

LESLIE UMBERGER

Emery Blagdon

BETWEEN 1955 and the year of his death, Nebraska native Emery Blagdon (1907–1986) shaped an installation-style art environment that would come to be regarded as one of America’s most significant. Blagdon died before his work garnered international attention—but during his life he was too busy making, using, honing, and adjusting the array of sculptures and paintings that comprehensively comprised what he called *The Healing Machine* to let any piece of it leave his farm on the Sandhill plains.

Art environments evolve over time and mirror the unique endeavor and worldview of an entirely self-directed artist. Projects like Blagdon’s shift after the artist is no longer there to tend, alter, and discuss it. Sometimes a site remains intact; sometimes the individual components find new contexts and audiences—always carrying the story of their past life with them wherever they go.

Blagdon tailored his world to fit his belief that the powers of the earth were inestimable, mysterious, and

could be put to good use. For more than three decades, he worked on an organic installation in a shed built specifically to house it. It was in the late 1940s or early 1950s when Blagdon began making wire formations, drawings, and paintings. When he inherited his uncle’s farm in 1955, Blagdon began to install his creations in a large, existing barn. In the early 1960s, the roof of the aged barn caved in, and with the help of his friend Ben Fox, Blagdon repurposed the lumber to construct a shed with an adjoining workshop. It was a crude space without any foundation or floor, but Blagdon liked the idea that his pieces would be in direct contact with the earth itself. Inside the shed, Blagdon installed his works in the array he would collectively call *The Healing Machine*.

Blagdon enthusiastically shared his project with family, friends, ailing locals, and a trickle of curious visitors. But the place was personal. Using bent and webbed hay-baling wire, salvaged copper, aluminum foil, wood, tape, minerals, paint, electric lights, and various items he believed could help wrangle the energies of the earth, Blagdon orchestrated a space that might heal the body and soul.

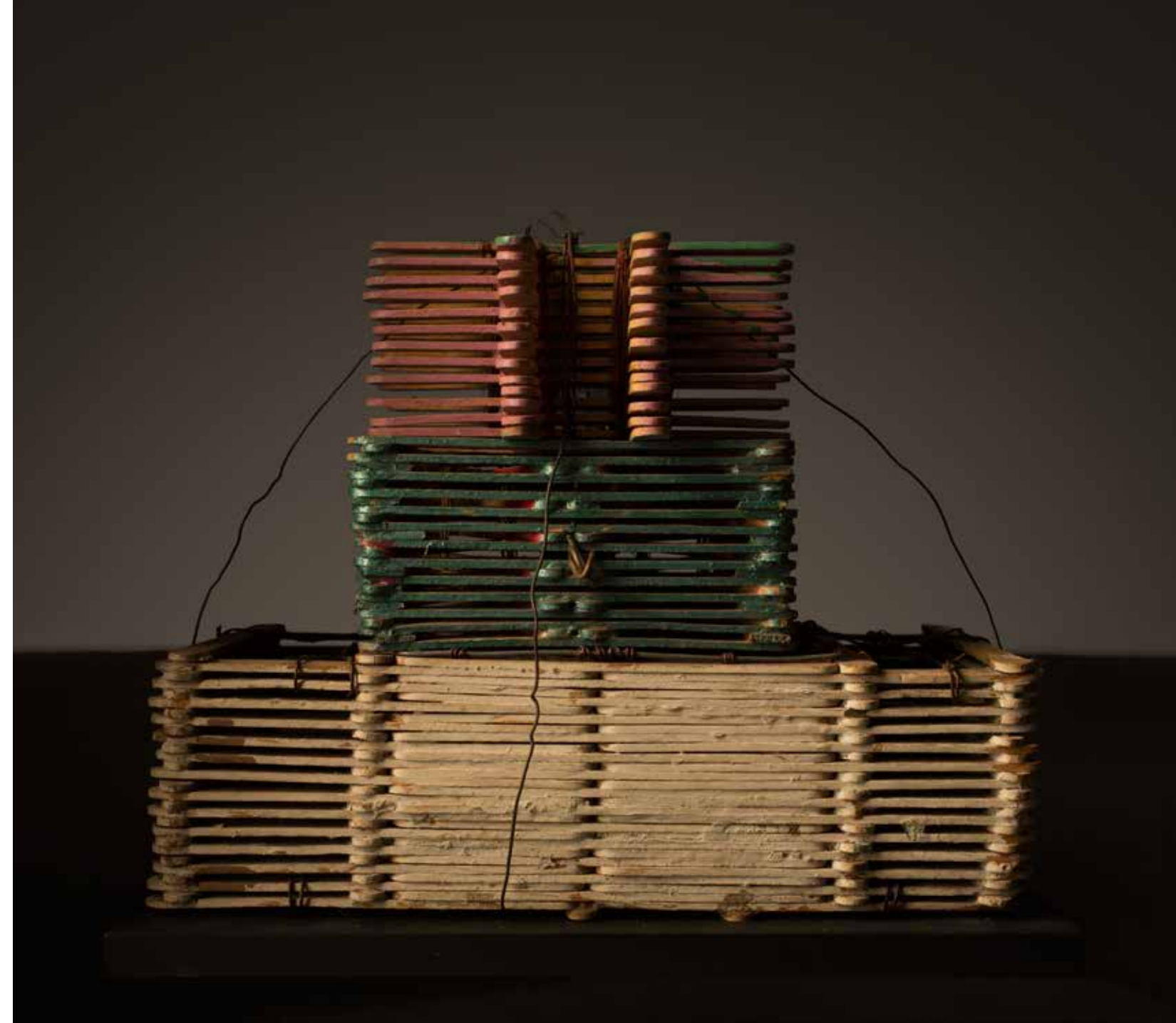


PLATE 77 | Emery Blagdon | Untitled | c. 1955–1986 | Paint, popsicle sticks, steel and copper wire, paper, and tin foil | 59 x 8 x 5 in.

Blagdon was influenced by the scientific developments of his time and by the personal events in his life. Born in 1907, Blagdon was a true character of the American West: a place of open spaces and rugged individualism. He was known as a free spirit. He lived for a time as a rail-riding hobo, prospected for gold in California, modified tractors to travel at highway speeds, tended his own subsistence garden, and worked as an itinerant laborer with significant mechanical talents. He watched cancer ravage first his mother, then his father. Perhaps already feeling the effects of his oncoming arthritis when he inherited his uncle's farm in 1955, he settled down and began to create a space that might positively impact these life-shattering ailments.

Natural science was a topic that enthralled Blagdon. He grew up in an age when “health physics” was wildly popular: electricity was thought to ease pain, newly discovered x-rays revealed the body's interior realms, and uranium radiation was promoted as a natural healing phenomenon. Blagdon often experimented with electricity and parts of his shed were wired—not just to light up, but to create a truly charged space. He searched his property for ideal energy fields and adjusted the elements of his “machine” according to the phases of the moon.

Blagdon envisioned his individual paintings and sculptures as functional components of a complex whole. Nothing was static or had a permanent location; even the works themselves were sometimes dismantled and reassembled. Change was the constant. In this way, Blagdon's *Healing Machine* mirrored the universe

he wanted to harness—a place of flux, power, magnetism, and mystery. Paintings didn't hang on the walls; they were stacked on the shed's earthen floor so that the mineral paints might draw the earth's energies from deep below, upwards into his space. Sculptures hung, sat, moved around, and came and went from his adjacent workshop.

After Blagdon's death, the site was dismantled, but the pieces were kept together and preserved. A plan was crafted to keep a core body of the *Healing Machine* together, much as Blagdon had left it, and to allow collectors and museums to care for the individual works—which Blagdon called his “Pretties”—that would come and go from his workshop.

In each work that he crafted, Blagdon's attention to detail is clear. Intersections are not merely structural; they are the junctures at which energy should flow into the adjoining materials. The seven works by Blagdon in Audrey B. Heckler's collection represent an exemplary cross section of his oeuvre. The layered box-like structure (PLATE 77) made from popsicle sticks, paint, foil, and wire embodies the form Blagdon gave to works that he may have conceived as batteries, or energy bundles. It is small, dense, and, within its cavity, it holds foil and other conductive materials. Blagdon may have designed the slatted sides so that the flowing energy could come and go with ease. Forms such as this one could have commanded any number of positions within the machine itself, but they largely sat on the floor or a table as power-generating hubs.





[LEFT] PLATE 79 | Emery Blagdon | Untitled | c. 1955–1986 | Steel, copper wire, paper, and tin foil | 76 x 7 x 7 in.

[RIGHT] PLATE 80 | Emery Blagdon | Untitled | c. 1955–1986 | Steel wire, plastic, tin foil, and paper | 19 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 9 in.

[OPPOSITE] PLATE 81 | Emery Blagdon | Untitled | c. 1955–1986 | Steel and copper wire | 27 x 7 x 7 in.

Also in the Heckler collection are works sometimes referred to as balances, cascades, or chandeliers. The balances, such as PLATE 78, are exercises in symmetry and movement. The arms are mirrored around a central core, and shapes and materials mingle throughout the piece. Copper and steel wires are interwoven; foil is curled, flattened, and folded. Salvaged treasures comprise the heart: gleaming aluminum pull tabs and rusted, snowflake-shaped machine parts.

Cascades such as PLATE 79 embody Blagdon's skill as a wireworker who learned from watching his father practice the art of tating. Wires are wrapped, woven, looped, and laced, and the energy seems to flow downward from the top. Chandeliers such as PLATE 80 add an astonishing pop of color to the array of wood and metal tones. This particular piece employs both hand-painted and preprinted plastic; the artist's intention to make the colors shout out their presence is clear. Hanging from a central axis, works such as this one spin and catch light, seeming to push a flow of energy outward across the room. They highlight the notion that even in stillness movement and flow persist.

The pieces in Heckler's collection convey Blagdon's intention to craft works that are cumulative not only in their individual forms, but gain power as they come together in groups. Blagdon's works have been appreciated by audiences from rural Nebraska to the 2013 Venice Biennale, and are held in a number of public and private collections. Blagdon allows us to consider an American artist who was a different kind of frontiersman—one who challenged stereotypical

notions of the Wild West, but was just as specifically situated within his time and place.

- 1 For an in-depth and carefully noted discussion of Blagdon's *Healing Machine*, see Leslie Umberger, "Emery Blagdon: Properly Channeled," in *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press in association with the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2007), 203–223.
- 2 General information in this essay is drawn from Umberger, "Emery Blagdon: Properly Channeled," and the compiled research related to that project. In March 1980 Blagdon was filmed talking to North Platte reporter Jodie Pitcock of local news station KNOP-TV about his project. Other descriptions of his project come from friends and relatives, including Connie Paxton, "My Notes and Family Memories," March 2006; Edna Blagdon Moore, interview by Don Christensen, October 1990; Ethel Blagdon Sivits, interview by Don Christensen, October 1990; Ben Fox, interview by Don Christensen, November 1987; and Dan Dryden, "Emery Blagdon Recollections," 1987. Typescripts of each are on file at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center Artist Archives in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.