



Deborah Stewart,
Propagation and Endurance

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Buffalo Arts Studio

Survival Strategies

Curatorial Essay by Edward Y. J. Millar
and Deborah Stewart

How do we survive?

Plants have developed a great variety of solutions to that one essential question, a fact of nature that has long been a source of inspiration for ceramic artist Deborah Stewart. Her interest in them stems from how some of the most vulnerable organisms around us find ways to be durable and persist into the future. In *Propagation and Endurance*, Deborah Stewart uses clay and metal seed pod ceramic sculptures to highlight the strength, resiliency, and determination in fragile things.

Seed pods are the protective casing on plants that enable natural propagation: the protecting, maturing, and dispersing of new seeds. This structure allows delicate flora to reproduce, endure, and continue into the future despite intense environments and external forces.

For *Propagation and Endurance*, robust clay seed pods are complemented by minimal steel and wire structural forms, blurring the line between what appears fragile and what appears formidable. By pairing the vulnerability of clay with the rigid strength of metal, Stewart encourages respect and acknowledgement of the enduring power of fragility.

Whether a hard outer shell or delicate winged pods, the natural world is filled with different strategies for propagation. Stewart finds great beauty not only in the diverse forms of their protective casing, but in their embodiment of the dual nature of plants: simultaneously vulnerable and resilient.

Beyond their biological purpose, Stewart sees in them a reminder for our daily lives. The sheer diversity of approaches to survival reminds us that there are always multiple solutions to every problem. While protecting and nurturing our offspring might vary from family to family, we are connected to one another through the shared hope our children will find a place to land and grow.

This series first began ten to fifteen years ago with Stewart gathering seed pods for careful, close study while working on other projects. Stewart started exploring their structure, composition, and lifecycle to develop press mold forms inspired by specific seed pods like Sweetgum, Pinesap, and more.

Nature, movement, and form have long inspired Stewart. Her lifelong engagement with hiking, camping, and gardening informs her deep physical and sensory relationship to the natural world, while her background as a modern dancer shapes her understanding of motion, energy, and breath. These influences converge in her ceramic practice, where she approaches clay as both a responsive partner and an expressive medium.

Propagation and Endurance draws on this passion to carve out a pathway of suggested movement. Metal and ceramic structures act as a form of wayfinding, guiding visitors throughout the space, just as seeds wander out in the world in search for a place to land.

Artist Statement

This exhibit is the culmination of quite a few years of collecting ideas and making parts – working toward a cohesive statement about the observation and experience of seedpods. Most flowering plants produce seedpods of one sort or another, some are very noticeable, some are very beautiful, all are designed to hold and then disperse seeds. And what a variety of designs have been developed over the millennia that seeded plants have been on this planet! It is amazing how many different solutions to the problem of seed dispersal there are to discover.

I have chosen the seedpod designs of a few plants to use as inspiration for clay forms that I have found to be compelling from an abstract and aesthetic point of view. The forms I have made are not intended to be botanically correct representations. The botanical is only used as a starting point for my work with clay. But then, how to present them? I have used metal structures as a form for presentation, and also because metal can refer metaphorically to the strength and resilience required of seeds and seedpods. So—clay and metal is the theme of these works, which in this way focuses on both the fragility and the enduring qualities of the materials.

Front Page: Deborah Stewart, *5-Pod Cluster*, 2026, clay and steel

Facing Page: Deborah Stewart, *Sweetgum (Liquidambar styraciflua)*, 2026, clay and steel





Deborah Stewart, 2025

Artist Bio

Deborah Stewart is a sculptor working primarily in clay who interweaves her experience as a studio potter, biologist, modern dancer, choreographer, and avid hiker into her work. Her main interests are the experience of nature and movement and their transformation into clay forms. She has a BFA in Design/Ceramics from SUNY Buffalo State University (then Buffalo State College), and an MFA in Visual Art/Sculpture from Vermont College of Fine Arts (then Vermont College of Norwich University). Stewart has taught Ceramics and 3-Dimensional

Design at several colleges in the Western New York area since 1996 including at the UB Craft Center, Buffalo State College, Niagara University, and SUNY Niagara (then NCCC). She has been a resident artist at the Buffalo Art Studio since 1996, where she also taught ceramics for over 20 years. Stewart's work has been exhibited locally and nationally and is represented in several personal and institutional collections—and has received several awards for her work from various institutions.

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Buffalo Arts Studio

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