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Peabody Essex Museum

connections

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2014



BRANCHING OUT: TREES AS ART

SEPTEMBER 27, 2014–SEPTEMBER 20, 2015

Rooted *in* APPRECIATION

BY SUSAN FLYNN, CONNECTIONS MANAGING EDITOR

Curator Jane Winchell's enchantment with trees started young and she has evidence: a pen and ink drawing that she sketched in sixth grade of an old gnarled oak with limbs stretching skyward.

"I still remember my sense of awe and appreciation for old trees as a kid and my frustration at trying to draw them," says Winchell, PEM's Sarah Fraser Robbins Director of the Art & Nature Center. "Something about these beings captivated me and still does, which certainly influenced the formulation of this show."

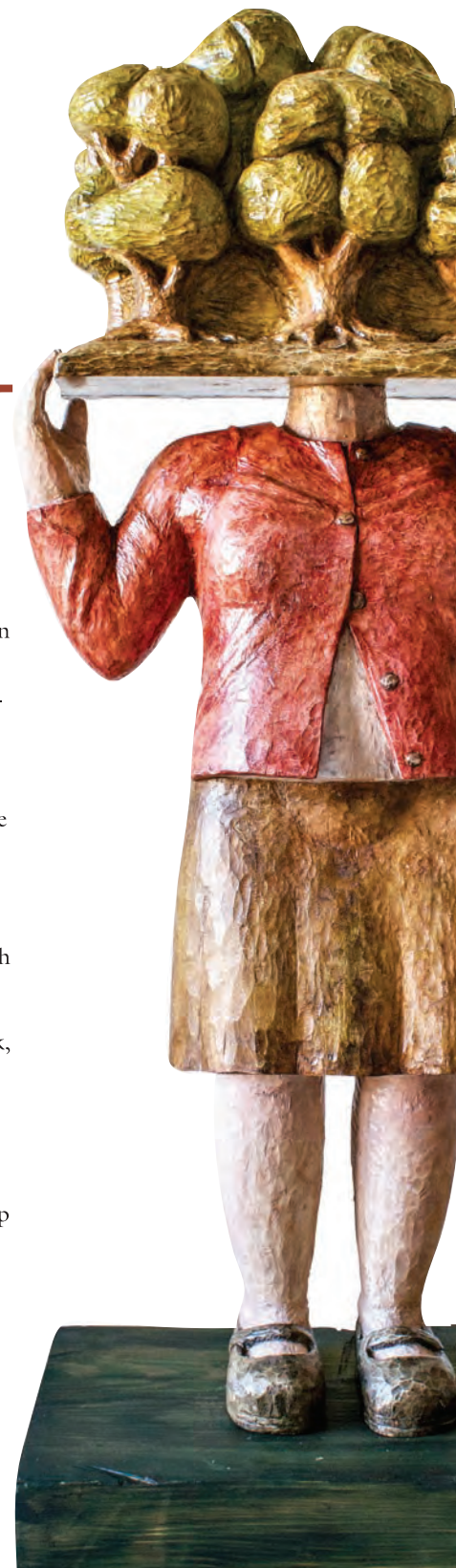
"This show" is *Branching Out: Trees as Art*, the latest interactive exhibition to open in the Art & Nature Center. The 38 chosen artworks reveal the many ways that contemporary artists are working with trees as both a medium and a source of inspiration.

Take the acorn for example. We barely notice these nuts scattered on the ground, but

artist Beth Galston saw in them the seed of an idea. She collected and strung together some 13,000 dimpled acorn caps to create a fantastical 300-foot-long coiled and writhing mass. It's titled *Tangle*.

"When you first see it, you have no idea these are acorn caps. It's surprising to see how perfectly the caps nestle together," says Winchell. "I love the ways the artists in this show open our eyes to see trees anew through their creative processes."

Assembled here are artists who work with bark, leaves, roots, branches, wood, stumps, seed pods, fossilized resin (amber) and even biosignals to create sculpture, video, photography, paintings, jewelry, environmental installations, digital art and music. Yes, music. With the help of some hypersensitive microphones, musician Diego Stocco composed an entire song on a tree in his backyard. He flicked the leaves, tapped on the trunk and even used a small bow to get an unusual sound effect.



Another artist, Bartholomäus Traubeck, took thin tree slices and turned them into record albums. A customized stylus attached to a turntable reads the tree rings and converts them into piano music, with every sound a reflection of the individual age, color and density of the tree rings. The tree's life becomes a five-minute musical composition.

Another project involved a 242-foot, 2,000-year-old giant sequoia named Stagg, considered the world's fifth largest tree. Photographer James Balog invented a way to photograph the tree in segments. He rappelled down a tree next to Stagg and shot more than 400 photographs, which he stitched together digitally to create a 93-inch-tall vertical panoramic composite. Two red specks in the photograph, which upon closer inspection are revealed to be climbers, help the viewer grasp the scale of these giants.

On Finding Home, a wooden sculpture by Sachiko Akiyama, is the official greeter to the exhibition. The artist has said her work reflects how human beings, like trees in a forest, are vulnerable to forces beyond our control.

After making human figures from tree trunks and branches for more than 20 years, Boston artist Joseph Wheelwright discovered roots and fell in love with the animated shapes they form. Two of his sculptures — a trio of acrobats and a couple embraced in a waltz — are testament to every tree's uniqueness. "It's amazing how often human features show up in a tree," Wheelwright has said. "There's no question that we're related."

There are certainly similarities — a trunk, limbs, circulatory system and even indications of communication skills. A growing number of scientists are studying the field of plant intelligence, examining how trees alert fellow trees of dangers via chemical signals delivered through the air and between their roots. Many of us feel invigorated after a walk in the woods, and that may reflect more than the change in scenery. Scientists have identified that trees (and other plants) have an energy field, which humans may be tapping into. Turns out the bioelectrical signals generated by trees are similar to the alpha waves produced by human brains.

In keeping with this idea, the show includes the work of artist David Yann Robert who recorded the bioelectrical signals in a beech tree over two days (using an acupuncture needle). With the help of a sophisticated computer program, he converted the tree's biosystem activity into a drawing, a process captured in a 17-minute time-lapse video and sound piece.

From the oxygen we breathe, to the furniture in our homes, to the paper in books in our libraries, trees are a fundamental part of our daily life.

Branching Out

Branching Out explores the disconnect between an appreciation of trees as a vital life force and our reliance on them as a material. Artist Letha Wilson takes a direct approach with her photograph of a snow-covered tree that's interrupted by a piece of lumber inserted in place of the trunk.

"This work kind of sums up this creative investigation of trees as being the whole and their parts," Winchell says. "Out in nature, appreciating a live tree can be a wonderful experience, and yet beautiful things are also made from trees. That's an ongoing tension that exists between us and nature, and it's important to be conscious of it."

Branching Out also includes several invitations to interact with trees. People can play a xylophone-like instrument made with logs, create and photograph original artwork at a tree collage station or clip a message-leaf on the Tree of Ideas among other opportunities for expression.

Like all Art & Nature Center shows, *Branching Out* relies on art to help expand our understanding of the environment and raise important questions in the process. Perhaps the exhibition inspires you to go climb a tree or take a long walk in the woods. You may even return with an acorn in your pocket.

LEFT Sachiko Akiyama, *On Finding Home*, polychromed wood, 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE Lorenzo Durán, *Lazos*, cut leaf, 2012. Photo by Walter Silver/PEM. BACKGROUND Joan Backes, *Falling Leaves* (detail), leaves and mixed media, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artist.

This exhibition is supported by the East India Marine Associates of the Peabody Essex Museum.