



T H E A R T O F N A T U R E

Assemblage artist Ran Adler applies principles of meditation and environmentalism.

By Alyssa Morlacci / Photography by Harry De Zitter

Like a painter with a blank canvas, Ran Adler's jumping-off point is a white wall. When the 67-year-old Naples-based assemblage artist presented a solo exhibition at the Wasmer Art Gallery at Florida Gulf Coast University in February, he transformed the empty 30-by-40-foot space in a way art gallery director John Loscuito had never seen before. "Since his work is at such a large scale, the wall becomes the frame," Loscuito says.

Some of Adler's pieces stretch as tall as 15 feet—from the gallery's floor to the ceiling.

But considering the materials Adler uses, this immensity seems almost unattainable. Picture one sea grape, small enough to pinch between two fingers, collected into a wicker basket, stripped of its stem, punctured with a needle and strung onto a wire joining thousands of others. Together, they are dried into terracotta-colored beads and weaved into a hanging structure that, when completed, is larger than Adler himself.

Nature's debris is Adler's most sought-after material. The horsetail he gathers along the Mississippi River in Illinois, the honey locust from his friend's farm in Missouri, the sea grapes and mahogany pods collected here in Naples.

With much of his work being rooted in nature, he feels particularly affected by issues such as

red tide and the threats on the Everglades. "I see things being destroyed that should be thriving, and emotionally it's heartbreaking," he says. To find balance amidst this reality, Adler listens to Japanese, Chinese and American-Indian meditation music as he works. The found materials, often arranged to form recurring patterns, become a physical embodiment of the music's repetitive sounds. That's perhaps why there's a calming nature to Adler's work.

Pieces are not complete, though, until they're hung and illuminated with light, the angles of the bulbs are used to cast shadows that create interest and depth. "There's a lot of play between light and shadow, so initially it's hard to understand where the physical work begins and ends, and where the light and shadow comes in," Loscuito adds.

Through the show, which Adler called "Presence," he hoped to create an in-the-moment experience for viewers. The goal stemmed from his own difficulty attaining this mindset six years ago when he was operating out of a large studio in Industrial Park by the airport.

The space "was an artist's dream," Adler says. It had a reception area and gallery walls. There was space for him to sleep, a full bath and kitchenette. There was a storage loft, room for multiple rolling tables and a large bench. Adler could work on

The artist gathers materials found in nature to create large-scale installations, like this "Into the Woods" piece, composed of honey locust branches and acacia thorns. Light and shadow play into his work—pieces are not complete until they are installed.



A work in progress shows Adler drilling holes into mahogany pods, which are then hand-knotted and stitched together with hemp string. Stashes around his studio hold materials, such as horsetail rush and driftwood, for future projects.





The "Presence" exhibit, which ran in the Wasmer Art Gallery at FGCU earlier this year, showcased the artist's use of natural materials. From left: "Medallion," made with mahogany pods collected on campus by gallery director John Losciuto and his students, is now part of the university's permanent collection; "Kimono," stitched with hemp and hung on bamboo; "Tornado," made with horsetail rush.

As he works, Adler listens to meditation music. The recurring patterns in his pieces become a physical embodiment of the hypnotic sounds.





The artist stands next to his 15-foot-tall "Kimono," the result of stringing together hundreds of mahogany pods found around Naples.

multiple projects at once, and people would often stop by to drop off materials. The studio became cluttered—filled with unused materials and unfinished projects. He began to feel crowded and uninspired.

He decided to downsize and bought a light-filled industrial house for \$6,000 at a 55-and-older community in Collier County. He stripped out the interior and opened up the rooms. He sprayed the floors and walls with white paint. Then, he brought in one work table and bench and just the tools he needed: A tidy stash of saws, shovels and rakes are organized on a peg board, and a rolling rack holds everyday tools, such as wires, bowls, driftwood, wood burners, a drill press, hand drill and a sander.

The shift was immediate. "It wasn't about how much I had," he says. "It became about how little I had and the challenge of creating something from that."

Adler has carried this minimal, uncomplicated approach into all aspects of his life, including his wardrobe. To match his distinguishable white goatee, he dresses in a daily ensemble of white linen shirts and pants—a uniform he adopted to simplify his morning routine.

This version of himself is his most authentic. Before moving to Naples 15 years ago, Adler says he lived many lives—from an insecure teenager attending high school in St. Louis, Missouri, to a fashion design student in L.A. to a floral designer in Kansas City, and several other stops in between before landing in Florida. "When I moved here I made a big change because I knew

I wanted to be a different person," Adler says. "I wanted to take this as the opportunity—maybe the last opportunity—to become who I really wanted to be; who I saw myself being." That person is a peaceful being embracing simplicity and stillness in life and in his art.

Similar to his own transformation, Adler likes to take decaying materials and give them new life: "Impermanence is a part of my work—the fact that I have caught a material at a time when it was on its way out to decompose."

Take for example his piece in FGCU's permanent collection. Gifted by the Wasmer family, it's called "Medallion" and made out of mahogany pods Loscuito and his students collected from trees on campus. Or the piece currently on display at Gardner Colby Gallery—the 2-by-8-foot Venetian plasterboard with Acacia thorns represent birds flying from the wall onto the board. Or the six installations at Judith Liegeois Designs, including tornado-shaped sculptures that hang from the ceiling and are made from a basket weaver's cuttings, strung together with wire.

"I don't think he's recognized throughout Southwest Florida as much as he should be as an artist," Loscuito says. "He should be exhibited throughout the country."

But widespread recognition isn't important to Adler. Instead, he values his ability to connect his inner and outer experiences by creating minimally and living simply. ■