Landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh immediately appreciated the site’s serendipitous qualities produced from past neglect. It features rolling topography because it was once a landfill. Mature trees were likely planted to hide the dump and their lofty canopy is the result of aggressive pruning to clear unsightly underbrush. The water element is a retention pond for runoff from acres of adjacent parking.

The fortuitous evolution of this Notre Dame site from historic disregard to present-day allure suggested the overarching theme for both park and inaugural exhibition: reclamation of nature and self. Indigenous trees, shrubs and prairie grass return the Midwestern site to how it might have looked at the founding of Notre Dame. Van Valkenburgh has carefully selected plants to retain the beautiful light that filters through the tree canopy and to celebrate Notre Dame’s four seasons. Indigenous plants have added benefits of not requiring irrigation, fertilization, chemical spraying or annual pruning.

The sculpture park creates a public space for contemplating nature and art. Groups enjoy walks, conversing with friends, brown-bag lunches, as well as impromptu class sessions, poetry readings and musical concerts.

Reclaiming Our Nature
Notre Dame Sculpture Park

Insanely beautiful!
—Michael Van Valkenburgh, upon first viewing the sculpture park site
The Notre Dame Sculpture Park is located at the south end of campus, bounded by the Irish Green, Eddy Street Commons, the Compton Family Ice Arena and the Football Stadium parking lots.
1. LITTLE SEED

“Seeds are fascinating structures formally. The most important thing about seeds is that they are packed with energy—hermetic and discrete in themselves, like an unexploded grenade of organic energy. I have always been fascinated by plant geometry, the underlying principles that determine botanical forms. One of the most interesting and pervasive of these geometric phenomena is spiral phyllotaxis, plants use it because of its ability to pack things together in the most efficient way possible, and on the whole nature loves economy. The packing system is most obvious in the arrangements of seeds on the head of a sunflower, but the same numerical principles apply to most pine and fir cones, pineapples, daisies and many other fruit, seeds and seed heads.”

— Peter Randall-Page

Little Seed is a prototype for Randall-Page's 70-ton Seed, which is on permanent display at the Eden Project in Cornwall, England within the Core education center. Randall-Page's Seed series continues his exploration of the ways natural forms can be described by mathematical formulas such as the Fibonacci sequence, which, when graphed, describes a spiral like those seen on sea shells, pine cones, sunflowers, seeds, etc. Little Seed is a perfect symbol for the Notre Dame Sculpture Park, which seeks not only to reclaim the natural beauty of the park site, but also to call attention to cycles of the growing season and, metaphorically, to cycles of human life.

Little Seed 2007, Peter Randall-Page, British, b. 1954
granite, 25 x 51 x 33 inches, 1 ton

2. TWO LINES OBLIQUE

“Rickey's works can gently heighten viewer's awareness of time actually passing and, in a marvelously indirect way, persuade them to recognize the beauty of pure abstraction.”

— Valerie Fletcher, George Rickey Kinetic Sculpture: A Retrospective

South Bend-native George Rickey added time and motion to sculpture. At this moment, his kinetic sculptures are in motion around the world, activated by indoor air currents or powered, outdoors, by the whim of the wind. In their silent, graceful movements his hypnotic sculptures reveal the play of natural forces—such as gravity and wind—upon works of art that have carefully considered physics to control the time and limits of their movements. They are, indeed, poetry in motion, once static totems to the passage of time, now also markers of time the maker passed in our midst.

Two Lines Oblique 1967, George Rickey, American, 1907 - 2002
stainless steel, 25 feet high, Gift of the artist, 2003.012
3. HANGING SCREEN SCULPTURE
Notre Dame alum David Hayes believed his hard-edged, flat-black, steel sculptures were “organic,” and he asserted “they should feel like they belong in nature.” While Hanging Screen Sculpture #18 was likely inspired by the shape of leaves (a common Hayes’ motif), as installed within the Sculpture Park it appears like a large spider dropping from a tree limb. His sculptures share affinities with Alexander Calder’s playful stabiles (he met Calder in Paris) and with shapes and colors found in Matisses’s paper cutouts. That is, his artworks are firmly rooted within Modern artists’ interests in abstracting nature, in utilizing consumer and industrial materials and in fabricating art by both hand and machine processes.

Hanging Screen Sculpture #18 2002, David Hayes, American, 1931 -2013 welded and painted steel, 25 x 24 x 29 inches, Acquired from the Estate of David Hayes with funds provided by the 2013 Art Purchase Fund, 2013.018

4. SINGLE WINGED FIGURE ON PLINTH
“I want to express the quality of erosion in the loss of limbs over time and the rooting of the figure to the earth in time, so that it becomes in its way an extension of earth, which we are. ‘We only exist by the grace of the earth nature. So what you see here is this feeling of an eroded separation from something larger in time . . . I hope for the person who isn’t too literal this will also have that connotation of being connected in time to creation.’” — Stephen De Staebler, Matter + Spirit: Stephen De Staebler

De Staebler’s clay and bronze sculptures depicting the human figure juxtapose the frailty and transience of individual lives against the remarkable resilience of mankind. Their forms are rooted in the realm of Western sculpture (here, Winged Victory of Samothrace, memorial relief and architectural friezes). Classical sculpture’s defiance of absolute decay became De Staebler’s metaphor for mankind yearning to connect with eternity—our shared quest for transcendence. This particular sculpture fabricated in the artist’s last year from “spare” bronze parts reclaimed from other projects, is perhaps De Staebler’s elegy to time he passed on earth.

Single Winged Figure on Plinth 2010, Stephen De Staebler, American, 1933-2011 bronze, 112.5 x 30 x 30 inches, Acquired with funds provided by the Humana Foundation Endowment for American Art, 2012.016
Wing Generator presents one of Hunt’s major formal themes—the hybridization of the Greco-Roman winged Nike/Victory with bird forms found on African iron staffs. This study for a gravesite monument, commissioned through the will of a deceased friend, is rich in Western and African mythology. Hobart Taylor, Jr., whose grave Wing Generator marks, achieved victory through a successful private and public life as a Civil Rights lawyer, an attorney for the City of Detroit, a member of President Lyndon Johnson’s staff for the enactment of Civil Rights legislation, and a successful corporate lawyer. The winged victory motif also symbolizes the Christian victory of life after death.

5. MAQUETTE FOR WING GENERATOR

“Hunt infuses his art with symbolism and metaphor. Most apparent in his African-American commissions, his sculptures express positive attributes of human character—fortitude, perseverance, vision, regeneration, tenacity and freedom.” — Sharon S. Patton, Richard Hunt: Extending Form


Maquette for Wing Generator.
Montana-based artist Deborah Butterfield has sculpted horses for her entire career. She fabricated early works from found (reclaimed) steel and wood. More recently, found branches, twigs and pieces of fencing and pieces of driftwood have been cast in bronze and assembled into a preliminary armature; with some bronze elements then cut off and repositioned and some real wood branches added. Once Butterfield is satisfied with the form, it is photographed; then the wood branches are removed, cast in bronze and welded to the sculpture. Finally, the bronze branches are chemically patinated to faithfully represent the colors of the original branches.

“When I look at her horses, I see something important that perhaps Butterfield is too modest to acknowledge—if there is a feminine strength and receptiveness to her home sculptures that are made of old steel letters and car fenders and rebar and pieces of sign and barbed wire and other detritus of industry, it is Butterfield who has put it there. If crooked sticks and thorns and pieces of fencing and pieces of driftwood have been bent and brought to order, it is Butterfield who has accomplished it. To my mind, she has done a particular, honorable thing that often falls to women—she has cleaned up the ugly messes that others have left behind, she has found beauty in the discarded and revealed it. Is this an artistic vision? You bet it is, because it is a valid and necessary response to one of the identifying features of our era—the realization that we have nearly destroyed the world we live in, along with it the natural part of ourselves, and are still in danger of doing so. Her horses are, after all, about regeneration.”

— Jane Smiley, Deborah Butterfield
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- George Rickey

Additional information is available at sniteartmuseum.nd.edu