

BECOMING TREES



March 31 - May 8, 2022

Fritz Horstman, Curator



Alan Sonfist
Myself Becoming One with the Tree, 1969/2022, photographs, 4 x 17 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

BECOMING TREES

THE LEAFLESS TIPS OF BRANCHES in a northeastern winter feather seamlessly into grey clouds. Roots flare out and dive into the soil, stretching deep and wide. Trees are both part of the land and part of the sky. A summer forest's canopy rustles and sways in the wind, exuding energy, not unlike a dance. Stout and slim trunks cluster, lean, cant, and mingle.

Present in some form in nearly every landscape that supports human life, trees have been intertwined in our stories, metaphors, myths, and religions for as long as such discourse and rituals have existed. When fully grown, they are typically much taller than a human, but with a little imagination, their trunks and branches easily resemble the human body and limbs. In Greek mythology, Daphne turns into a tree during her escape from Apollo, representing a prominent early example of the human body reflecting arboreal form. Trees carry, or perhaps embody, a charisma that invites us to identify with them and ascribe ideas about ourselves onto them.

The exhibition *Becoming Trees*, mounted at **Concord Center for the Visual Arts** in Concord, Massachusetts, in the spring of 2022, brings together the work of 15 artists whose depictions of trees explore a wide variety of approaches to the subject. The threshold between what is human and what is nature is critiqued, massaged, and permeated; poked at with fingers and with branches; hugged and held at arm's length. Each approach evinces a degree of empathy.

The title *Becoming Trees* is borrowed from **Alan Sonfist's** group of five photographed self-portraits from 1969, *Myself Becoming One with the Tree*, in which his naked body, set in a forest, is seen standing behind progressively larger cherry trees, encircling them with his arms. As the trees expand, Sonfist's human form diminishes until we see only his hands. As his studio assistant from 2002 through 2004, I witnessed Sonfist pursuing a related activity. While in the woods, he sometimes would hand me his camera, strip down, and begin striking poses like the trees that surrounded us. He explained that he was celebrating the similarities between the forms of trees and

our own. His movements were performative and focused, but not those of a trained dancer. The man in the 1969 photos never completely dissolves into the tree, but his intention to do so is sincere. His collaboration with the trees—if we can give the trees such agency—sets an example that the artists in the 2022 Concord exhibition draw upon in myriad ways.

In **Katrina Bello's** drawing *Untitled (41.334611, -106.595017)*, cupped hands hold a small amount of water that reflects a stand of cottonwood trees, its numbers indicating the geographic coordinates in Wyoming where she made the drawing. Bello, who grew up in the Philippines, uses the Filipino word *Hawak*, meaning touch, hold, carry, and protect, as a title for the larger series of drawings from which this comes. Only indicated in the contour of the water, the hands are absent, just as the trees are visible only as reflections, their forms branching like arteries in invisible arms. The trees and body, through water, hold, carry, and protect one another.

The live edges of **Rachael Vaters-Carr's** large wooden sculpture *Soliloquy* are actual slices of bark and cambium of the trees from which they were cut. These planks mark the size of a human body, as if they might be used to carry a person who has suffered a traumatic injury. Here again, the body's size and the tree's trunk are aligned. Leaned against the wall in a group, these “stretchers” assure us that if needed, they are ready for use in a medical emergency. In that security, they remind us of our frailty, drawing attention to both our bodies and theirs.

Trees, or parts thereof, were standard structural support devices for figurative sculptures in ancient Greece and for the Roman sculptors who copied them. A human figure's thin legs broke easily when rendered in marble, and so very often the figure was supported by the stump of a tree. **Jeff Slomba's** *Arcadia Revisited* comprises seven of these stumps digitally removed from their intended figure and reassembled as a 3-D printed “forest.” Arcadia, that mythically idyllic natural realm, features prominently throughout art history but has never quite been attained. By removing humans from the sculptures, Slomba has reassessed our historical view of nature, suggesting that Arcadia might exist only without humans.



Katrina Bello
Untitled (41.334611, -106.595017), 2018, watercolor on paper, 8 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



Rachael A. Vaters-Carr
Soliloquy, 2018, wood, 80 x 48 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



Jeff Slomba
Arcadia Revisited, 2022, selective laser-sintered-nylon 3D print, 24 x 24 x 13 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Richard Barlow's silver-leaf drawing *Mount Eerie*, from his series *Covers*, reproduces the nature imagery from an album cover while removing all words and signifiers. Made on three layers of translucent vellum, the drawing leaves us to consider what the landscape imagery might convey on its own and compare it to the memory of the original design's intent. Barlow's drawing of craggy trees is haunting and elegant, both building on and critiquing the same image in the photograph used on Mount Eerie's 2003 album cover. Elsewhere in the exhibition, he has created a large wall drawing of a strangely symmetrical forest, which similarly asks us to consider how we perceive and make use of pictures of nature.

Katie DeGroot's *The Referee* is a painting-on-paper that casts five branches as the anthropomorphized members of a community, conversing and possibly contesting a match point. A moss-bedecked branch at the right seems to hold out two beseeching arms to a white birch on the left that has turned away. At the center, a mossy, mushroom-laden figure, possibly a hemlock branch, is the referee. All five are in various states of decay, with broken limbs and flourishes of moss and mushroom. DeGroot's branches, though playful, remind us that the forest is a community, interconnected just as much as any human community.

Fungi and trees are the two great allies of the forest. Together, they ensure its health via an underground, mycorrhizal network where fungi colonize the root systems of host plants to provide increased water and nutrient absorption. **Kathleen O'Hara's** installation *Fruits de la Terre (Fruit of the Loam)* occupies the gallery's corner storeroom. O'Hara's installation can only be seen by looking through a hole in a door, referencing Marcel Duchamp's iconic *Étant donnés*, which also is viewable only through a hole in a door and critiques the role of nature in art. As the viewer peeks into O'Hara's darkened space, they see a world of light and shadow populated by ceramic mushrooms. Meant to honor the unseen fungal world that is so important to forest welfare, this secret environment evokes the complexity and mystery of the forest ecosystem.



Richard Barlow
Mount Eerie, 2010, silver leaf on vellum, 12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



Katie DeGroot
The Referee, 2021, watercolor on paper, 50 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Galerie Gris



Kathleen O'Hara
Fruits de la Terre (Fruit of the Loam), 2021/22, clay and glaze, installation
Courtesy of bk projects

As structures that jut high into the air, trees are a natural host to many entities that benefit from elevation. Mushrooms that grow on trees can spread their spores more widely in the wind; vines and epiphytes hang off their limbs; small animals build their homes in trees to avoid predators on the ground. This world above is the focus of the drawing *Beginning of the End*, in which **Joseph Smolinski** places cellular communication transmitters atop dead trees in a flooded forest. Drawn from the artist's photographs of a lake formed by the creation of a hydroelectric dam, tree communication is cast as an out-of-date technology, melancholically, beautifully sinking under the weight of the new.

Meg Alexander's *Beaver Stumps* depict what remains of trees after a beaver has done its work. The dams beavers build from felled trees create wetlands, which filter and slow drainage, providing habitats for a wide range of forest life. Trees are both the primary food source for beavers and the building material for their lodges and dams. Using their strong teeth to cut trees down, beavers leave behind stumps that show remarkable similarities to the work of a skilled human woodcutter using an ax. Alexander's small drawings point to a larger story about the many creatures that make use of trees. Sensitively rendered in India ink on gessoed board, these stumps float in a white fog reminiscent of old vignettted portraits. If the forest community hung pictures on the walls of their home, these drawings would fit in among the other venerated ancestors.

A fallen tree quickly becomes a source of nutrients to other lifeforms. Death and decay give life to other organisms, as does the trauma of fire, a critical part of the cycle of life of forest ecosystems. **James Prosek's** *Burned Log with Flowers (Mimesis)* is a bronze cast of a burned log out of which grow two bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) flowers made from clay, oil, and paint. Prosek, who is interested in the history of representation and artifice in both human and nonhuman realms, suggests a version of flower evolution that reflects survival through imitation or mimicry. Here, a mutated version of the flower has grown black, which may help it survive, camouflaged against the burned wood and concealed from hungry forest dwellers such as deer. Prosek equates evolution's ability to create forms that mimic other forms to survive with a human's ability to make imitations of things in nature to communicate and survive. Through representation, humans create the illusion of permanence to cope with the inevitability of our own mortality and to momentarily escape time and decay.



Joseph Smolinski
Beginning of the End, 2010, ink, acrylic, graphite on paper, 26 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



Meg Alexander
Stump 1-4-11, 2011, India ink and traditional gesso on board, 7 x 5 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



James Prosek
Burned Log with Flowers (Mimesis), 2016/19, bronze, clay, oil watercolor, 9.5 x 21 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York

Laura McPhee's diptych *Early Spring (Peeling Bark in the Rain)* comes from her larger series *Guardians of Solitude*, photographed in 2008 in a canyon in Idaho through which a forest fire had recently burned. The deep empathy McPhee has for her subject reads as a wistful reverence; just a slight difference in camera angle between the two images captures every detail, dwelling on both the destruction and the beauty. We survey the landscape slowly, as in a sacred space, acknowledging and existing with these scarred ancient trees.

Claire Sherman's *Tree and Moss* is a modest 10 x 8 inches, one of her four paintings of that size in the show. Painted in oil on panel, the moss-strewn trees in the foreground resemble the poses of young dancers, while the broad trunk in the center paternally watches over them. Sherman paints her subjects with the sensitivity of a portrait, using thin paint to pull the central tree up into the sky and a thicker, darker application to capture the moist life of the understory. Light and air fill her forest, as on a bright summer morning, giving us the sense that our own bodies could move between and around the space among the trees.

The space around trees and the space around bodies are also the focus in **Howard el-Yasin's** *Twigs Out of Line*, comprising dozens of twigs and branches, groups of which have been joined end-to-end and protrude from the gallery wall. el-Yasin speaks of forests as traumatic places of cultural isolation, abandonment, and aberrant behavior but also of wonderment. The sculptural presence of tree trunks and branches are connected to one another, both physically underground and phenomenologically, as each tree exists both as form and void. He has altered that experience by unnaturally elongating the twigs. Abstract imagery gives way to illusion as sharp shadows become rootlets, connecting an uncanny forest, extending the wonderment, and reflecting traumatic memory.

Begun as a drawing, which was photographed and then applied to embroidery fabric using cyanotype fluid—a technique that produces a blue image—**Jon Cowan's** *Void in a Tree* comes from a large series of related works. Bright visions of the tree's vitality are evoked by geometric forms embroidered into the blue landscape. Cowan's meticulous and visible craft draws a comparison between artistic and arboreal labor: the hands of the artist creating the image and the unseen magic residing within a growing tree.



Laura McPhee
Early Spring (Peeling Bark in the Rain), 2008, archival pigment print, 16 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the Artist



Claire Sherman
Tree and Moss, 2016, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches
Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery



Howard el-Yasin
Twigs Out of Line, 2010, twigs, installation
Courtesy of the Artist



Jon Cowan
Void in a Tree, 2021, cyanotype and cotton thread on Aida cloth, 13 x 10 inches
Courtesy of Good Naked Gallery

In 2019, **Gina Siepel**, along with her research collaborator, naturalist Kate Wellspring, initiated a deep study of an 85-foot-tall living northern red oak tree and its immediate surroundings in the forest of Macleish Field Station of Smith College in Western Massachusetts. With the intention of eventually (in late 2022) felling the tree and making furniture from its wood using traditional green woodworking techniques, the project *To Understand a Tree (Time)* seeks to close the gap between forest and furniture. Through public engagement, contemplation, site-based study, video documentation, and woodworking, Siepel addresses ideas about ecology, interconnected systems, and multi-species communities. At the center of each of the nine images in the composite photograph stands Siepel's oak, the thicker of the two adjacent trunks, which is shown across an entire year. Also included in the exhibition is a chair she made using the same green woodworking techniques she will use on the wood of her oak tree, once it is felled. In this gap between forest and furniture exists a long struggle to navigate, define, or blur the line between nature and culture.

NEARLY 200 YEARS AGO, a large creaking elm tree in front of the building that is now **Concord Center for the Visual Arts** became for a short period the focus of the town. Deemed dangerous, it was taken down to the dismay of some, including Henry David Thoreau. Taking the transcendentalist view of a spiritual connection between all living things, he wrote in his journal, "I have attended the felling, and so to speak, the funeral of this old citizen of the town." In its place, an elm sapling was planted, an event that Thoreau would likely have celebrated, if not partaken in himself. That tree still grows there, now a giant. In 1922, when the Center was founded, the tree would already have been a towering presence, though much leaner than the stout sentinel that now checks opening car doors along Lexington Road. Whether planted by Thoreau or some other citizen from Concord's period of transcendentalism, the tree represents a direct physical, spiritual, and metaphorical line to that history of thought arching over ***Becoming Trees***. Each artist in the exhibition has created a useful way to consider the position of humans in the natural world. Conflating or comparing our physical bodies, erasing or emphasizing our presence, the exhibition critiques, consoles, and encourages, and above all, exhibits empathy for the trees through which we wander.

Fritz Horstman
Curator of ***Becoming Trees***



Gina Siepel
To Understand a Tree (Time), 2020, video stills
Courtesy of the Artist

Concord Center for the Visual Arts
would like to thank our exhibition sponsor:
The Linda Hammett Ory & Andrew Ory Charitable Trust

ConcordArt

Concord Center
for the Visual Arts

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Tues-Sat 10-4:30, Sun noon-4
Closed Mondays

Mission:
To promote and advance
the visual arts and artists,
and to enrich and sustain
our cultural community.



Honoring Concord Arts' centennial year and founder, Elizabeth Wentworth Roberts, who drew inspiration from trees in her artwork, *Becoming Trees* is part of the Concord Art Centennial Exhibition Series.



Laura McPhee, *Early Spring (Peeling Bark in the Rain)*,
2008, archival pigment print, 16 x 40 inches