

‘Becoming Trees,’ and learning from them, at Concord Center for the Visual Arts

Fifteen artists consider what trees mean to us and the damage we’ve wreaked on them.

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 5, 2022, 12:15 p.m.



Alan Sonfist, "Myself Becoming One with the Tree," 1969/2022, photograph. ALAN SONFIST

CONCORD — Trees may be our salvation. Healthy forests make healthy ecosystems. More trees mean more [carbon capture](#) and lead to better [mental health](#). In “Becoming Trees” at Concord Center for the Visual Arts, guest curator Fritz Horstman and 15 artists explore what trees mean to us.

Back in 1969, Alan Sonfist, a conceptual artist devoted to ecological themes, went into the forest and photographed himself hugging a series of cherry trees, each one larger than the next. His grouping of

those images, “Myself Becoming One with the Tree” suggests a tree swiftly outgrowing a man and ultimately engulfing him, perhaps taking its rightful place in the dynamic between humanity and nature.

The artists in “Becoming Trees” step back and let the trees take center stage, but they often show the damage we’ve wreaked. In Joseph Smolinski’s sublime, apocalyptic drawing “Beginning of the End,” dead trees topped with cellular communication transmitters are what remain of a forest flooded to create a hydroelectric dam. Plundered once again, nature bears witness to relentless human progress.



Joseph Smolinski, "Beginning of the End," 2010, ink, acrylic, graphite on paper. JOSEPH SMOLINSKI

Or human error. Photographer Laura McPhee’s diptych “Early Spring (Peeling Bark in the Rain)” captures an Idaho forest ravaged by a wildfire sparked by a man burning cardboard on a windy day. It looks like a cathedral; it looks like a battlefield. Scarred trees stand amid fallen ones in the kind of vacuum of shock and silence that follows loss.



Laura McPhee, "Early Spring (Peeling Bark in Rain)," 2008, archival pigment print. LAURA MCPHEE

Most of the artists here marvel at how nature persists and continues to renew itself.

Meg Alexander's silken ink drawings of the remains of trees felled by beavers celebrate that animal's crafty woodwork. In sculptor James Prosek's bronze cast "Burned Log with Flowers (Mimesis)," one flower camouflages itself in black to stay safe and hidden against the charred log. Katrina Bello's charcoal and pastel drawing "Lupain" (the Filipino word for "land"), is an intimate depiction of the bark of a burned redwood. At more than eight feet across, it is a landscape unto itself.



James Prosek, "Burned Log with Flowers (Mimesis)," 2016/19, bronze, clay, oil, watercolor. JAMES PROSEK AND WAQAS WAJAHAT, NEW YORK

Our anthropocentric scope is so limited we likely will never understand trees. "Becoming Trees" reminds us that art is a way to be present with them, and to learn from them.

BECOMING TREES

At Concord Center for the Visual Arts, 37 Lexington Road, Concord, through May 8. 617-369-2578, www.concordart.org

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