

Forest of Dreams: Contemporary Tree Sculpture

Exhibition Artists

Louise Bourgeois

Emilie Brzezinski

Nick Cave

Kim Cridler

Tom Czarnopys

Michele Oka Doner

Peter Frie

Hugh Hayden

Jim Hodges

Patrick Jacobs

Maya Lin

Robert Lobe

Roxy Paine

Rona Pondick

Ai Weiwei

Beholding Trees

As with most textbook definitions, the dictionary entry for "tree" does not begin to convey the intricacies of its subject. Especially with trees, those silent yet vital lifelines, it is impossible to capture their immense complexity in a smattering of words. Thus, the profusion of literature devoted to these magnificent beings, from ancient myths to modern homages by famed authors such as Herman Hesse and John Fowles.

Within the history of art, trees held the attention of Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, who not only drew them exquisitely but also developed a scientific "rule of trees" proposing equal thickness of a tree trunk to that of its combined branch widths. In later centuries, as the genre of landscape painting gained prominence, trees began to take center stage, notably in the vivid cypresses of Vincent Van Gogh. During the 20th century, while nature endured the assault of industry,



Leonardo da Vinci,
A stand of trees., c.1500
Red chalk (sheet of paper).
7.52x6.02" RCIN 912431

trees were increasingly viewed with an eye of sympathy. Like protagonists in a drama, they were portrayed as bold characters, a treatment found in paintings by Andrew Wyeth.

Contemporary art brings a vast repertoire of materials and methods to the subject of trees. It also reveals a range of associations and references, from mythological to personal, comical to environmental. The 15 artists included in *Forest of Dreams: Contemporary Tree Sculpture* together conjure an arboretum of the imagination. While these works vary greatly in scale and creative approach, they all partake of an otherworldly quality; a divine strangeness that compels us to see trees in an enchanting new light.

There is wisdom in proffering strangeness, as it can spur enhanced appreciation. Accordingly, Surrealist artists of the 1920s and '30s cultivated a bewildering aesthetic that defied reason and infused experience with dreamlike vision. Other modern art movements sought similar strategies to "defamiliarize" objects and complicate the viewing encounter, in order to make the usual *unusual*.

Trees—astonishing creatures on whose lives we depend—merit an artistic makeover to showcase their splendor. Due to the perceptual phenomenon known as "plant blindness," static flora is overlooked in lieu of moving things that could signal danger. As we instinctively attend to more active elements, trees are relegated to our background awareness. The marvel-filled sculptures in *Forest of Dreams: Contemporary Tree Sculpture* conspire to shift this bias, overcoming plant blindness and unveiling the mighty, albeit immobile, tree.

Surreal and uncanny traits abound in *Forest of Dreams*, which features numerous hybrids and composite creations. Roxy Paine's fabricated stainless steel tree, *Caption*, verges on the Frankensteinian yet retains a graceful air. Nick Cave's aptly titled *A•mal•gam* appears like a botanical sphynx, with a seated human trunk branching into an avian haven.

Several works on view merge the anatomy of humans and trees, suggesting parity between the two species. This shared physiology marks Rona Pondick's bonsai, *Fukien Tea*, whose branches bare golden fruitlike heads; Louise Bourgeois' *Topiary*, which sprouts a maple leaf from a female torso; and Hugh Hayden's *Hangers*, where a human skeleton morphs into branching structures.

The wall sculptures of Kim Cridler and Robert Lobe also express bodily identification with arboreal life. Cridler's *Fallen Crown*, part of her series of "limbs," has the poignancy of an injured arm, while Lobe's *Womb* implies the generative power of both human and tree. With such sympathetic works, these artists join a current environmental effort to adopt a "grammar of animacy" that "affirms kinship with nature," as spearheaded by celebrated Indigenous author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Animacy and anthropomorphism are found throughout tree mythology of all world cultures and take tangible form in this exhibition. Michele Oka Doner's *Totem*, with a figure emerging from a wooden stump, resonates with spiritual power. Emily Brzezinski's *Sprites* jauntily imparts the supernatural spirit



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, c. 1622-1625 Carrara marble. 95.7" Borghese Collection. Rome, Italy.

of a woodland fairy. Ancient Greek myth is populated with tree-based figures, most famously in the tale of Apollo and Daphne, a nymph who transforms into a laurel tree to escape the god's advances. Classical mythology provides the source of Tom Czarnopys' bark-covered *Pan*, which depicts this god of pastures and woods playing his signature pipes.

Science has recently affirmed mythical beliefs about the secret life of trees, including hidden forms of communication and social support. Ai Weiwei's muscular *Iron Root* reminds us of this underground realm, where much of a tree's existence unfolds. Patrick Jacobs' dazzling diorama, *Lord of the Fungi*, is a hymn to mushrooms on the forest floor and submerged fungal networks—known as the "woodwide web"—that connect all trees through mycelium threads.

Researchers continue to chronicle threats to the Earth's great forests and trees. Maya Lin's *Ghost Forest Baseline Z* refers to formerly wooded lands that have now fallen prey to global warming and extreme climatic events. The solitary *Felled Tree*, by Peter Frie, lies like a victim of gravity's pull or other undermining forces. Jim Hodges' richly evocative sculpture, *Still*, offers an ideal end note to *Forest of Dreams*. This large, aged trunk, draped in a metal gossamer web, conveys the motionless yet enduring nature of trees, who continue to feed both our breath and imagination.

— Suzanne Ramljak, Chief Curator

"All of my trees are fictions.
They are not just trees that are
taken and cast ... I'll spend
thousands of hours merging
things, modeling them to
make it look like nature
made it and I had nothing
to do with it."



Rona Pondick

Fukien Tea, 2003.

Painted bronze and rocks. 28x15x14"

Courtesy of Thaddaeus Ropac,
London/Paris/Salzburg/Seoul and
Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



“[A tree] is a symbol
of a person. It has the
right to exist, to grow
and to procreate.”

Louise Bourgeois
Topiary, 2005. Bronze and silver nitrate. 11.5x4.25x3.25"
Courtesy of The Easton Foundation Collection.

Nick Cave

A•mal•gam, 2021.

Bronze. 122x94x85" Courtesy of
The Forman Family Collection.



“Incorporating vintage floral toile and ceramic bird figurines that envelope the body in a protective aura of history, memory, honesty, and rebirth, the monumental human-based forms are firmly rooted in the earth, growing from the soil.”