



BILL WOLFF

An Image of Transition

A devotee of Japanese sculpture, Bill Wolff spent four years on a Ministry of Education and Culture fellowship, studying, working, and exhibiting in Tokyo, Yokohama, and elsewhere.

“As my time in Japan ended, I knew I was going to have four or five months living out of a suitcase back home,” he says. “I had packed up my studio in Japan and didn’t have one in the U.S. yet. It was a good time for a residency.”

The one he attended in 2009 placed him on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, in remote solitude. The Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park hosts one artist at a time.

“I don’t think there are too many places where you can make a big piece of outdoor sculpture that’s only going to be there for a short time,” he says. “I wanted to go into the forest, gather materials, and make something out of stuff that I found on the ground.”

What would he make? A symbol of transition. In an alpine meadow that’s a ski slope in winter, and using only the tools he could carry on the bicycle that the residency provided, he crafted *Birdbridge*, a 10-by-35-foot bridge structure, plus a bird made of rope and driftwood.

There was a music festival at the nearby ski lodge on the last weekend of the residency, so the sculpture had an audience, albeit briefly. “It blocked the ski slope, so I bet it made it till winter and then got taken down,” says Wolff.

ABOVE: Bill Wolff’s *Birdbridge* at Lake Michigan in Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. BELOW: The bird, being made of found wood and rope.



The object is gone, but the experience lingers in Wolff’s memory. “Seeing the lake—and not being able to see the other side—gave me the feeling, ‘this is the end of the world,’” he says. “It stormed the day before and the day of the music festival. It was tough to have to stay in the cabin, but it was good to see Lake Superior angry. The physical presence of the lake refreshed the work. That sense of isolation was something I was relying on to fuel what I was doing.”

And the residency also reminded this self-reliant, hands-on sculptor to be even more self-reliant and hands-on in future work. “I think what the experience left me with was renewed conviction to do large work on my own, instead of contracting out certain elements,” he says. “It was a nice reminder of how freeing it is to gather stuff, let the pile germinate into an idea, then develop an image and make it, all without asking anyone’s help or permission.” ■