



This Art Bites

A beastly building material—with eyes and probes.

Walls. Some provide structural support and separate the kitchen from the dining room. Others suckle your scalp to extract your bodily fluids for sustenance. Take, for example, *Hylozoic Soil*, an 8,000-cubic-foot thicket of acrylic, latex, and metal that trembles, grasps, and snaps at people who pass through it. The creator of this conceptual building material, Canadian artist and architect Philip Beesley, also designs respectable, less-aggressive public structures. But this latest work takes inspiration from hylozoism, the belief that all matter has life. ¶ “The first impression is that it’s very benign,” Beesley says. Indeed, the columns—made of over 70,000 delicate laser-cut components that converge in a skeletal canopy—appear harmless. Then you notice them swallowing like a forest of mechanical throats. A system of infrared proximity sensors, microcontrollers, strands of titanium

nickel memory wire, and custom circuit boards helps *Hylozoic Soil* zero in on victims: Hundreds of frondlike fingers made of serrated Mylar, acetate, and polycarbonate reach out to greet you, as dense colonies of whiskers wave excitedly overhead. But don’t get too close: Needles attached to tiny latex bladders are poised to pierce your skin, and collector barbs grab hair and clothing. “It has a lot of hunger,” Beesley says. “It treats you much like any wild animal would treat a human: You’re its food.” The daring—or foolhardy—can tempt the predator at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts through early December. —TIM MCKEOUGH