Forbes

Artist/engineer Jen Lewin returns to the subject of moths for an installation among the mighty oak trees in downtown Houston's Discovery Green.

By Chadd Scott, Contributor. ⓘ Chadd Scott covers the intersection of art a...

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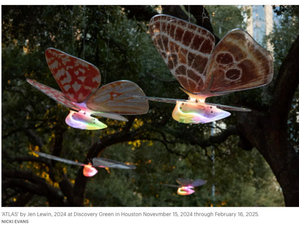


'ATLAS' by Jen Lewin, 2024 at Discovery Green in Houston November 15, 2024 through February 16, 2025.
NICKI EVANS

Jen Lewin rejects the right brain/left brain binary. American culture, society, and education broadly divides people into two separate intellectual camps from childhood: left brain thinkers adept at logic and math and right brained thinkers geared toward creativity.

The left brain/right brain binary is a myth, but go to a high school and see how many kids participate in both the science club and theatre productions. Lewin stands as one of the few to successfully break down the left brain/right brain segregation.

"From the time I was a kid in the 80s, I have been attracted to all forms of engineering, physics, hardware, software; I took apart a computer when I was in third grade–one foot in engineering, science. and math, and the other foot in art," Lewin (b. 1974) told Forbes.com. "I was told for most of my young life that I was either right brained or left brained, it couldn't be both, and it took a rebellion in my mid-20s to be like, you know what, I'm going to be whole brain, and I'm going to do both."

Lewin, an artist by profession now, previously worked in tech. Her public artworks typically involve highly technical mediums including robotics and fabrication on a large scale. Work she performs herself–the construction and the software–along with a team.

"I don't have formal training in computer science and hardware, but I've spent 30 years learning it and have a pretty strong technical acumen," she said. "I liken it to if you're an artist and you paint, you definitely understand mixing paint, and you understand the medium of paint, and in my case, I'm an artist that makes large interactive sculpture that requires both computation and electronics, and in order to make work within that medium, I have had to master that medium."

Lewin finds the intersection art with science and technology to be the most exciting frontier of human creativity, a combination mirrored in the natural world.

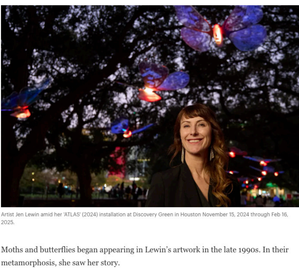
"If you look at biodiversity, the shore where (land and water) collide is where you have the richest biodiversity. Where art and science overlap is where you have the most exciting developments," she said. "We can see this in AI. The really interesting aspects of AI are where it overlaps into art and design."

Considering her aptitude for robotics and electronics and machining begs the question of why she chose to pursue the utterly unstable, hardscrabble career of an artist instead of those more secure and lucrative professions.

"I love technology, but I don't want to produce something that lives on the screen or lives in the cloud, I want to make something physical that integrates with that technology," Lewin explained. "I want to be physically building. I want to be in my shop. I want to be cutting things out of wood. I want to be painting on silk, but I also want to be writing the software."

Lewin's fusion of art with technology can be experienced through February 16, 2025, at Discovery Green in Houston where her *ATLAS* installation suspends 24 handcrafted and hand-painted ethereal glowing moths from stately oak trees along the park's Brown Promenade.

A Moth To A Flame



Artist Jen Lewin amid her 'ATLAS' (2024) installation at Discovery Green in Houston November 15, 2024 through Feb 16, 2025.

Moths and butterflies began appearing in Lewin's artwork in the late 1990s. In their metamorphosis, she saw her story.

"I go through these periods where I redefine my art career and I feel like I'm going through a really transformative process. There's this emotional alignment I have with them as a species when it comes to transformation," she explained. "Moths in particular, when they become moths, it's a really wild transformative process and there's something interesting to me in that."

ATLAS' name draws inspiration from the Atlas moth (Attacus atlas), one of the largest and most striking moths in the world. Named after the Titan Atlas from Greek mythology, who was condemned to hold up the sky for eternity as punishment from Zeus, the Atlas moth is renowned for its impressive wingspan, vibrant colors, and intricate wing patterns. *ATLAS*' name also reflects the responsibility society bears for conserving endangered species of moths.

Lewin further connects to moths through her interest in light as an artistic medium, such is the case with *ATLAS*, and moths' attraction to lights. An attraction so strong, in fact, that the easiest action anyone can take toward protecting moths is turning exterior house lights off at night and using shades to diminish lighting from inside. And for god's sake, if you still have a bug-zapper, trash it immediately.

Moths drawn to artificial light repeatedly bashing themselves against the source can be fatal at worst, and always disturbs their procreation and pollination. That's right, same as their more colorful and celebrated daytime counterpart, butterflies, moths are essential pollinators. Roughly a third of pollination occurs at night.

Actions taken to protect butterflies and birds will benefit moths as well. Along with turning lights off at night, these additionally include ceasing the use of pesticides, insecticides and weed killers such as Roundup on lawns. These products are indiscriminate killers. Poisons. They can't distinguish between a beneficial moth or a nuisance mosquito. Incorporating native plants and trees–the plants birds and bees and butterflies and moths evolved alongside–into home landscapes supports a range of biodiversity, including moths.

The king of native plant and tree species in Houston and across the South is the enormous live oak tree. Live oak trees support hundreds of animal and insect species; moths and butterflies use the tree's leaves to support their larvae. The Discovery Green's Brown Promenade where *ATLAS* has been installed features an allée of century-old live oaks.

"I fell in love with the Promenade. I had built these (robotic sculpture) moths and butterflies in the late 90s, early 2000s, and I wanted to return to those projects, but hadn't found the right space for it; I walked Brown Promenade and saw the beauty of those trees and immediately came back to my team and said we could do a new version of the moths," Lewin said. "That that location and the beauty of the trees, the beauty of that landscape, really spoke to me."

Discovery Green

HOUSTON - NOVEMBER 09: Jean Dubuffet's 'Monument au Fantôme' sculpture stands in Discovery Green Park in Houston, Texas on November 6, 2017. MANDATORY MENTION OF THE ARTIST UPON PUBLICATION - RESTRICTED TO EDITORIAL USE. (Photo By Raymond Boyd/Getty Images)
GETTY IMAGES

Discovery Green is a 12-acre park in the heart of downtown Houston. Conceived as a public-private partnership between the city and philanthropists Nancy Kinder and the late Maconda Brown O'Connor, the vision was transforming an underutilized parking lot into a premier greenspace and mecca for accessible arts, culture and educational programming.

Since its April 2008 opening, the park has hosted more than 10,000 free events, and in fiscal year 2024, more than 2 million visitors spent time there.

Discovery Green has also become one of the city's premier art venues, first introducing its public art program in 2014.

Expanding on that mission, Discovery Green seeks to create a more diverse and inclusive public art sector for local, underrepresented artists through a first-of-its-kind mentorship program: Art Lab. Prioritizing artists of color, women, and the LGBTQ+ community, Art Lab supports artists in developing their skills and providing access to the resources needed to fund, build and place large-scale, interactive public art.

Art Lab also offers a mentorship program which Lewin has been participating in, sharing her knowledge of public art. Her insights focus more on right brain strategy than left brain creativity.

"These pieces require footings and cranes and city shutdowns, so how to deal with the effective logistics for these large pieces. How to deal with city entities that are often commissioning you to do the public art piece. Contracting is a big one. What does contracting look like for a large, permanent public sculpture," Lewin explained. "Unfun things like insurance and shipping. How do you produce a big public sculpture and then ship it reasonably? It's not just about the creative vision and the ability to create (the artwork), then there's this next piece which is how do you build it? How do you find a team to create it? Do you create it yourself? Do you bring in fabricators? How do you move it? How do you install it so that it can then be loved and experienced in the public art space?"

Not easy work, but meaningful work.

"Art in public space engages us with our community and with our public space in a deeper way," Lewin said. "It's something that, if done well, can be evocative of a community, a community's thoughts, fears, ideas, dreams, and it can bring people in and make them have a sense of place and ownership within their community, which I think is fundamental and important for how we feel and engage with where we live."