

FROM THE MURKY BANKS OF THE
CHATTAHOOCHEE

—ANDREA DEZSÖ—



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The Columbus Museum commissioned internationally renowned artist Andrea Dezsö to create a project in response to Columbus and its surroundings. Reimagining the Galleria cases, Dezsö has created an experience focused on “tunnel-books.” Rooted in 19th-century shadowplay entertainments and similar to children’s pop-up books, these artworks are three-dimensional tableaux created from sheets of paper that are drawn, cut out, painted, and assembled. Different layers are stacked one atop another, leaving some space between, and held together with a collapsible framework. In Dezsö’s hands, individualized lighting designs enhance the work’s otherworldly qualities. By constructing special vantage points, the artist invites the viewer to actively engage with these one-of-a-kind dioramas.

Born in Transylvania, Romania, Andrea Dezsö received a BFA in Graphic Design & Typography and an MFA in Visual Communication from the Hungarian University of Design in Budapest. She moved to New York in 1997 and has taught at Parsons The New School for Design and Hampshire College. Dezsö’s illustrations have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek*. Americans for the Arts’ Public Art Network included the artist’s *Community Garden*—a glass mosaic mural in New York, located on the mezzanine wall at the Bedford Park Boulevard Subway Station—in its 2007 year-in-review of the best in public art projects nationally. *From the Murky Banks of the Chattahoochee* marks the debut of Dezsö and her work in Georgia.

All of the tunnel books on display are from the collection of the artist.

Andrea Dezsö, *Forest Stroll with Goat*, 2014, Japanese hand-made Shojoshi paper hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered one-of-a-kind tunnel book





Andrea Dezső, *Adam & Eve Sasquatch*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book



Photo by Nash Baker

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA DEZSÖ

by Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D.

JONATHAN FREDERICK WALZ: Your projects often include fantastical creatures and your commission for The Columbus Museum visualizes regional “folk tales.” Could you tell us about your interest in imaginary flora and fauna?

ANDREA DEZSÖ: I love the natural world—plants and animals, rocks and waters, spaces, colors, smells, and flavors inspire and uplift me. I also love visiting imaginary spaces. I allow what I experience in nature to mingle with my own imagination. I grew up in Transylvania with a strong connection to folk tales, legends, and myths. I’ve always loved stories and storytelling, and for the show at The Columbus Museum I have made up worlds you can experience, and, hopefully, be moved by what happens there.

JFW: Late last year you were commissioned to create a version of one of Edward Hicks’s *Peaceable Kingdom* images and I thought the result was amazing. Based on imagery in some of your projects, I get the sense you might be a fan of Hieronymus Bosch—! Are there other artists from history you admire or dislike?

AD: Yes, I do enjoy the work of Bosch, and from the European canon I especially love the work of the Van Eyck brothers, Giotto, and Fra Angelico, among many others. But much of the art I find most compelling was created by people whose names we don’t know. My favorite art includes imagery from the marginalia



Andrea Dezsö: *Dragonfly Woman*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book

of medieval and renaissance illuminated manuscripts, maps, tapestries, and stone carvings. In modern and contemporary art, what I find especially inspiring has been created by people whose names have not always been recorded, folk artists, indigenous craftspeople, or self-taught artists whose names we know but who worked outside the mainstream, such as Bill Traylor, Martín Ramirez, William Hawkins, Anna Zemankova, or those whose work connected strongly to folk traditions, like Hilma af Klint and Constantin Brancusi.

JFW: I know your partner is also a practicing artist. What's it like to live and work so closely together? Do you and your partner discuss each other's work?

AD: Art is a big part of our lives together. We are genuinely interested in each other's art practice and discuss it often. We work together to conceive shows and solve visual problems, and he often helps me to manage projects which might otherwise feel overwhelming. My partner is Adam Gurvitch. We live in a small house where we have our separate studios, and often travel together for artist residencies, to do visual research, install work or teach. I think we spend more time in each other's company than most of the couples I know, and we find it enjoyable!

JFW: You work adeptly in so many different ways, from magazine illustrations to large-scale mosaics. You're so good at so many things, how do you choose your method and/or media for any particular project?

AD: I love materials and am always curious to explore new ways of making images. Some of my projects start with an idea I want to explore, and I need to master new techniques and materials to execute it, like the *Lessons from My Mother* embroidery series. Other works start with a material I'm inspired by or want to explore like a curiosity about juxtaposing the color of alcohol markers and the velvety matte surface of vinyl paint. Sometimes a project demands certain materials and I have to learn, like the large-scale permanent public art commissions that were executed in glass mosaic or stainless steel; in those cases I've developed expertise in how to design so that the fabricators I collaborate with do a faithful translation. Most of my artwork is rooted in drawing and painting, but I love the physicality of

materials and working with tools. I'm always eager to try my hand and love learning-by-doing, so it's been a pleasure to experiment on my own and also learn from masters who've taught me everything from stone lithography, Mokuhanga (Japanese woodblock), and monotype printmaking, to vitreography (etched glass) and computer-aided woodcut printmaking. Growing up in communist Romania, I had to work in a toilet factory as a teen and I developed a love of casting porcelain and industrial production! It's an interesting challenge determining which media to work with on a particular project, and commissions usually come with expectations, but if I have the freedom to decide I always try to expand beyond what I've already done.

JFW: I see from your social media posts that in the past year you worked in a hot glass studio. Is there a medium that you're totally curious about and are dying to try?

AD: I feel very fortunate to be invited to be an artist-in-residence at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington last year, and previously at Pilchuck Glass School. Pilchuck is the cradle of American Studio Glass movement and invites artists who have never before worked with glass to collaborate with skilled glassblowers. That residency was the gateway to a number of exciting and deeply satisfying collaborations with wonderful masters of the medium of hot glass including Dante Marioni, Ben Cobb, Dan Friday, Jeff Ballard, Pablo Soto, and others, and with printmakers Charlie Cohan and Soo Mei Teh who taught me to use etched glass plates to make embossed paper prints. I'd love to try weaving, basketry, blacksmithing, and wood carving. And I'd love access to resources and expertise to scale-up all of these explorations!

JFW: For The Columbus Museum you're creating a



Andrea Dezsö, *The Watchers*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book



Andrea Dezsö, *Butterfly Man*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book

series of “tunnel books.” How and when did you come across this format? It reminds me a bit of theater sets—just a miniaturized version—as well as various shadow plays or other nineteenth-century entertainments.

AD: Just as you’ve said, tunnel books go back to the 18th century and grew in popularity in the 19th century alongside toy theaters and other forms of printed pop-ups in Europe. I was inspired by Carol Barton’s carousel book workshop at the NY Center for Book Art to start experimenting. I created my first illuminated tunnel books for collaborative group show titled *Comix Fluxture* at Flux Factory in Queens, New York in 2004. The show was a walk-through labyrinth that revealed a narrative story in sculptures and images. I decided to tell my part of the story using illuminated paper silhouettes and developed multi-layered, hand-cut

paper constructions to create the illusion of space using flat elements. I was short on time and didn’t find any examples, so I came up with the method I still use today of assembling the tunnel books by sewing cut-out layers to collapsible sides to create a self-contained unit. I also continue to experiment with the possibilities of light and shadow.

JFW: Do you listen to music or podcasts or other programming in the studio? What’s on your playlist?

AD: I listen to lots and lots of audiobooks! Well-written, well-narrated books occupy that part of my mind which is prone to question what I do while I do it. Some of the most memorable I’ve listened to recently include *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* by Deepa Anappara; *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon

James; *There There* by Tommy Orange; *Means of Ascent* by Robert A. Caro; and *The Order of Time* by Carlo Rovelli. I’m really looking forward to listening to *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel, the final volume in her wonderful Cromwell series which started with *Wolf Hall*.

JFW: Is there an American artist today whose work you find especially compelling?

AD: Many, including Ann Toebe, Allison Schulnik, Katherine Bradford, Kathy Butterly, Alison Elizabeth Taylor, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Xylor Jane, Nicole Eisenman. Actually, it was not easy to think in terms of compelling American artists, since the American art scene is so transnational. Many of the artists currently showing in American galleries whose work I love might not be American, or might be foreign-born Americans like myself, or might live here but don’t consider themselves American. I realized I’m not even sure which contemporary artists whose work I love are American.

JFW: No worries. I specifically asked about American artists, because the Museum narrowed its art collecting focus to “American” in the 1970s. But you’re right: globalization has really blurred the lines between various categories and has actually made it harder to decide what to add to the collection here. Andrea, you’ve taught at several different universities. What advice would you give to students in Columbus and elsewhere who are considering pursuing a career in the visual arts?

AD: Work a lot, so that you get really good. Follow your heart. Treat people nicely. Don’t get a big ego. People who end up actually working a lot do it because they love making art. It’s not about liking the idea of yourself as an artist, it’s about being determined to put the work in.

JFW: All of this makes sense, especially given that I see all of these characteristics in you. It’s been fun to put *From the Muddy Banks of the Chattahoochee* together with you. Thank you for sharing your thoughts—and your art—with us.



Above: Andrea Dezső, *Estakwvnyay*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book
Front cover: Andrea Dezső, *Wampus Cat*, 2020, Arches watercolor paper laser-cut and hand-cut and sewn, collapsible, multi-layered tunnel book

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