Interstitial Spaces: Julia Barelo & Beverly Penn
Organized by Houston Center for Contemporary Craft and curated by Anna Walker.
On view at HCCC June 2 – September 1, 2012.

Julia Barelo is a professor in the Department of Art at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces. She has exhibited widely across the United States, at institutions such as the Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, Museum of Art and Design, Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, and Museum of Contemporary Craft. Her work can be found in multiple permanent collections, including those of the Museum of Art and Design, Meza Arts Center, Isla Rojale National History Museum, and Museum of Contemporary Craft.

Beverly Penn is a professor in the Department of Art and Design at Texas State University. Her work has been featured in exhibitions across the country and at institutions such as the Austin Museum of Art, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, American Craft Museum, and the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati. Penn’s work is in numerous permanent collections, including the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Racine Art Museum, and National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Jenni Sorkin is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History and Critical Theory at the University of Houston. Her writing has appeared in The Visual Art Observer, Art Journal, Art Monthly, N:22: The Nordic Art Review, P我想, The Journal of Modern Craft, Modern Painters, and Third Text. She holds a PhD in the History of Art from Yale University.

About HCCC
Houston Center for Contemporary Craft (HCCC) is a nonprofit arts organization founded to advance education about the process, product and history of craft. Since opening in September of 2001, HCCC has emerged as an important cultural and educational resource for Houston and the South—two of the few regions in the country dedicated exclusively to craft at the highest level. HCCC provides exhibition, rental and studio spaces to support the work of local and national artists.

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Exhibition Overview

**Botanical Artifice:**
Julia Barello & Beverly Penn
By Jenni Sorkin

Derived from plants, herbs, seeds, and other natural ingredients, botanicals are ingredients such as lavender or peppermint, valued for their medicinal properties. Yet instead of using fibers, oils, or pulp, the installations of Julia Barello and Beverly Penn can be described as botanical for the eye: aesthetic preparations that flutter and cast shadows, branches that writh and curl, translucent leaves that glimmer and turn in an indoor wind. But such elation is shot through: Barello’s materials are X-ray negatives and MRI transparencies encrusted by silver pins, while Penn shapes lifelike versions of weeds into ornamental bronze disks. Both artists harness craft processes to produce an artificial naturalism reminiscent of the Arts & Crafts movement, repurposing cast-off materials (exposed furs, uprooted weeds) in the service of beauty. Barello and Penn use sculpture as a means of exploring historical ideas of decorum, in particular, William Morris’s investment in functionalism, plurality (copies and repeated patterns), and simplicity of form and design.

As a young jeweller in the late 1990s, Julia Barello began experimenting with non-traditional materials, such as anatomical drawings of insects. By focusing on the hands, wrists and throat—areas of the body where jewelry is most often worn—she crafted gold and silver versions of infection and disease, using precious metals as a means of communicating the permanence of chronic pain and discomfort rather than beauty and luxury. By adding found images in wax X-rays and MRI films and combining these with the vascular systems found in stems and tree roots, Barello enhances the fragility of the human body into her installation-based works; in this case, a large, shaded tree spreading its limbs along the surface of the wall. The 1960s media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, described television to be an emotional extension of the physical body: the desires, diversions, and consumer products that take over, in recognition of an influence that alters the permeable borders of the individual body. In this way, Barello’s installation, *Wisteria* (2011), also becomes a way of extending film. It is often described as a skin in that it is photoreactive, recording images upon its surface. Barello transforms the clinical experience of illness and injury from sterility into the lush landscape, all while using materials that reference metalwork, as MRIs and X-rays are electromagnetic, dependent upon raw and precious metals to operate. Such procedures are sometimes considered invasive, and the fragmented body parts are turned into natural forms through cutting, creating a large-scale surface adornment in the gallery: a giant flowering wisteria (also an intrusive). As well, creating serial forms is reminiscent of the laser cutting used in metalwork. The resulting work is simultaneously a rehabilitation and a shelter. Using wax casting to create an intricate wreath of invasive weeds found in her native Texas, Beverly Penn’s sculptures offer fresh commentary on the history of metalwork itself: the web of ironwork often found in the domestic sphere.

Arts & Crafts blacksmiths like Samuel Yellin (1855-1940) created gates, file screens, knockers, locks and hinges that utilized stylized flora and fauna as primary decorative motifs. The synecophoria in Penn’s organic forms creates a sense of movement reminiscent of the sensorial metalwork by the Art Nouveau architect, Hector Guimard (1867-1942), whose highly stylized plant designs graced the Metro stations in Paris. Penn, for instance, used wire to infamously exploit ornamental ironwork, such as railings or screens in either a horizontal or a vertical direction.

Penn updates this practice, trading heavy forged iron for reflective light metals such as brass, bronze and nickel, which carry not only light but greater malleability for an enhanced level of detail. In *Adele* (2011), her movement away from highly abstracted flowers toward painstakingly accurate stems and leaves expresses an urgency beyond solely aesthetic ones, with an eye toward environmental concerns. The rapid growth and harmful potential of weeds are referenced in *Five Weeks in a Barbershop* (2011), the scientific name for wild garlic. A central glass rod, all which progressively sized bronze and brass seedlings burst, is a gesture of cultivation, showcasing the destructive beauty and edible temptations found in its leafy tansy pattern.

Some invasive species alter ecosystems processes, transport disease, interfere with crop production, or cause illnesses in animals and humans; they affect both aquatic and land habitats. For these reasons, invasive species are of global concern. For example, *West Nile Virus*, transmitted by mosquitoes, is an invasive pathogen of humans and animals. Human activities such as travel, trade, and tourism have all substantially increased, impacting the speed and volume of species movement. Some invasive species are unintended hitchhikers on international cargo, still others are deliberately introduced as ornamental plants (non-native grasses for lawns) or pets (boca constrictors).

The wall installation, *Submerged* (2012), is a collaboration between the artist that incorporates cast-bronze hydridas, a non-native aquatic species, and cut and dyed X-ray film leaves, creating a site-specific work that explores a shared sensibility of botanical forms. Crisp and evocative, Barello’s and Penn’s sculptures incorporate historical ideas of decoration to respond with very empathy to the cultural consequences of invasions, large and small.