



# **Up River: A Path Foward Work by Thomas Sleet**

**September 9–November 15, 2025**

**Opening Reception: Tuesday, September 9, 5:00 – 6:30 p.m.**

**Artist's Gallery Talk: Tuesday, September 9, 5:30 p.m.**

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois  
[Principiacollege.edu/jameskschmidtgallery](http://Principiacollege.edu/jameskschmidtgallery)



**(above)** *Temple of Solace [model]*, 2022, painted wood, 18" x 18", photo: Suzy Gorman

**(right)** *Temple of Solace [model]* (detail), 2022, painted wood, 18" x 18", photo: Suzy Gorman

**(front cover)** *Up River*, 2025, burned wood, 66" x 96", photo: Suzy Gorman

# Introduction and Acknowledgments

by Sara Phillips de Borja

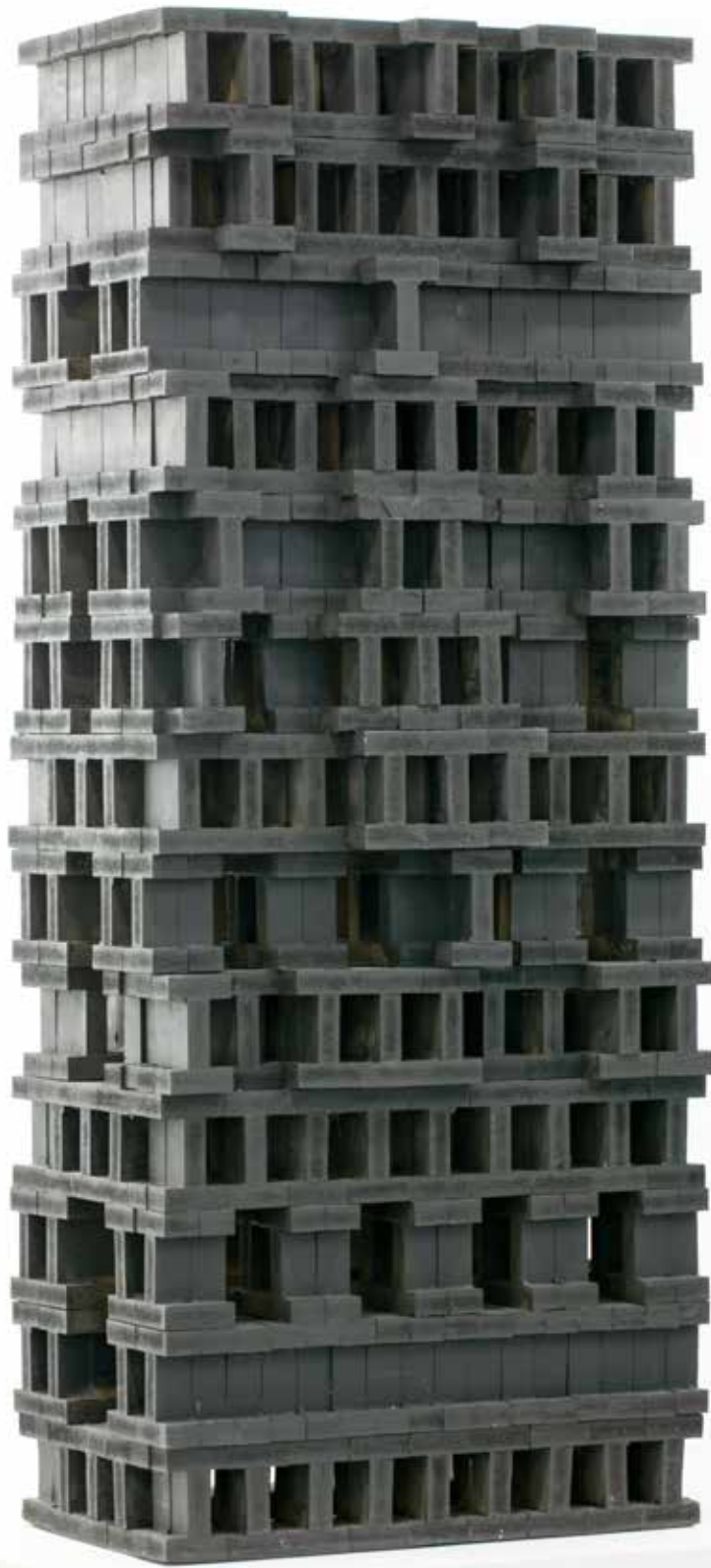
Up River is traditionally spelled as one word when referring to moving in a direction against the current. Thomas Sleet's desire to emphasize the word up in the title of this exhibition furthers his positive message of progressing forward. Verticality and looking towards the sky are central to the works in this exhibition and key to understanding his intentions. Sleet's artwork demands the viewer's eyes travel upwards through his compositional decisions, while his titles *Ascension* and *Sky Temple* allude to a heavenward trajectory and *Volcanoa* suggests the capacity for an eruption.

Sleet constructed the central work of this exhibition, *Temple of Solace*, for the first time in the James K. Schmidt Gallery. Demonstrating the skills of an artist, an architect, and an engineer, Sleet assembled this nearly 16.5 x 16.5-foot structure by strategically positioning layers of reclaimed material upon previous rows. This circular form flows upward and instills a sense of inevitable progress and uplift that is fully dependent on the integrity of its foundation. Each layer relies on the stability of the previous work as it climbs upwards. In this sense, *Temple of Solace* functions as both a physical and conceptual ascent, embodying resilience, renewal, and forward momentum. This exhibition invites viewers to share in this upward journey, recognizing not only the sculpture's verticality as a formal strategy, but also as encouragement to find comfort in its spiritual potential.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the efforts of so many. Much appreciation goes to Thomas Sleet for designing a work specifically for the James K. Schmidt Gallery space and his willingness to share his sculptures with Principia College. Dane Carlson has written an incisive essay offering perspectives that enrich the context and nuance of Sleet's work. This exhibition has required the help of many individuals throughout our community, and I am grateful for their generous assistance. Bruce Rea thoughtfully designed the exhibition catalog, invitation, and marketing materials, and Kristin Martin created

graphic design elements for advertising that captured the spirit of this exhibition. With her attention to detail and institutional knowledge, Deb Wold, the James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar was invaluable. And many thanks to Zemma Kitchen, the Visual Arts PGTI, for her assistance with the installation; to Tom Halsey, for constructing the pedestals; to Jon Hosmer, Principia College Web Director, for his work with the gallery's website; to Suzy Gorman for photographs of the artwork; to Newell Moore and Ronald Young for their help with installation; and to our Principia College facilities department, for their tireless efforts. And a special thank you to my colleagues in the Visual Arts department for their support of the James K. Schmidt Gallery.





**(above)** *Volcanoa*, 2015, mixed media on wood, 50" x 16" x 22"

**(right)** *Volcanoa* (detail), 2015, mixed media on wood, 50" x 16" x 22"



# On Transfiguration: Following Thomas Sleet Up River

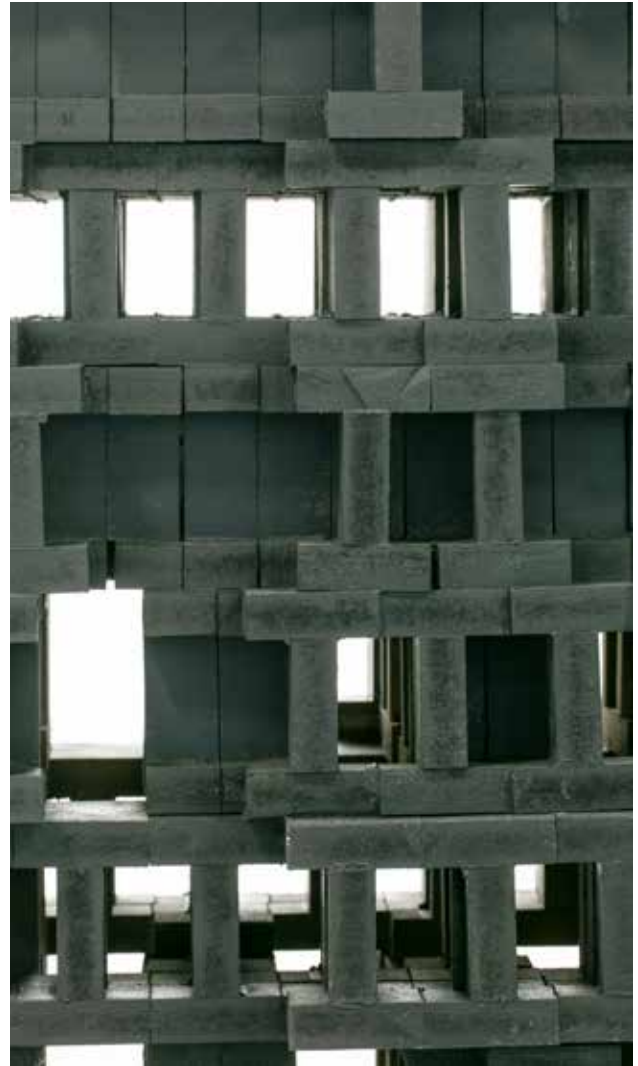
by Dane Carlson

The word that strikes me the most as Thomas Sleet describes his work is *transfiguration*; materials, the artist, the viewer are all transfigured. Transformation suggests a change in form, structure, or function. But transfiguration is a change into something greater—emergence into a new purpose without disavowing what came before—and Sleet's use of this word clarifies the essential search for the sacred that his work embodies.

Sleet refuses to situate his work within the increasingly familiar narratives of contemporary art: the critique of capital, the uncovering of layered global and personal crises, or the staging of political resistance. This work is not positioned as a mirror turned toward the world. He turns that mirror away, choosing to cultivate a space in which something else might emerge, unburdened by the weight of the world or the sometimes performative nature of politically engaged art-making. He does this because, as he says, the work he creates must be protected from these things. He talks about his work as the making of an embryo that must be shielded, protected. Rather than withdrawal, this is tending to a more fundamental truth that must be cultivated with care.

Sleet's care is, in part, given to discarded materials. Rather than metaphors or symbols, these materials simply are what they are. His work takes place between hands and material, physical work and tactile intuition. This reminds me of Tim Ingold's notion of "correspondence," the making of knowledge and form through a mutual relationship between body, matter, and environment.<sup>1</sup> Ingold argues that making is not the imposition of form upon matter, but a process of becoming along with it. Sleet's sculptures emerge in this space of correspondence. The process is less about invention than recognition of the material's inherent capacity for transfiguration and its taking-up of a new purpose in the process.

This attention to material specificity—to what something *is*—marks a clear stance against the plasticity inherent to modernity. Working with the innate capacities of each material is for Sleet a necessary response to plasticity, both literal and metaphorical. In her examination of petrochemical modernity in *Plastic Matter*, Heather Davis examines plastic as the material most emblematic of this condition. Plastic and plasticity represent "freedom from the obligations and messiness of the earth,



providing promises of protection and sanitization from a world that poses constant threats."<sup>2</sup> Plastic refuses specificity by being endlessly adaptable, shape-shifting, and unmoored from limitation. This condition of plasticity is invasive, she says, and it unmoors us from the constraints of reality that we should be attentive to.



(above) *Stabile [Black Sun]*, 2022, metal, 3' x 3' x 3'

(right) *Stabile [Black Sun] (detail)*, 2022, metal, 3' x 3' x 3'

Sleet's body of work is also a rejection of the wasting inherent to plasticity. Waste is not just about materials, but about the capacity to discard them. Plastic—especially in its single-use forms—is the ultimate wastable material. Unmoored from the constraints of reality by its plasticity, wasting plastic seems to be without consequence. It simply disappears.

But, in truth, wasting requires a capacity to waste by sacrificing one thing for another. This is a sacrifice of something unseen for something seen, like the wasting of those doing the invisibilized, dangerous labor of manufacturing goods that we consume thoughtlessly every day.<sup>3</sup> Wasting thus strips meaning from the thing that is wasted. Sleet's engagement with materials that have

been literally and figuratively made into waste is also, like every aspect of his practice, an act of transfiguration. His rejection of wasting means that wasted materials are first physically transfigured themselves and second form the literal material for our own transfiguration through Sleet's work.

This work also rejects plasticity as it returns us—the artist, material, and viewer—to nature through transfiguration. Before examining how this happens, I want to wrestle for a moment with the notion of nature itself.

It is widely argued that nature does not exist but is instead a construct of modernity. Contemporary critiques place nature as one part of a problematic binary: nature as the realm of everything beyond the human, and culture as the world made by humans. This binary distinction has long been a powerful

tool in the arsenal of colonialism and imperialism. This includes, for example, American landscape painting used to erase violence and reinforce the myth of national exceptionalism. Such landscape paintings buoyed a vision of the United States as "nature's nation" by obscuring a deeper history of forced expulsion of Native Americans from the land.<sup>4</sup> There had not been a nature/culture binary in the American landscape until it was forcibly created.

Arguments against this binary propose that its two elements are indivisible from one another, even when we attempt to physically enforce their separation. In St. Louis, for example, this binary has been physically constructed through the hard infrastructures that constrain once-shifting river courses and wetlands of the American bottom. The continued lapses of these constraints—broken levees, floods, crumbling revetments—reveal the actual precarity of this binary and the dangers that come from its violent failures. Drawing on these arguments, I approached Thomas Sleet's work skeptical of the notion of nature. Yet, I have found my assumptions tested.

Sleet is clear that nature as part of this binary is central to his work. But for him, the binary is constructed differently; nature is something beyond simply the opposite of culture. It is not the idealized wilderness of American landscape painters. Nor is it a dangerous, capricious force that requires human control—such as the long-running constraint of the Mississippi River by Army Corps of Engineer levees. It is also not an abstract environmentalism. His daughter writes that it is instead "a symbiosis between humans and the environment."<sup>5</sup> Sleet's priority, she says, is "to return to communion with nature."<sup>6</sup>

Raised in then-rural Kirkwood, now a suburb of St. Louis, Sleet's early life was shaped by reciprocal relationships with the land. He foraged, hunted, and ate what the land provided—elderberries, rabbits, squirrels, dandelion greens. His daughter's writing continues to note that he was witness to the violent and extractive transformations of St. Louis while his awareness of nature emerged in the Kirkwood



of his youth. The root of these transformations was, she states, "a misalignment from nature."<sup>7</sup> Both Sleet and his daughter make clear that his definition of nature is not a theoretical construct or an idealized beyond-human force. Nature is the visceral and embodied action of reciprocity that Sleet takes up in his work.

During a conversation with the artist, I thought of Andreas Malm as a possible parallel for Sleet's embrace of the binary. In *The Progress of this Storm*, Malm, framing mobilization against climate crisis, argues against the blurring of boundaries and flattening of distinctions.<sup>8</sup> Without them, he says, we cannot know who is responsible and how to work in response. But Malm's definition of nature as a passive victim of human action is fundamentally different from Sleet's understanding of nature as a reciprocal relationship between

humans and the many things that make up the world, the opposite of unmoored plasticity.<sup>9</sup> Sleet's reason for not collapsing nature into culture is fundamentally different.

He holds open the possibility of our transfiguration through passage into another state of being. His work is a bridge, a tangible form that allows for literal rather than metaphorical passage between one state and another: between our disconnected, extractive present toward the reciprocity we have forgotten. Sleet's notion of up river is a spatial, existential, spiritual return to origins. Up river is where we come from and must return to.

The bridge is thus a rupture. This return requires transfiguration rather than a simple passage, and passage strips away the profane. I find a parallel to this notion in the work of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, who in *Confronting Images* suggests that the image is not a mirror but an event—something that unfolds through time, unsettling, to open new fields of perception.<sup>10</sup> Sleet's work troubles our way of seeing but in a fundamentally different way than contemporary work that makes visible systemic harms like racism and environmental injustice. Sleet instead gives us a bridge toward communion with the world.

Sleet's return upriver is also a refusal to allow his work to be influenced by the grittiness and vagaries of daily life. He rejects the autobiographical impulse that would render the self visible through the making of work. His work is to him a sacred egg, protected from what is happening outside of it, what might influence it. The work does not have to suffer, he says, because of the condition of the artist.

I want to return to his daughter's writing one more time as she describes the central work in this exhibit, *The Temple of Solace*, because it returns me to the possible fruitfulness of binaries that Sleet's work has already opened up. She says: "Individual I-beams stacked together... build a temple around the viewer, invoking feelings of both insignificance and significance, awe of the external and the internal."<sup>11</sup>



(above) *Up River* (detail), 2025, burned wood, 66" x 96",

photo: Suzy Gorman

(right) *Sky Temple*, 2019, painted wood, 15" x 12" x 2.5",

photo: Suzy Gorman





The possible simultaneity of insignificance and significance, awe of the external and the internal, extends the dialogues and tensions between expected opposites found in Sleet's earlier works. Common to many of these is the concurrence of monolithic spatial presence and the intricacies of material detail, surface, and light. For instance, in *Temple Ark* (2019), the solidity of an almost-circular form, legible as a single object, is broken when one looks beyond this solidity to see the aggregation of smaller, stacked units whose sharp, 90-degree angles become visible as subsets of the circle. Sleet's *River Ark* (2023), previously installed at the Audubon Center at Riverlands, works similarly: two rows of driftwood posts rise steadily in height and distance from each other as the intricately river-made forms of each complicate its initially perceived linearity.

I can imagine that the forms of insignificance and significance felt in the presence of *The Temple of Solace*, Sleet's bridge, are manifold. It might be an insignificance in relation to the vastness of the sacred and the significance of our own personal forms of symbiosis with the world, or an insignificance amongst the vast networks of life that we are embedded in and the deeply personal, lived significance of divine presence.

Ultimately, I'm not sure that it matters. All that matters is that we find our own forms of symbiosis and return to communion with nature. Even if we accept or attempt to refuse it, his daughter says, there is no confronting the "inevitability of nature."<sup>12</sup> I look forward to facing this inevitability.



(above) *Ascension* (detail), 2025, wood and bronze, 12"x 72",

photo: Suzy Gorman

(right) *Ascension*, 2025, wood and bronze, 12"x 72",

photo: Suzy Gorman

1 Ingold, Tim. *Anthropology and/as Education*. Routledge, 2018.

2 Davis, Heather. *Plastic Matter*. Duke University Press, 2022.

3 Lewpawsky, Josh and Max Liboiron. *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*. The MIT Press, 2022.

4 Ferber, Linda. "'Nature's Nation': The Hudson River School and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1876." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, [www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/natures-nation-hudson-river-school-and-american-landscape-painting-1825](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/natures-nation-hudson-river-school-and-american-landscape-painting-1825). Accessed 20 Aug. 2025.

5 Sleet, Deanne. Introduction to Thomas Sleet "Temple of Solace," 2025.

6 Sleet, Deanne. Introduction to Thomas Sleet "Temple of Solace," 2025.

7 Sleet, Deanne. Introduction to Thomas Sleet "Temple of Solace," 2025.

8 Malm, Andreas. *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. Verso, 2020.

9 Morris, Hanna E. "Book Review The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World." *Communication and the Public*, vol. 4, no. 1, Mar. 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2057047319829591>.

10 Zolkos, Magdalena. "The Nocturnal Order of Visuality: Images, Dreams, and Uprisings in Didi-Huberman." *Journal of Continental Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021, pp. 379–400, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jcp20223933>.

11 Sleet, Deanne. Introduction to Thomas Sleet "Temple of Solace," 2025.

12 Sleet, Deanne. Introduction to Thomas Sleet "Temple of Solace," 2025.





photo: Suzy Gorman

## Artist's Statement

The anchor piece for this exhibit, *Temple of Solace*, references the idea of the structure as a sacred space, a container, a refuge or a sanctuary for existential freedom and peace. The artist, Thomas Sleet, is contemplating a yonic vessel composed of many parts, aligned, united, and acting as a unified whole. The I-beam segments are arranged on a circular axis that gives the effect of all units radiating outward from the center of the form. This arrangement connotes individuals standing on the shoulders of those who came before, previous generations, and the idea that collectively, they represent a community structure in which the sum total is greater than the constituent parts.

*Temple of Solace* is formed from wood collected from buildings recently demolished in St. Louis that were constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The work contains over 688 I-beam units that were dipped in a latex whitewash to create a stonelike appearance. *Temple of Solace* measures approximately 16.5 feet high by 16.5 feet in diameter.

## Artist's Bio

Thomas Sleet is an artist who lives and works in St. Louis, Missouri. He creates pieces that focus on intersections of the natural world with the man-made and the synergistic design probabilities created at that juncture. Drawing on his interest and fascination with nature, including the ways nature uses materials and builds geometrically, Sleet informs, and reforms, salvaged manufactured elements. He gives these a new life in the form of organic geometric structures imbued with a spirit, creating sacred vessels.

Sleet received his BFA in ceramics with a minor in sculpture from Washington University in St. Louis and has maintained a working studio since 1980. He has mounted three solo shows at the Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis, a solo show in 2002 at the Mitchell Museum at Cedar Hurst in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, and has had works exhibited at Elliot Smith Contemporary Art in St. Louis, as well as the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio. In addition, Sleet has hosted artist residencies and seminars at Webster University, University of Missouri at St. Louis, the College School, and the School for Visual and Performing Arts, a magnet school of St. Louis Public Schools.

Thomas Sleet's website: <https://thomassleetart.com>

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This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

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