



The Staff of Asclepias

Erik DeLuca, Artist

One common milkweed seed is about the size of an orzo noodle. It is brown, rough, and looks like a log boat. If it's the right season, the seed quickly germinates—although half won't make it. Once rooted, milkweed digs itself into the ground, with networks of roots taking hold in rhizomatic gestures. Soon the health of the milkweed will grow five feet tall, with green perky leaves and complicated, gynostegium flowers with nectar. The plant's namesake is the Greek god of healing, Asclepius—whose serpent-entwined staff continues to flourish.

It was 1941 in southwestern France. There was a barbed wire fence flanked by the Pyrenees and brown, wet mud. On this spiked border marked by the Shoah sat a yellow butterfly full of hope and resilience. This is the image in *One Spring*, a painting Karl Robert Bodek and Kurt Conrad Löw made inside the Gurs Camp. Meanwhile children in the United States were rallied to collect milkweed seed, not for butterflies, but for military bomber jackets. The cotton-like floss produced by grown milkweed is water-resistant and optimal for insulation.

During World War II the Texas state insect thrived because their host plant, milkweed, entered into the military-industrial complex. The North American Monarch butterfly, now almost an endangered species, migrates north from Mexico—they breed and die; breed and die. This cycle happens four or five times before a clump of Monarch reaches Canada. Once up North—like magic—a Monarch super generation comes to life. As they have done since before recorded history, these Monarch superheroes fly back south in the wind to Mexico where their great, great, great, great, grandparents were born. This incredible migratory journey is nothing without milkweed—a seed enshrouded in biopolitics and resilience.

Place

Kyle Hobratchsk, Founder, Director of 100 West,
Corsicana Artist & Writer Residency

When Erik DeLuca arrived to Corsicana for his residency in the Samuels Building, proper orientation demanded he call Babette Samuels. Her husband's family business gives the Samuels Building its name: Samuels' Men's Clothiers, part of the once-thriving Jewish merchant community in downtown Corsicana.

Babette is today's matriarch of the remaining, dwindling Jewish community. She is a dynamo, with her hands on most every facet of what is good in Corsicana. In her 92 years, Babette has lived here since 1951, and has championed progress in the schools, our cultural centers like the Palace Theater and public library, our parks and recreation department, and in particular has nurtured Corsicana's Jewish legacy to endless degrees. Her work has helped sustain the 1870s Corsicana Hebrew Cemetery, and she oversees the preservation and Jewish services at Temple Beth-el, the only onion dome temple in Texas.

Erik's weekly phone calls with Babette have surfaced threads essential to Erik's understanding of Corsicana, and the methods for growing his milkweed project. She introduced Erik to the Hebrew Cemetery where he is now planting milkweed, and to her favorite film *Fiddler on the Roof* and its song *Sunrise, Sunset*, singing her own rendition to him. The intergenerational component to this work is especially remarkable, and a reminder that Corsicana serves as an essential host beyond the immediate residency setting.

The two-story Samuels Building built circa 1900, two blocks south of 100 West on Beaton Street in Downtown Corsicana, has been known as Blackmon's Antique Shop in more recent decades. It closed a couple years ago, and was since purchased by Nancy Rebal, a co-founding residency artist, who envisioned the second floor ideal for new creative projects.

Until Erik's arrival in March of this year, every surface from floor to wall was barnacled by some kind of Americana artifact, arguably three shops' worth of inventory crammed into one space. Heaps of broken lamps, furniture and garbage drowned the second floor. And it is here that Erik was granted his Corsicana Residency, in a manner to set tone for a kind of studio practice we rarely get to host outside of the more formal or expected pursuits of making objects or paintings at 100W where drop cloths and easels might be involved. Here at Samuels, no precedence for studio practice exists, and we've found this healthy and compelling.

Way-stations

Sofía Bastidas, Curator

As a resident at Corsicana Artist & Writer Residency, Erik DeLuca has been working on the top floor of an old antiques store in downtown Corsicana packed with years of ephemera on wooden shelves. In Spanish, there is the word *adecuar*, which means to make suitable, accommodate, adapt, make fit. This is what DeLuca has been doing in the Samuels Building. He sifts through piles of hoarded furniture and ephemera, finding layers of paint, drawings, and wallpaper. This process of “making suitable” enables *The Staff of Asclepias*, in which DeLuca has designed a series of way-stations for the Monarch butterfly’s migratory pattern to take root in Texas once more. Ambitious in scale and impact, DeLuca’s project engages with questions of ecology; movement; migration; indeterminacy; and trophic cascades, powerful indirect interactions that can control entire ecosystems. His endeavor to place nature’s patterns at the center of his work offers a new possibility of solidarity, as he dedicates his practice to the service and understanding of vital non-human networks.

It begins with the *Asclepias*, a plant commonly known as milkweed (or butterfly flower, silkweed, silky swallow-wort). Milkweed is the host plant for the Monarch butterfly, a symbiotic relationship that has ensured mutual survival for millennia. This prehistoric creature continues to pass through the region to lay eggs on milkweed. Today, the Monarch butterfly population has decreased by 80%. This near-extinction is due to the great absence of its host plant, and the very reason why DeLuca devoted his studio space to the milkweed’s precious seed. In doing so, his own path aligns with the Monarch’s through the conversion of the Samuels Building into a milkweed nursery, setting into motion the possibility of a new, sustainable era of Monarch migration. *The Staff of Asclepias* sheds light on how different temporalities co-exist. The life of the insect is relatively short, but the survival of a species can span geological eras. DeLuca’s work can be understood as presenting different temporalities, or four “acts,” to use the theatrical term. Each “act” comprises a complexity of processes, materials, symbolism, which taken together create a meaningful and ideally transformative social and environmental sculpture.

ACT I: Samuels Building

As one ascends the stairs to the second floor of the Samuels building, one discovers a cluster of chairs, doors and wooden panels, rescued from the abandoned hoard of defunct antiques business and now thoughtfully pushed aside. In a far end corner, there is a table with a record player, some coffee mugs and a painting of a tiger rustled up from heaps of curio that serves as custodian of the natural world. In the center of the room, milkweed plants are arranged on a 6 x 11 ft table, with five commercial, magenta LED lights shining on them. There is a work station where the artist records the development of the plants. The atmospherics of the space change depending on when one is there. In the daytime, warm natural light pools in through the front windows, softening the sharp magenta and producing an almost emerald glow. At night, in pitch black, entering the building feels more unpredictable. The magenta light is deep; its vibrancy almost hurts the eyes. At this hour, the fuschia tone overpowers all other hues, the green of the plants disappears, as does the tiger's background. The suspended lights correspond with the overall atmosphere of the building, a strange moment where time seems to pause, but plants still grow.

ACT II: Corsicana Hebrew Cemetery

It takes about 7 to 15 days for the milkweed seeds to germinate. Half of them will put out shoots; half will fail to sprout. In 30 to 45 days the milkweed will be mature enough to meet the Earth. When ready to leave the nursery at the Samuels Building, a portion of these plants will travel to Corsicana's Hebrew Cemetery. Here it is important to note DeLuca's fascination with the work of artist and minimalist composer La Monte Young. In Young's *Composition 1960 #5*, there are no specific notes to play. Instead the performer is simply instructed to let a butterfly loose in a performance area. The creature's erratic trajectory embodies the music's staccato style before being set free on the final note. Its presence is as ephemeral as the performer's composition. Too, the artist composed a rendition of *Sunrise, Sunset* from *Fiddler on the Roof* for the cemetery, a starting point of interest for DeLuca. These sounds of resilience, tradition, migration, and hope fade in and out as the sun rises and sets. In this setting, the milkweed gains strength from the soil of these ancestors and the Monarch receives new hope from such tenacious people. It is within this space that DeLuca equates the Monarch's survival with that of humankind, to remind us of our own fragility and place among the non-human.

ACT III: Sweet Pass Sculpture Park

A milkweed plant may not flower in the first year of growth. Instead it could focus its energy into producing a vast and vigorous root system. Flowering is a phase that we will likely only witness at Sweet Pass Sculpture Park in the years to come. In the meantime, the park allows for contemplation about and around sculpture as part of the city's urban ecology. For *The Staff of Asclepias*, the park serves as a second Monarch way-station composed of about 300 milkweed planted by visitors. The planting is accompanied by a horizontal white LED light sculpture suspended above the ground, invoking the Greek god Asclepius whose serpent-entwined staff is a symbol of health and rejuvenation. This line also gestures towards the Monarch's migratory path from North Mexico to Canada. Visible during dusk and dawn, the line scatters particles of light in the earliest sunbeams. The final rays of diminishing sunlight take us into the night and intensify the horizontal neon beam that juxtaposes the erected lights of the Dallas skyline.

ACT IV: ANTEROOM

In ANTEROOM, the window gallery across the street from the entrance of 100W Corsicana, there is a sampling of *The Staff of Asclepias: ACT I* at the Samuels Building, a phase of the project that was mainly kept between the artist and the seeds. It respects the project timeline and events as something sacred and at times inaccessible by stringing together seemingly disparate elements and temporalities into one narrative: the seedlings, the mature plant, the light, sunrise and sunset, Monarch butterflies, Texas and the artist.

Protasis (Soil):

Tamara Johnson & Trey Burns,
Founders of Sweet Pass Sculpture Park

Sweet Pass Sculpture Park is located on Fabrication Street in west Dallas, just west of the Trinity River. Since its opening in 2018, Sweet Pass has exhibited outdoor projects by various local and international artists on a rotating basis. While highlighting outdoor contemporary projects in a free and open setting, Sweet Pass is dedicated to experimentation, community engagement, and strives to support the local ecological systems in and around the park.

As we facilitate a project that involves planting, we think it is important to call attention to the soil before we dig. Sweet Pass, like much of Dallas, is composed of what is colloquially known as “black velvet”, a dark soil derived from Upper Cretaceous rocks and tinged black from prairie fire (where our present ecoregion the “Blackland Prairie” gets its name). Following cycles of heavy rain and brutal sun, the alkaline clay in the soil swells and shrinks often physically cracking on the surface. This constant movement causes the ground to churn; in the park we often find car parts (sometimes with the lawnmower) that well up from the earth after storms, a reminder that the lot was once a dump for a nearby truck mechanic.

Much of the soil horizon in west Dallas has a complicated history. West Dallas, historically a working class minority neighborhood, was not formally annexed by the city until 1954, only then bringing subterranean pipes for running water and sewage. After being deemed a Superfund site by the EPA in 1995, 50 years of buried contaminants from a lead smelting plant run by the conglomerate RSR/Murmur had to be removed from the ground. In the late 90’s, a stratum of dust was added from the destruction of the West Dallas Housing Projects following a segregation lawsuit that found that people of color were discriminated against in housing assignments. In 2016, the bodies of early settlers were exhumed from the lot adjacent to the park so it could become an environmental runoff site for nearby condo construction.

There was quite a bit of mining that happened in west Dallas as well, especially after the discovery of limestone and shale (the necessary components for Portland Cement). The building booms across the river helped to establish "Cement City" which took millions of tons from the earth. It is the resulting infrastructure made from this material that drastically shifted the face of the local fauna, which in turn has severely impacted Monarch butterfly migration in the area - DeLuca described a graphic migration map he found showing Dallas as a blackout zone.

We first became aware of the milkweed planting project (that later evolved into *The Staff of Asclepias*) when the park was closed as we sheltered in place. This spring, the park seemed to be a bit more green, the irises leftover from a home that used to stand here bloomed a little more vividly. Our early conversations with Erik revolved around the phenomenon of *music for plants*. One particularly beautiful example, Mort Garsen's synth masterwork *Plantasia*, states this in the liner notes:

"[A] professor took three identical sets of plants and put them in three rooms under identical growing conditions. In the first room, he played only classical music and those plants thrived; in the second room, he played only rock music and those plants thrived; in the third room he played only the news. Those plants died. Let that one grow on you while you listen."

We thought this project would be apropos to the moment of bringing the park out of dormancy.

Sweet Pass is invested in creating systems that can exist in the gaps between ideas of gardens, green spaces, and public spaces while supporting contemporary art. These questions of being a steward to the ecology (intervening on and supporting of) are self-evident in running an outdoor space. The root of curator, "curare", is "to take care of"; it is this position of stewardship we take very seriously - the artists, the works, the visitors, the grass, the trees, the opossums & stray cats. In many ways this project is a natural fit, planting works that bring visitors and provide sustenance - simultaneously engaging with the local community and extending beyond it. We look forward to seeing Monarch here and helping them on their way.

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Curators: Sofía Bastidas and May Makki
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