **Presidio Trust** to bring *Create-with-Nature* activities into the Presidio in San Francisco, California through facilitating family events and providing training and consultations. Finally, I’ve been working with the **Children & Nature Network** and the local **Children in Nature Collaborative** of the San Francisco Bay Area, California to bring children and families into closer connection with nature and with each other through *Create-with-Nature* activities.

Mary Daniel: In conclusion, is there anything else you would like to share?

Zach: Just that I’m grateful to the Arts & Healing Network for spreading inspiration and serving so many of us with diverse yet overlapping creative approaches to healing. I hope that your readers will get in touch with me so we can share information and inspiration.



Zach Pine (left) helps carry a big rock to be used in a sculpture (Photo by Roy Gordon, 2009)



A couple poses with their creation at the Annual Free Create-With-Nature Earth Day Celebration on Stinson Beach, CA in 2006.



Afternoon, Kohala Coast, Hawaii, 2004
Lave stones between two palm trees.
An example of Zach’s solo work.



Late Afternoon, Kensington, CA.
Fallen Magnolia petals on a rock, 2003.
An example of Zach’s solo work.

To learn more about Zach Pine and his work, please visit his web site, www.naturesculpture.com.