

Art: Design: Culture

Glass

The UrbanGlass
Art Quarterly

The Rise and Fall
of Vitraria
Landscape Sculptor
Costas Varotsos
Clare Belfrage's
Crossed Lines

Immersive
Environments

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PERRY GLASS STUDIO 2016 ARTISTS



Judith Schaechter (American, b. 1961), *Feral Child*, 2012. Stained glass. © image courtesy of the artist

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GLASS

EDITOR

Andrew Page

editor@glassquarterly.com

ART DIRECTION

Stislow Design

PUBLISHER

Don Zanone

publisher@glassquarterly.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Erin Somers

managingeditor@glassquarterly.com

COPY EDITOR

Michele Albright

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

John Drury

William Ganis

Victoria Josslin

William Warmus

James Yood

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For subscription inquiries, call or write:
GLASS Quarterly, 647 Fulton St., Brooklyn, NY 11217
Phone: 718-625-3685 ext. 222
Email: customerservice@glassquarterly.com

For editorial and advertising inquiries:
GLASS: The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly
647 Fulton St.
Brooklyn, NY 11217
Phone: 718-625-3685 ext. 222
info@glassquarterly.com, www.glassquarterly.com
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The Natural

Massive monumental glass works that interact with the rugged natural landscape are part of a singular quest for connection by Greek artist Costas Varotsos.

BY RANDY B. HECHT



Proposed intervention at the Epidaurus Theater, one of the best-preserved ancient Greek amphitheaters, 2005.

There's a certain irony in the tale of a sculptor who builds his work into the natural environment and at the same time must circumvent the unnatural environment in which his country has become stuck. Costas Varotsos has mastered the art of persuading us that nature intended to have layers of green glass rise up between the ridges in a mountain range, or take on the shape of a poplar standing in a grove alongside real trees. But like everyone who lives in or near Athens, he's also become adept at practicing the art of logistical subterfuge—a survival skill in contemporary Greece. The way it all works can offer unexpected insights to a visitor to the country.

Varotsos lives on Aegina, a small Saronic island that you reach on most days by taking a 75-minute ferry or 40-minute hydrofoil ride from the Athenian port of Piraeus, which itself is accessible by metro from the city center. So when he called me the day before our interview to say that his assistant would meet me at my hotel and escort me to the port, I thought he was being overly chivalrous. Despite my protests that it wasn't necessary, he insisted. It wasn't until we set out the next morning that I understood what had happened: anger over the economy had sparked a wildcat strike that left the ferry and hydrofoil services sidelined for the day.

Intrepid owners of small craft had seized the opportunity to provide alternative means of transport at triple the normal cost of passage. But first you had to find them. Through a port teeming with ferries, yachts, and cruise ships, the assistant, an aspiring film director named Gerasimos, drove us from one possible spot to another, each time racing out of the car to seek advice from anyone who might have inside information on the right place to go. The third time was the charm, and an hour or so later, I stepped out of a fishing boat to find the sculptor waiting for me on the Aegina dock.

Sea and space

The mad dash to get there brings to mind *Dromeas*, the iconic Varotsos sculpture known in English as *Runner*, which has had two lives. The original sculpture, which stood at eight meters, was created in 1988 and stationed in Omonia Square but had to be removed when the city began construction of a metro station there. Varotsos recreated the work at its current location adjacent to a large hotel a few blocks from Syntagma Square, home to the Greek Parliament and frequent political protests. Composed of iron and jagged-edged sheets of translucent green glass stacked 12 meters high, the work conveys a feeling of action, speed, and transience, particularly when viewed beneath an illuminated night sky. At once racing and motionless, *Dromeas* is an urban everyman.

Varotsos built his home on the island so that he could—literally and figuratively, personally and artistically—rise above it all. Although he maintains a residence in Athens, teaches in the city, and sends his daughter to school there, his home is perched high in Aegina's mountains, close to nature and far from the metropolis and the mayhem. The living area is walled in by floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides that make the interior and exterior spaces nearly indistinguishable, just as his outdoor sculptures fit like camouflage into their landscapes.



Dromeas (Runner), 1994.
Glass and steel. H 39 ft.

He designed the house and grounds with his artistic aims in mind, and considers the nearly panoramic view of the mountains and sea essential to inspiring his work, although he does the actual creation in a basement studio cut off from those visual stimuli. When I observe that he absorbs upstairs and creates downstairs, he laughs and says, "You understand."

That blank canvas of a studio may also help him to develop visions for works that are exhibited in museums or galleries rather than outdoors. He thinks of those indoor spaces as laboratories: "When I am in nature, or when I am in an über-dimension, I don't do experiments. I live. I am alive. But when I am inside the private space, in a gallery or a museum, I have the opportunity to play, to make experiments."

It's like nature is the experiment, I venture, so you and your work must fit in with the nature experiment.

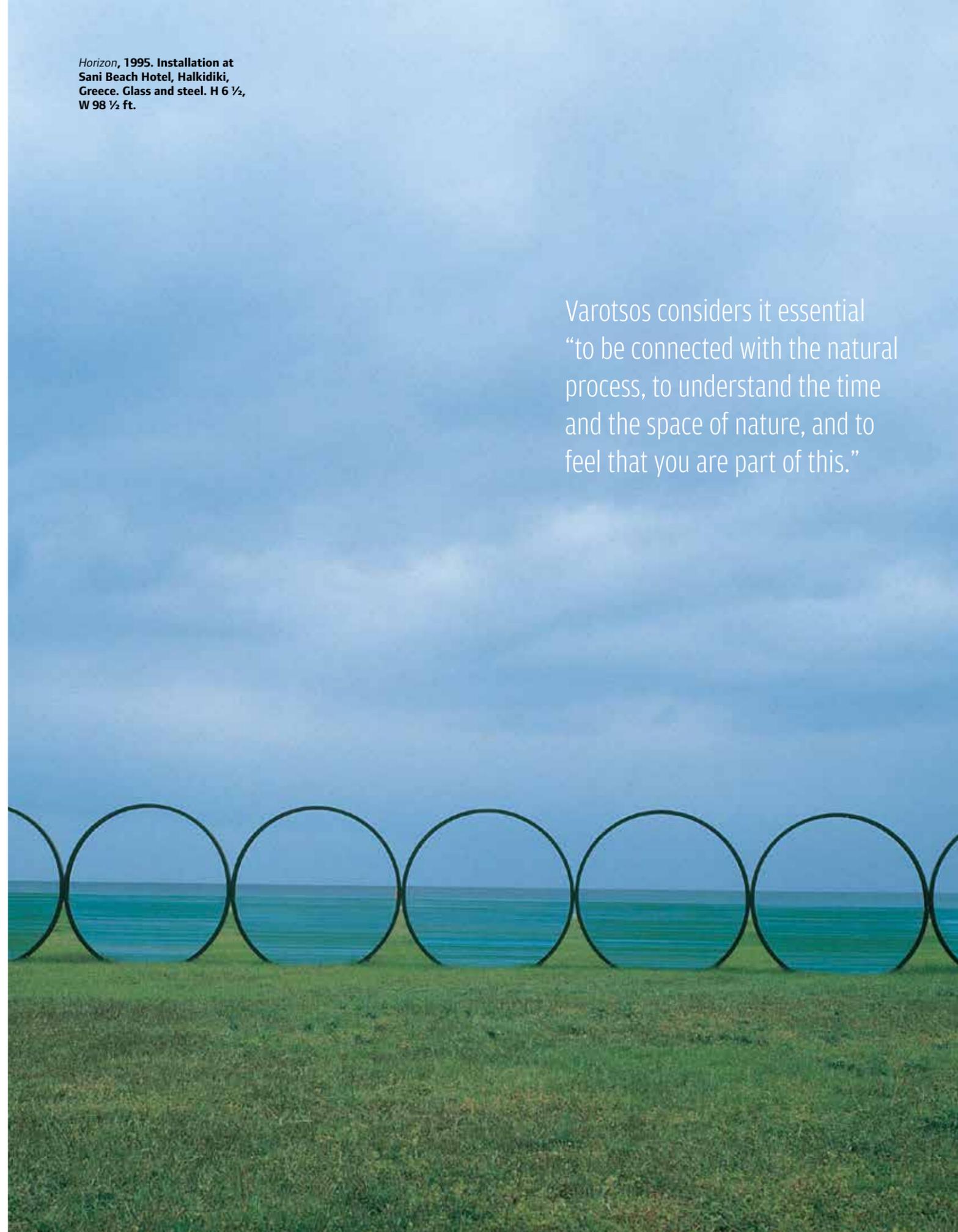
"Exactly," he says. "So you are part of this. When you are in a white box, you need an experiment. You work with your mind. And I enjoy this also."

But he prefers creating works for outdoor spaces. Nature has been a kind of living companion for him since childhood. He has, in particular, "a huge relationship with the sea" that has "an autobiographic dimension." And he considers it essential "to be connected with the natural process, to understand the time and the space of nature, and to feel that you are part of this."

Work in progress

The one note of discord in his home environment is struck, paradoxically, by those of his own works on view amid the olive trees and hilly slopes that surround the home. They weren't created for the property, and it was only at his assistants' insistence that they were installed. The owner doesn't like seeing them there. "My work makes me anxious," he says, laughing, "because when I see my work, I want to touch it and change it." In the artist's eyes, the art is never finished.

Horizon, 1995. Installation at Sani Beach Hotel, Halkidiki, Greece. Glass and steel. H 6 ½, W 98 ½ ft.



Varotsos considers it essential "to be connected with the natural process, to understand the time and the space of nature, and to feel that you are part of this."

Varotsos attempts to use art to create a man-made reflection of what we find in nature and the way it affects us.



Horizon, 1995. Memorial for Paris Kanellakis and his family on private land, with Mount Parnassus in the background. Glass and steel.

Among the works under development in his studio is a piece that is an outgrowth of a 2012 sculpture called *L'Approdo: Opera all'Umanità Migrante (The Landing: A Work Dedicated to Migrating Humanity)*. Varotsos was commissioned to create the initial sculpture in honor of the 83 Albanians who lost their lives when their ship, the *Kater i Radës*, collided with the Italian naval vessel *Sibilia* on March 28, 1997. The shipwreck was transported to a concrete platform and transformed by Varotsos into a memorial to the dead. The ship's propeller was later discovered, brought up from the Adriatic waters, and offered to Varotsos, who is layering it with sheets of glass as a continuation of the original tribute and of his fascination with the sea and the dangers it holds. As new waves of migrants wash up on Greek shores each day, the works resonate with fresh meaning.

A native of Athens who began his artistic life as a painter during studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, Varotsos found himself drawn to working with transparent materials and the stratification of colors. "I arrived in the sculpture through paint," he says.

The concept of stratification of color is central to his work and brought him to his ideas about space and its use. "I began to give a lot of

importance to the space between the colors, between me and the piece, between the concept of the work and the work," he says. "In this space is floating the energy of the work." The idea came to him in the early 1970s and became the genesis of his artistic goals, which, over time, he realized were best achieved using glass. "The material for me is not important. It's the work that I want to express," he says. "I use a lot of glass because it's the material that helped me to express this, to work with the energy of a space. But I'm not a really a glass artist. I'm an artist that uses glass." And although he says he loves the material, he adds that the goal when making a piece of art is to make the material disappear into the work and the concept that it expresses.

As an artist, Varotsos has similarly emerged from and been transformed beyond his own origins. As he puts it: "I consider myself a Greek artist, but with international language. And I feel Mediterranean, we can say." His ties to Italy, where he lived for many years and where many of his works may be found, are particularly strong. (In 2016, he will have new works exhibited in Salerno and Torino.) That has, in turn, fostered a sense of connection to the Renaissance—a period that progressed while Greece was in its Byzantine era. So he thinks of himself as a Greek who

"has passed through Renaissance culture. I am a Renaissance guy, but with Byzantine roots," he says. "It's a little bit complicated, but it works."

Perhaps that's because the root of his sculpture is not a school, style, medium, or period of art, but rather an attempt to use art to create a man-made reflection of what we find in nature and the way it affects us. One of his as-yet-unrealized projects is a "sculpture park in the sea," built on land masses so small they don't even qualify as islands—"some stones, small islands, coming up from the sea"—and to transform those small natural spaces into works of art by different artists.

Stars in his eyes

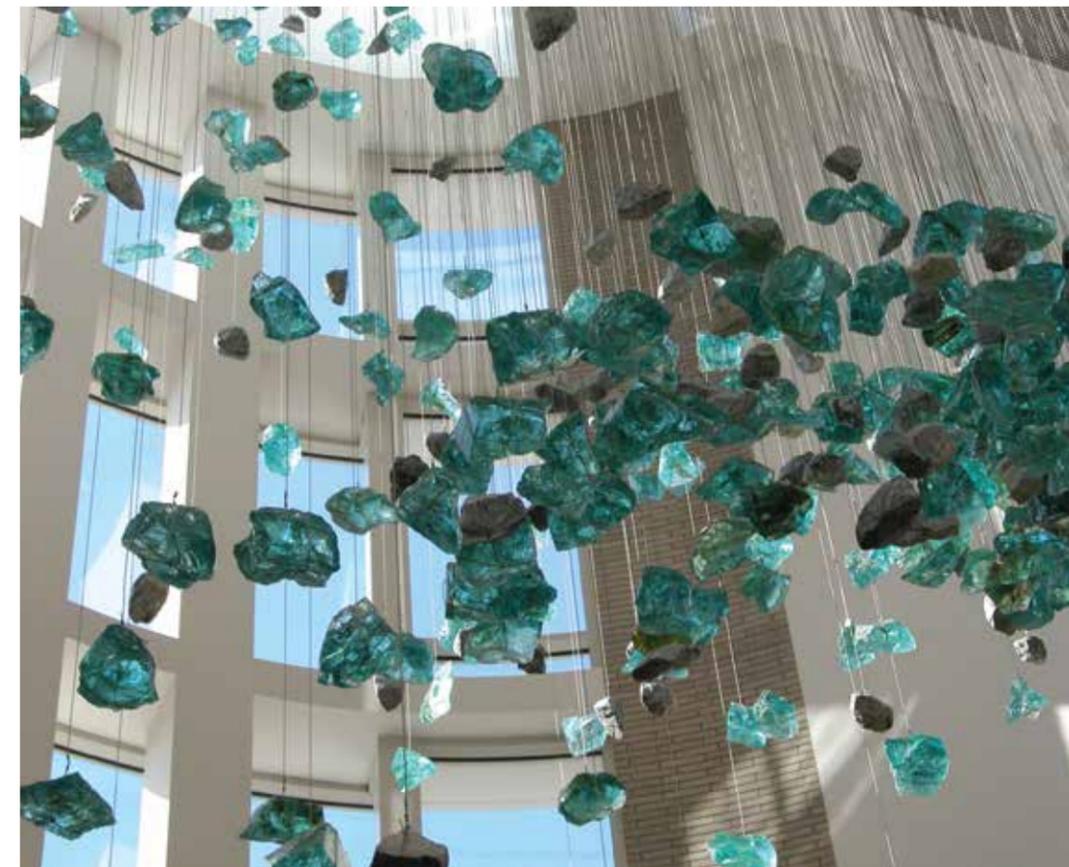
There can be a daredevil aspect to his interaction with nature, a brand of environmental extremism that tests the line between life and death. He recalls adventures in his youth that involved going out sailing without any navigational instruments and episodes of self-imposed outdoor adversity. In Cappadocia, Turkey, he tried hot air ballooning, which looks much more peaceful to people observing from the ground than it is for those in the gondola. "The fire. It's violent! And then the silence. There is a tension with a balloon. You are there, but you are in big danger also."

Flirting with that danger has increased his sense of being alive and, by extension, his sense of being a part of the natural world—on Earth and beyond. "I'll tell you something that I live sometimes. The night without moon, in the center of the sea, in a sailboat, and you feel this globe dimension, the stars, the sea," he says. "Our problem is that we are not part of anything anymore. A big part of my work is part of this experience. To understand my work, you have to think about these things."

I remind him that earlier in our conversation, he said that we are in a community with nature. When they see the whole sky, the whole universe



Above: Untitled, 2006. Public art installation in Steffisburg, Switzerland.



Left: Galaxy, 2006. Permanent installation at the Washington Convention Center, Washington, D.C. Glass and stone. Dimensions variable.



LEFT: *La Morgia*, 1996–97. Land art installation in the Apennine Mountains near the town of Gessopalena, in Abruzzo, Italy. Glass and steel. L 131 ft. The work was intended to heal the landscape “wounded” in World War II.

BELOW: *Meteora*, 2003. Rendering for proposed intervention in Kalambaka, Greece.



A 2005 rendering of proposed interventions on a rocky island off the Greek coast in the Aegean Sea.



Energy, 2003. Permanent installation at the Chianti Sculpture Park in Pievasciata, Siena, Italy. Glass and steel. H 19 ½ ft.

... the beauty of life is that it is composed of different and sometimes contrasting moments, but that there is a line that connects everything.

before them, most people say it makes them feel how insignificant they are. But isn't the opposite also true? If you are part of that community...

“You are very important,” he says, laughing.

“You are part of that whole sky,” I say, “and that’s how significant you are.”

“Exactly.”

The conversation’s philosophical turn leaves me wondering whether, as an artist, he is more driven to convey insignificance or significance. Or does he try to convey both: that we are completely insignificant, but we are part of the totality of the significance?

He responds that the beauty of life is that it is composed of different and sometimes contrasting moments, but that there is a line that connects everything. “This line is the desire, no? That drives you. All the rest can be positive, negative, but the important is to have this line, to focus on this line,” he says. “I think I find this line. If not, it’s difficult to do art. If you work with these forces of art and you don’t have your line, it could be really dangerous. In real art, I mean, not decoration.”

Does that mean, then, that art is capable of capturing the adrenaline rush we can get in a sailboat or hot air balloon? Can an artist recreate that?

“It’s not exactly adrenaline,” he says. “It’s a feeling that touches all the senses. You don’t know from where this pleasure is. This is the goal. If you don’t have this, you don’t have a piece of art.” ■

Brooklyn-based freelance writer and Urban Glass student RANDY B. HECHT covers cross-border arts, culture, and business topics for media and corporate clients in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Her publication credits include National Geographic Traveler and Smithsonian magazine.



Costas Varotsos in his studio on the island of Aegina, a 75-minute ferry ride from Athens.

PHOTO: RANDY B. HECHT