

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

## Art on Campus

UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AFFILIATE

Biorenewables Complex

**title**

*Floating World*

**artist**

**Ralph Helmick**



**Location**

Biorenewables Research  
Laboratory, Sukup Atrium

**Materials**

Painted laser cut steel panels  
and seven terrazzo medallions  
on the floor

**Size**

39 x 27 x 35 feet

**Date**

2014

### **About the Artist**

Ralph Helmick obtained a BA in American Studies from the University of Michigan, attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and received an MFA in Sculpture from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Tufts University, Medford, MA. Early in his career Helmick exhibited his work in several solo shows in Boston and New York, as well as in group exhibitions in museums throughout New England. His many honors include a General Services Administration National Design Award, a National Endowment for the Arts / New England Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, inclusion in the Public Art Network's National Year in Review on eight different occasions, and numerous commendations for his public artwork.

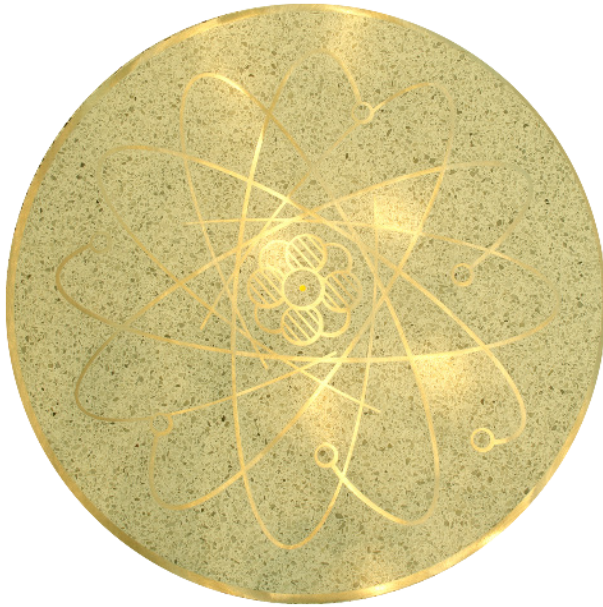
**University Museums - Art on Campus Program  
Iowa State University, Ames, IA**

## About the Work of Art

The following is a description of the installation in the artist's own words.

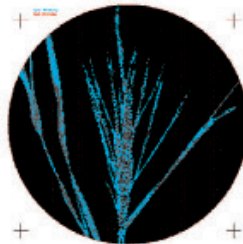
### The hanging sculpture:

Inspired by the paintings of Grant Wood, this hanging sculpture juxtaposes Iowa State's central role in the history of agriculture and simultaneously acknowledges the University's groundbreaking contemporary endeavors.

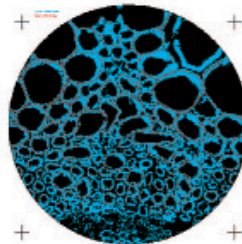


### The floor:

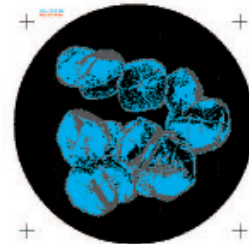
Beneath the hanging sculpture are seven circular terrazzo medallions which create a "you are here" story of scale, starting with where you are in the universe and eventually zooming in to where you are in the atrium, and finally a carbon atom (pictured at left).



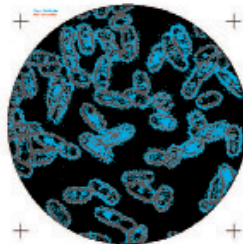
SWITCHGRASS- PANEL 2



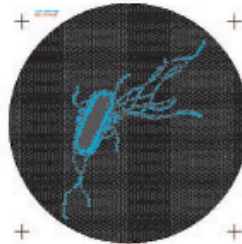
CELLULOSE- PANEL 3



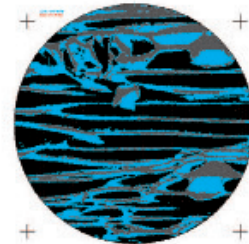
PROTEIN CRYSTAL- PANEL 4



YEAST- PANEL 5



E COLI- PANEL 6



BIOCHAR- PANEL 7

### The sun circles:

Six sun circles, each three feet in diameter, hang above the landscape panels. They represent the sun and are individually laser cut to depict the pioneering research carried out at the molecular level in the Biorenewables Complex. The image above illustrates the patterns seen on the sun circles.

# A description of the panels

## Panel 1

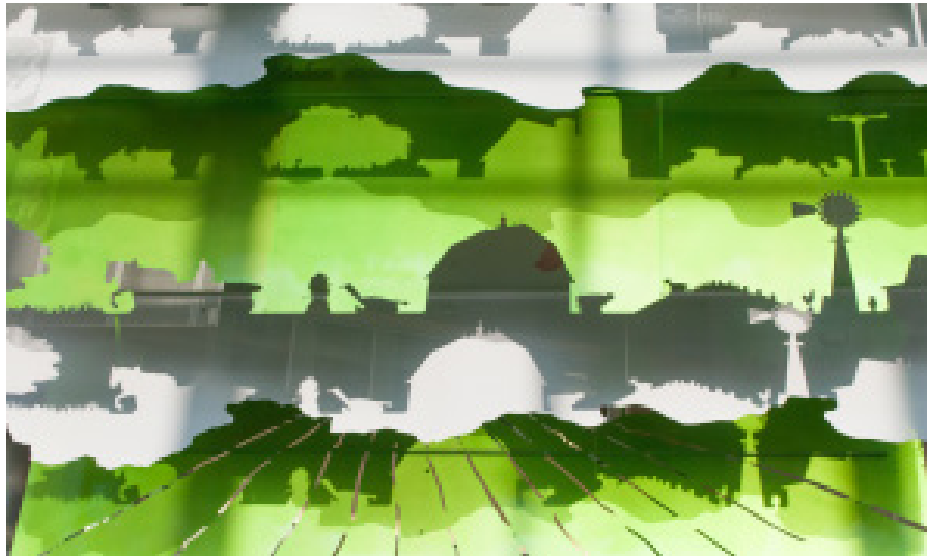
A red-winged blackbird, a dragonfly and a cattail are legacies of a pre-agrarian Iowa.

## Panel 2

A 19th century scene representing American agriculture at a time when wilderness is transformed into farmland.

## Panel 3

This layer represents an Iowa farm at the turn of the 20th century, a time of premechanization. Plows and tools were people or animal-driven, and agriculture was painstaking, unpredictable and challenging. In 1900 farmers represented 38% of the U.S. labor force; by the end of the century the figure was only 3 percent. Beginning with the internal combustion engine and moving on to rubber tires that kept machinery from sinking in muddy soil, mechanization also improved the farm implements designed for planting, harvesting, and reaping. The advent of the combine, for example introduced an economically efficient way to harvest and separate grain. As the century closed, "precision agriculture" became the practice, combining the farmer's down-to-earth know-how with space-based technology. The trees and shrubbery used in *Floating World* are all native to Iowa and are all found on the ISU Campus. A piece of literature published by the ISU Botany Club entitled "The Trees of Central Campus" (first published 1971; updated 1976) proved helpful in determining what species to include.



## Mist 2 (between Panels 3 and 4)

Dr. J. Brownlee Davidson, the head of the Agricultural Engineering Department in 1905 and a central figure in Agricultural Engineering until 1946 is depicted in the lower right corner of the mist 2 layer.

## Panel 4

This panel represents the move towards a more industrialized Iowa farm. The schoolhouse brings the viewer in from the left and moves toward showing the rural electrification of Iowa that occurred in the 1930's. Ford's first pickup the 1930 Model A is next on the right and hints at the independence that farms would gain from using machines instead of livestock. A barn and silo house animals and store grain and machinery. Other layers will show the progress made in grain storage with the modern Sukup grain storage bins. The tractor shown is a McCormick Deering model 10-20 built in 1928. This tractor started on gasoline and switched to cheaper fuels once it was warmed. The buildings on the far right are those found on the typical farm in the 1930's. This would consist of a farm house, barn and silos. The home portrayed here is a hybrid of the house in Grant Wood's *American Gothic* painting and his childhood home.

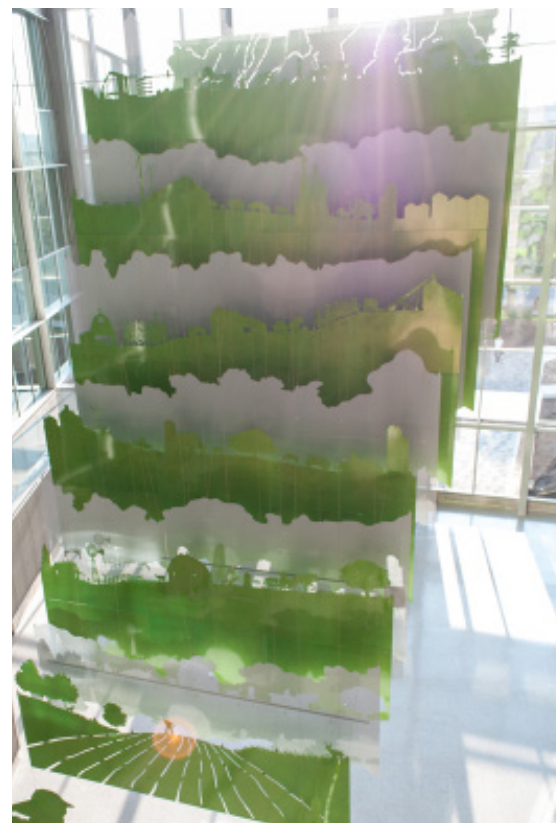
## Panel 5

This panel features the major mechanization and boom that the farming industry saw in the 1980's. Science and technology have become even more significant and the relationship between the two directly correlates with production on the farm. At the end of the 19th century, it took 35-40 hours of planting and harvesting to produce 100 bushels of corn. One hundred years later, it took less than three hours. Before the tractor, at least 20 percent of the harvest would go to feed and bed the livestock.

A 1980 Ford pickup truck is represented in the barn, showing the aesthetic geometry of the 1980's. The tractor on the left side of the barn is a more primitive John Deere 850 model. Complete with ROPS, the tractor on the right reflects the effort made to make agricultural equipment safer for the operators; this tractor is a McCormick MTX 175 with an auto baler. Corn and soy make up the overwhelming majority of production of the state of Iowa. The growth sequence of both can be seen on this panel, with corn to the left and soy on the right. Sukup medium duty hopper bins circa 1980 can be seen on the far right side of this panel. These bins are a popular choice for the Iowa farmer. The Sukup family has made indispensable contributions to the farming industry with their wide range of grain dryer and storage bins. A gravity wagon with auger and conveyor feed grain into the grain dryers and storage bins.

### Panel 6

This layer embodies major scientific innovations responsible for the vast expansion of the farm industry. With wind turbine technology, ethanol facilities, vast storage, and precision equipment, Iowa is on the cutting edge of large scale agriculture. On the far left, terracing of the landscape is represented, with a small soy plant representing the crops benefitting from this ecologically sound method of land management. Large modern windmills as are seen dotting the modern Iowa landscape are next, surrounded by a herd of swine and followed by an expansive indoor swine housing. The ethanol facility is depicted in the middle of this panel. Corn serves many purposes, one of the most important of which is its conversion to ethanol. ISU is a key player on the ethanol front and is committed to innovation in this field. The John Deere 9870 STS combine harvester is shown beside the ethanol facility. This type of tractor is ubiquitous on Iowa farms and is responsible for accomplishing a variety of tasks that would have taken an exponential amount of time at the turn of the century. Additional Sukup grain storage bins round out the modern agriculture panel. High above the panel itself, a GPS satellite floats, assisting the harvester in its navigation.



### Panel 7

This illustrates the ISU campus circa 2014. The Biorenewables Complex is first on the left. Moving to the right is the Marston Water Tower, Beardshear Hall, Morrill Hall and the Campanile--a treasured icon of the ISU campus. Continuing past the Campanile is Memorial Union, the Fountain of the Four Seasons designed by Christian Petersen, Catt Hall, and Stephens Auditorium. This section represents the richness, commitment to excellence, and history of this verdant campus. Interspersed among the buildings are a variety of flora commonly found on the ISU campus. Also on Panel 7, Dolly the genetically duplicated sheep forms a cutout on the lower-left-hand side, an oblique nod to the innovative scientific advances being made at ISU.

## About the Art on Campus Collection

Iowa State University is home to one of the largest campus public art collections in the United States. Over 2,000 works of public art, including many by significant regional, national and international artists, are located across campus in buildings, courtyards, open spaces and offices. In 1982, the University Museums created the Art on Campus Collection and Program that codifies acquisition, education and care and conservation of the campus public art collection.

The foundation of the contemporary Art on Campus Collection and Program began during the Depression in the 1930s, when Iowa State's President Hughes envisioned that, "The arts would enrich and provide substantial intellectual exploration into our college curricula." In 1978, Iowa passed the Iowa Art in State Buildings legislation, which requires .5 percent of new construction or remodeling funds to be used to acquire public art. Since 1978, Iowa State has completed Art in State Building projects, commissioned or acquired public works of art, and has involved faculty, students and staff in the commissioning and acquisition process.

**This information sheet is intended to be used in addition to viewing the Art on Campus Collection.  
At no time should this sheet be used as a substitute for experiencing the art in person.**