

MIT List Center

Sarah Sze

I'm Sarah Sze, and the name of the piece is Blue Poles.

Known for her provocative site-specific installations using prefab materials, Sarah Sze was commissioned as part of the MIT Percent-for-Art, to create this piece for the Sydney-Pacific Graduate Residence Building. She was inspired by the primacy given to color and scale by modernist abstract sculptures, such as Alexander Calder's *The Great Sail*, here on the MIT campus. This work, however, recalls a far more prosaic artifact of modern life, the fire escapes of her native Boston.

It was built as a fire escape that was scaled to the scale of a cat. While I had this very strict system to start-- it has a balcony, a stair, and a ladder, and it's all just those three elements-- it has this quality of a kind of circuitous meandering route that climbs the building. Like a vine or a virus that develops and grows on location.

Today, fire escapes are generally obsolete. Contemporary buildings like this one have their emergency exits inside, a less visible alternative escape. Sze's playful jumble of oddly-scaled platforms and miniature ladders completed in 2006 adds a human dimension to the urban landscape.

Fire escapes sit between, for me, being decorative-- but they are this necessity, this need for a second means of egress, an escape route. But then they're also used as extra balconies, places people leave their houses, places where people steal things. They have this whole other language to them.

So why the title *Blue Poles*? Sze painted this piece blue as a complement to the warm-toned brick of the building. She appropriated the title from a work by abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock.

Encouraging a provocative and unexpected connection between his gestural painting and her own work. Pollock is famous for putting the canvas on the floor. He walked around and he splashed paint onto it and used paint for paint's sake. I think what's important about Pollock in relation to this work has to do with improvisation. Something that happens by mistake, but perhaps you keep it.