

LOUISIANA ART & SCIENCE MUSEUM

LOVELY AS A TREE

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LOVELY AS A TREE

“I think that I shall never see/A poem lovely as a tree.”

–Joyce Kilmer, *Trees*, 1913

Lovely as a Tree is named after the opening verse of Joyce Kilmer's *Trees*, among the most famous lines in American poetry. Written in 1913, Kilmer exalts the beauty of the tree's natural form and proclaims the impossibility of mankind to create a work of art that could ever be of equivalence. Yet artists throughout the centuries have never lost admiration for the tree, finding unlimited inspiration in its various possible interpretations despite its great familiarity. It is estimated that there are over 100,000 species worldwide, which equates to about 25% of all living plant species. Curated by Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein for the Louisiana Art & Science Museum, *Lovely as a Tree* presents a wide range of media by an international selection of artists who investigate the familiar form of the tree from a variety of new and sometimes surprising perspectives: Ron Bechet (New Orleans); Dawn DeDeaux (New Orleans); Beth Galston (Carlisle, MA); John Grade (Seattle); Insun Kim (Brewster, NY); Beth Moon (New York City); Eirik Solheim (Norway); Steve Tobin (Bucks County, PN); and Bartholomäus Traubeck (Austria).

Trees are among the most important structural elements of our ecosystem. In addition to the significant role of wood in the history of civilization, trees provide food and shelter for hundreds of different species of insects, birds, and mammals; protect coastlines from erosion; and convert carbon dioxide into oxygen. These facts are not lost on **John Grade**, an environmental artist based in Seattle. Grade's work ranges from drawings and mid-sized sculptures to large-scale installation projects, frequently involving collaborations with large groups of people. Made out of biodegradable materials, his art is designed to change over time, often by virtue of the natural forces that have inspired it.

Grade's recent project *Middle Fork* (2015) consists of two sculptural recreations of living trees found in different geographic areas of

LEFT: Steve Tobin, *Mango table with black wood and pearl inlays* (detail), 2016, 96 x 96 inches. Photo Ken Ek.

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the United States. To make the one included in *Lovely as a Tree*, Grade traveled to Alaska. Trees are conspicuously absent on the Arctic Slope, except for isolated strands of balsam poplar. Grade was dropped by bush plane at the fringes of the tree line to find the elusive species. After several days' travels by raft and foot, he located and made a full plaster cast of the tree. Back safely in his studio in Seattle, he used the cast to make a mold. Then with the help of volunteers, he made a new tree out of thousands of pieces of salvaged cedar, which he milled and carved into quarter-inch pieces. Each of these pieces was cut and shaped to fit the surfaces of the cast and held together with water-based glue. At 9 feet tall, *Middle Fork (Arctic)* is significantly smaller than its 105-foot companion work, *Middle Fork (Cascades)*, modeled after a Western Hemlock growing in the Cascade Mountains of North Bend, Washington. Both represent 150-year-old trees. The difference in scale is attributable to the contrasts in climate. Much of Grade's work is impermanent. He plans ultimately to return his tree forms to the forest, allowing each to decompose beside the tree from whence it originated.



Seeking to document some of the oldest and most majestic trees on Earth, San Francisco photographer **Beth Moon** traveled the world. A self-taught photographer known for her alternative printing processes, Moon gained widespread recognition for the resulting series

John Grade, *Middle Fork (Arctic)* and detail, 2015, reclaimed old-growth cedar, 9 feet tall.



of platinum prints titled *Ancient Trees: Portraits of Time* (2014). Trees have been living on our planet some 300 million years, according to the fossil record. In fact, conifers became the dominant land plant during the Cretaceous period. Long-living, some species have been known to thrive for more than 4,000 years.

Traveling again, this time to Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, Moon subsequently produced the series *Diamond Nights* (2015). In these color photographs, the iconic baobab, sometimes called the “Tree of Life,” and the surreal quiver tree are presented against a star-filled Milky Way that can only be captured in the most remote areas. Titled after the constellations, these dreamy images recall

ancient myths as well as contemporary research on the relationship between trees and astronomic phenomena. Moon claims inspiration from a 2009 study by the University of Edinburgh that suggests that variations in cosmic rays impact tree growth more than annual temperature or rainfall. The researchers discovered the correlation by studying the growth rings of spruce trees over the past century.

Trees living in areas with pronounced seasons form growth rings when new cells, arranged in concentric circles, are formed. These rings, visible on the cross-section of the trunk, indicate a tree’s age and growth rate, weather patterns, and any factors that might have



affected the tree's growth. **Bartholomäus Traubeck**, a media and sound artist living and working in Vienna and Munich, was struck by the visual analogy between the growth rings on a tree's cross-section and the grooves of a vinyl record.

Inspired, he engineered *Years*, a record player that generates piano music on the basis of these rings. Traubeck obtained cross-sections of seven different species of tree growing in Austria and cut them to resemble discs. He then created a modified record player capable of "playing" the wood discs. Instead of a needle, the tone arm was fitted with a microscopic lens camera. The camera scans the rings as the arm slowly moves towards the center of the disc. The image transmits data regarding each tree's strength, thickness and rate of growth, and takes into account the overall appearance

of the wood, such as the range of light and dark textures and tones. The machine is programmed to apply a mathematical formula to the acquired data, converting it into piano scores unique to each tree. For instance, the spruce is a fast-growing tree and has lots of space between its rings; thus, it produces a minimalistic, calming composition. By contrast, the ash results in a loud, eclectic composition by virtue of its complex, tightly woven texture.

Revealing the inner life of the tree, the cross-section can be incredibly beautiful and is often sought after by those who appreciate wood. Wood has played an enormously significant role in the history of civilization. A pivotal medium, it has been used for fuel, tools, paper, buildings, furniture, and much more. **Steve Tobin**, a world renowned sculptor with a

profound interest in the power and patterns of nature, recently has begun to work in wood, having already mastered glass, bronze, steel, and ceramic. Tobin transforms natural phenomena such as tree roots, termite hills, animal bones, and even the forest floor into sculptural forms, often of great magnitude. His best known work *Trinity Root* (2005) is an 18-foot-tall bronze of the stump and root system of the sycamore tree that shielded St. Paul's Church in New York from the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Tobin's sleek wood pieces are made from exotic fallen trees salvaged from Costa Rican rainforests. Over 2,000 species of tree grow in Costa Rica's tropical forests, which are rich in diversity with many different types of trees growing together. Among those represented in Tobin's work are mango and monkey pod, a wood sought after for its luxurious golden-

brown color and highly-figured curly or wild grain patterns.

As with his other sculptural works, Tobin's wooden forms appear organic. Instead of squaring-off corners, he allows the naturally sinuous curves and irregularities of the tree's cross-section to dictate the form, sometimes adding inlays of pearl or other woods. The supports often resemble tree roots, the element for which he has become best known. Intended as functional tables and seating, Tobin's wood works are not divorced from nature; indeed, their allure is their very authenticity.

Similar to Tobin, **Beth Galston** likewise works from the actual elements of the tree, collecting and re-making found leaves, twigs, and seed pods. A sculptor and environmental artist, Galston explores the processes found in nature



Beth Galston, *Leaf Dreams: Cucumber Magnolia* (detail), 1997/reconfigured 2016, waxed magnolia leaves. Dimensions variable.



and their inherent transformation. She cites childhood nature walks with her father, a biology professor, as an early influence.

Recasting Nature: Sycamore Columns is made from dried leaves, strung together with monofilament thread. Suspended vertically from the ceiling, the leaf clusters mimic the scaly, reddish-brown bark of the sycamore's trunk, relating the architecture of nature to the Classical archetype of ancient man. Another work, *Leaf Dreams*, also is composed of leaves, this time from the cucumber tree which is known for its leafy foliage. Galston collected the large, fragile leaves, dried them and then dipped them in beeswax as a preservative. She then carefully stacked the waxed leaves into piles and encased them within an air-tight

vitrine. Removed from the withering passage of time, the ephemeral leaves symbolically are transformed into a poetic meditation on the beauty of nature amidst the natural processes of loss, death and decay.

The rotational positioning of the Earth with regards to the Sun causes the environmental changes that we call seasons. Norwegian artist and new media specialist **Eirik Solheim** has been documenting the seasonal transformation of the trees in his own backyard for the past 11 years. An ongoing project, Solheim took a couple of still photographs from the window of his home with a compact camera in 2005, and subsequently streamed them into a video format that he posted on YouTube. Garnering



nearly 100,000 views, the response was so encouraging that he repeated the project in 2008.

This time he used a more powerful camera and took the photographs at regular intervals outside, always from the same location and at consistent exposures. He simultaneously recorded audio files. After diligently recording for a whole year, he downloaded the image and sound files into a computer program to create a series of photographic compilations and time-lapse videos of varying duration. All of the resulting videos and photo compilations, with modest titles such as *One Year in Two Minutes* (2008), sensitively capture the picturesque and often dramatic

seasonal changes in the Norwegian landscape.

While Solheim presents nature as it really is, **Insun Kim** meticulously constructs her own trees out of thousands of stainless steel nails. Born in South Korea, Kim moved to the United States as a teenager and now has her own foundry in Brewster, New York, where she welds the nails together, producing graceful forms that emulate weeping cherry, maple and even willow trees. Some are as tall as 8 feet.

For Kim, the materials, process and ultimate form are symbolic. She describes each nail as representing an individual whose connections to others are expressed by the variation in the conjoining nails and the individually welded bonds. As the form takes on the shape of the tree, the structure grows in strength and stability similar to a unified community that stands together, or “many leaves one tree” (Shel Siverstein).



Insun Kim, *Weeping Cherry* and detail, 2015, stainless steel nails, 90 x 44 x 42 inches.



The tree is a recurrent metaphor found in many myths, legends and religious texts with varying implications. **Ron Bechet**, a well-respected Louisiana artist and teacher, has discovered unlimited potential in the tree's varied form and shape while keeping the tree's symbolic reference constant. For Bechet, the tree symbolizes human strife, endurance, and ultimately the hope of reconciliation. He combines studies of nature with his imaginings to create sensitive portrayals of the human condition, which can be seen in abstract renderings that include *Vulnerability* (2014) and *Restoration of Consciousness* (2016). Other works such as *Reconciliation* (2008) are more literal, realistically depicting the tree's trunk and sprawling root system. Whether rendered in stark black charcoal or painted in expressionistic color on arched, free-standing

panels or shaped canvases, some with openings resembling tabernacles, Bechet's trees impart a metaphysical intensity.

Nature turns ominous in **Dawn DeDeaux's** series titled *MotherShip*, a group of works in various media that considers the conditions and consequences of alienation from the natural world. DeDeaux made a name for herself in the 1970s with her pioneering approach to new technologies. Always an innovator, she has continued to experiment, applying new technologies to create immersive, synchronized media environments in addition to 2D work. *The Day Old Forster Oak Fell Into the Ring* (2013) is composed of a digital image transposed onto stainless steel. The five panels together measure 120 by 240 inches. The grand scale of this post-apocalyptic

landscape prompts comparisons to master paintings while giving weight to its futuristic message.

This scene from the *MotherShip* series is dominated by a massive oak. America's national tree, the oak is a frequent symbol of towering fortitude and endurance. Pictured here, the oak is falling, perhaps signaling the final blow. The dismal scene is populated with ladders that extend to nowhere, a reminder of the desperate need for escape. Nearby is a huge industrial-shaped ring. Often used to symbolize infinity, the ring in this image also refers to the construction of the MotherShip, the Zeppelin vessel that is to transport mankind from Earth to spheres beyond. The ominous scene becomes a warning about what DeDeaux describes as the "dysfunctional marriage of man and technology," suggesting that uncontrolled use of technology is fraught with peril. Yet, paradoxically, mankind is doomed without it. Nature weighs in the balance.

These nine artists whose work is included in *Lovely as a Tree* are united in their admiration and respect for nature's bountiful trees. Representing a wide variety of media and viewpoints, their artwork invites us to look at these giant perennial plants anew and to be reminded not only of the grandeur of their form but also of the imperative role that trees play in sustaining life and renewing the human spirit.

By Elizabeth Chubbuck Weinstein

DIRECTOR OF ART INTERPRETATION/MUSEUM CURATOR,
LOUISIANA ART & SCIENCE MUSEUM

"And the boy
loved the tree...
very much. And
the tree was
happy."

—Shel Siverstein,
The Giving Tree,
1964

Dawn DeDeaux, *The Day Old Forster Oak
Fell Into the Ring*, 2013, digital drawing
on metal panels, 120 x 240 inches.



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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All artworks courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Ron Bechet

Reconciliation, 2006
Charcoal on paper
72 x 68 inches
Collection of Kell and
Dorian Bennett

Restoration of Consciousness,
2016
Charcoal on paper
60 x 68 inches

Vulnerability, 2014
Charcoal on paper
48 x 66 inches

Dawn DeDeaux

The Day Old Forster Oak
Fell Into the Ring, 2013
Digital drawing on 5 metal
panels
Edition of 3
120 x 240 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Arthur Roger Gallery,
New Orleans

Beth Galston

Leaf Dreams: Cucumber
Magnolia, 1997/
reconfigured 2016
Waxed magnolia leaves
Dimensions variable

Recasting Nature:
Sycamore Columns, 2000/
reconfigured 2016
Sycamore leaves,
monofilament
Dimensions variable

John Grade

Middle Fork (Arctic), 2015
Reclaimed old-growth cedar
9 feet tall

Insun Kim

Cherry Blossom 5, 2016
Stainless steel nails
43 x 25 x 25 inches

My Square 2, 2016
Stainless steel nails
21 x 12 x 12 inches

Summer Delight, 2015
Stainless steel nails
14 x 11 x 7 inches

Weeping Cherry, 2015
Stainless steel nails
90 x 44 x 42 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Morrison Gallery, Kent,
Connecticut

Beth Moon

Diamond Nights Series, 2015
Cetus, 20 x 30 inches
Corvus, 20 x 30 inches
Hercules, 20 x 30 inches
Izar, 44 x 64 inches
Polaris, 20 x 30 inches
Vela, 20 x 30 inches
Volans, 20 x 30 inches
Color photographs

Eirik Solheim

One Year in Two Minutes, 2008
One Year in 40 Seconds, 2008
Digital videos with sound

Steve Tobin

Site-specific installation
consisting of tree cross-
sections and tables made
from exotic Costa Rican trees,
2016, along with Sumi ink
drawings and maquettes
from *Steel Root* series.

Bartholomäus Traubeck

Years, 2011
Picea (Spruce) 04:54
Fraxinus (Ash) 05:21
Quercus (Oak) 04:53
Acer (Maple) 04:52
Alnus (Alder) 05:16
Juglans (Walnut) 05:10
Fagus (Beech) 04:22
Documentary video and
soundtrack

FRONT COVER: Beth Moon, *Izar* (detail) from *Diamond Nights* series, 2015, color photograph, 44 x 64 inches.

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