Openlands Lakeshore Preserve Podcast
Arc of Nature

NARRATOR: One of the ironies of this nature preserve is the many urban artifacts that intrude on the landscape: roads and trestles and here, this enormous concrete bridge. For curator Lisa Roberts, however, these artifacts represent not just a part of the site’s heritage but an opportunity – a canvas for artists to give voice to the surrounding landscape.

ROBERTS: “It’s a way to re-purpose something that most people see as ugly and industrial and it gives it another reason for being there—in this case, to help make visible aspects of nature that people might not otherwise notice or experience.”

NARRATOR: The large flat surface of this bridge support, for example, with its built in grid pattern offered the perfect surface for a mural, but not just any mural.

ROBERTS: "We knew we didn't want a literal rendition of nature - we've got the nature right here - but rather some way of helping people to see the nature that's right around them."

NARRATOR: Chicago artist Ginny Sykes led the design of the mural. She's created numerous public art works, and she feels that a natural setting is the perfect place to contemplate art – especially art that contemplates nature.

SYKES: "This is a place for contemplation, to understand the grandeur of nature, and also to think about it on a microcosmic level. So take the time to explore, and just slow down and enjoy nature."

NARRATOR: All the elements of the mural are things that exist at the Preserve. The images reveal patterns - patterns that recur throughout
nature in different scales.

Look closely at the tree rings. The concentric circles also represent the paths of orbiting planets.

Circles and spheres also appear in the spores and seeds floating off to the left, and the molecules below them. There is a kind of marvelous elegance in the way nature’s geometry repeats itself from the tiniest atom to the vastness of space.

The form of a circle also appears in natural cycles.

ROBERTS: "Day and night. The lunar cycle each month. There's the seasonal cycle over the course of a year. The water cycles. Plants and animals all go through cycles from birth to death. Think about a plant growing from seed to mature plant, to flower, to fruit, back to seed again. There are cycles that govern every biological process on the earth."

NARRATOR: Another form that recurs throughout nature is a branching pattern. You can see this in the veins of the large oak leaf.

This pattern also appears in root systems, in the way tree branches fork, and in the underground tunnels carved out by ants and other critters.

Notice how one of the roots branches off to chart the meandering path of this ravine.

By mapping our location, we are reminded that all of these elements share a place in the world. This idea is reinforced by the aluminum arcs, suggesting lines of latitude and longitude - lines we use to divide the earth and locate our position. The arcs also connect the elements of the mural, reminding us that everything on this earth is part of a vast, interconnected web of life.

The various sections and patterns of the mural create visual rhythms, just as nature is full of rhythms.

ROBERTS: "The tides move according to a rhythm. The heart beats according to a rhythm. The sun rises and sets according to a rhythm. These
are all beautiful regularities that nobody can explain, and nobody stops to think about, that govern our earth and our nature, and part of what makes it so mysterious and wonderful and cool."

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