

## Margo Sawyer transforms place

Across floors and on walls; in natural settings and urban environs; within domestic or commercial structures, Sawyer composes artistic places that are simultaneously sculpture, architecture, and sublime space.

Likewise with *Reflect*, Sawyer imbues the already gorgeous Umlauf Sculpture Garden & Museum—inside and out—with a fresh transcendence.

Inside, a luminescent floor installation suffuses the gallery with light as well as kind of luxurious stillness. In the garden, pyramids of vintage brick stand sentient and ancient-seeming. Sawyer's sculptures invite us to be contemplative, suggest we quiet down our thoughts, and proposes that we contemplate.

Yet that invitation comes at some remove. You cannot physically enter the shimmering landscape of glittering tile, shiny silver balls, handblown glass objects and sleek, colorful metal boxes that Sawyer arranges on the gallery floor like some chimerical, miniature cityscape.

Held at bay from any immersive or interactive engagement, you fleetingly explore Sawyer's sumptuous floorscape with your imagination. From the perimeter, you travel along pathways made by the tiny gleaming spheres, mentally traversing the glass tiles, perhaps comparing their differing textures, imagining some to be pools of water.

Or maybe you study the arrangement of boxes—is there an ordered pattern to the variegated rectangles and squares, an overarching symbolic design to their placement?

Ditto with the pyramids. Sawyer keeps us somewhat at bay from those at well. The elongated bricks—quotidian building material from the early 20th century and made in Elgin, where the artist lives and works—seem unfamiliar, even ancient, and though the classical pyramid form feels familiar, its physicality is both of this time and place and not of this time and place.

Like other site-specific works, Sawyer has thoughtfully created throughout her practice, with *Reflect* she offers viewers intriguing situations.

Sawyer is a placemaker of beautiful places that are of this world and also not, grounded and yet not grounded, immediate with their alluring details and yet elusive with their elegant remove.

Sawyer accomplishes this through combining opposites. She mixes rigor and play, blends stillness and busyness, and astutely presents commonplace material as extraordinary artefact.

Sawyer is most interested in that line between the everyday and the divine—that edge where busyness and logic can give way to stillness and play. She pulls from the modernist vocabulary of precise and logical geometry, from minimalist sensibility of exacting shape and form, then couples those restrained aesthetic sensibilities with a kind of spontaneous gesture and sublime action.

Inside the Umlauf gallery, the tiles, steel spheres, boxes, and glass at first seem to be ordered in an arrangement driven by logical plan. But in actuality, they are laid down with meditative artistic instinct. Sawyer delightfully, intelligently engages in the ephemerality of the present moment, deftly shaping her installations with her own aesthetic alchemy that mixes intellect and emotion and spirituality in equal measure.

That Sawyer has been invited to transform the Umlauf museum and grounds in 2014 bears a certain potency. Outside the museum's walls, beyond the calm verdant garden, the city rapidly densifies and clutters beyond what Charles Umlauf likely could have ever envisioned. As it does, any sense of place—any sense of space—grows more inimical to contemplative life.

With *Reflect*, Sawyer reinvents an originally contemplative artistic locale into a freshly contemporary place for reconnecting with ourselves.

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin  
Austin American Statesman arts critic



# REFLECT



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# UMLAUF sculpture garden & museum

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# Margo Sawyer



## Reflecting on Margo Sawyer at the UMLAUF

The Umlauf Sculpture Garden & Museum is delighted to present new indoor and outdoor sculptural installations by Margo Sawyer. From May through October, Sawyer's sculptures will fill our gallery floor, rest atop the Garden grounds, and nestle into its earth. Collectively titled *REFLECT*, these works bear witness each day to the passing light and the changing seasons. They also recall seasons of Sawyer's life and career, adding a retrospective element to the exhibition.

Sawyer's exhibition marks an UMLAUF milestone as we commemorate our 23rd anniversary. The Museum has embarked on an expanded exhibition schedule, alternating foundational shows of Charles Umlauf and his peers with exhibitions of outstanding current sculptors. Very much a contemporary artist, Margo Sawyer is a Professor of Sculpture and Installation Art in the same department at The University of Texas at Austin where Umlauf taught for forty years. Although born in Washington, D.C., Sawyer was educated in England at Brighton Polytechnic Faculty of Art and the Chelsea School of Art (BA, Honors). Her interest in current American art led her back to the U.S., where she followed a scholarship at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture with an MFA from Yale University. Sawyer is a world traveler with an international exhibition history. Her numerous honors include Fulbright Grants to study in India and Japan and a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome.

Charles Umlauf, who retired from the University of Texas in 1981, could never have imagined that his Department would embrace something called "installation art." Nor, it is safe to say, would he have sanctioned the change. But Sawyer's generation picked up and transformed the sculptural mantle, carrying it into the 21st century. Whereas Umlauf's heroes were Renaissance artists of the Western tradition, Sawyer's earliest influences were the pyramids at Giza, Dutch de Stijl, German Bauhaus, and Russian Constructivism. Add to this the American artist Donald Judd, whose minimalist trajectory Sawyer radically expands through a global perspective that stretches from Japan through South Asia and back to her studio in Elgin, Texas.

Margo Sawyer's multipart exhibition consists of a single expansive floor installation inside; three major and three minor installations outside; seven installations in all. Each facet of *REFLECT* encompasses much more than the sum of its sculptural parts. Each installation has the potential to proliferate. A garden pyramid could easily be enlarged by broadening the base bricks and increasing its height. The border of the gallery installation might be moved so the interior contents could expand by several feet. Just as each installation has the capacity to grow, each is guaranteed to be disassembled. In that sense, the exhibition itself, with its promise of creation and eventual disassembly, becomes the grand metaphor for the many discrete parts of *REFLECT*.

*REFLECT* is literally and figuratively groundbreaking. Sawyer is the first artist ever to install work that speaks directly to our Lawrence Speck-designed building. Tens of thousands of chrome steel balls carpet the floor or trace the lines between the bricks. Sawyer's objects cast reflections of the ceiling, walls, partitions, sky—and even our visitors. Subtle changes in the natural light alter the installation's appearance considerably. Time spent with Sawyer's exhibition is time slowed down. The theme of *synchronicity*—Karl Jung's concept of meaningful coincidences—anchors Sawyer's oeuvre and is the title of one of her major ongoing series.

*REFLECT* is heavy with history. Sawyer's site-specific floor piece is a quasi-retrospective, including objects spanning from the 1980s through 2014. Some pieces were handcrafted and painted by the artist. Others, such as the 12" x 12" mirrors, are off-the-shelf. Still others are the result of intensive partnerships Sawyer undertakes with international artisans and manufacturers. The bamboo boxes and diamond-shaped frames came after months of working with Japanese craftsmen. During various residencies over the last decade, she worked side by side with master glass gaffers to develop the luxurious vessels. The steel boxes (in mirrored stainless, yellow zinc, and blue) were developed at and generously donated by EVS Metals in Pflugerville, Texas. Jeff's Resurrections LLC, a full-service automotive restoration company, flawlessly applied iridescent pigments to Sawyer's wooden squares. These are only a few of the sculptor's numerous constructive collaborations.

Outside, Elgin Butler Brick provided the blue and gray bricks that are arranged into a circle and rectangles in the Garden. The terra cotta-colored bricks belonged to an early 20th century building that Sawyer owned in Elgin. After a freak windstorm destabilized the structure, the City condemned the building, forcing her to demolish it. In characteristic fashion, Sawyer salvaged the bricks, chipping away the 100-year-old mortar. At the UMLAUF, several teams of volunteers arranged them into pyramids she designed. Sawyer traverses historical eras and cultures as effortlessly as she traverses media. Her cooperative spirit seeks out the finest creators in each field, from whom she learns and to whom her art pays homage. Sawyer's decades of experience have intensified her preternatural intuition and sublime aesthetic sense. One might say that collaboration—her relationships with materials, color, people, buildings, cities, gardens—is Sawyer's real medium.

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