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# AVENUE

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# AVENUE

## PARCEL 1 • The Connecticut Woods

"Between every two pines is a doorway to a new world."  
— John Muir

Surrounding woodlands, wetlands and shores were the terrains that we explored as children. Rich and diverse, this was our wilderness frontier. Different types of trees became the cornerstones of our adventures—unlimited by our imaginations. We had full run of this outdoor playground as long as we could hear the dinner bell at dusk. We wove our daily play activities into the fabric of these surroundings, distinguishing the myriad of trees in and around us for their specific qualities. They fell into categories of distinct usefulness for us and became our play spot for the day, the week, or the season.

These Arborscapes included not just the mature maple in our front yard, but its companions; pines, cedars, hemlocks, spruces, sumacs, cherries, and a towering walnut tree. The Norway spruce provided easy climbing, cool shade, shelter from rain, and soft needles to sit and play upon. In the winter, it was lit up with white light bulbs that increased its majestic presence; we lived on a hilltop. This tree was not a “swing” tree however— the enormous maple next to it was our swing tree. This maple provided a branch that allowed us to shimmy ourselves into a lookout, providing us with a bird’s eye view to survey the yard below. The white pines in the side yard offered strong junctures for fort building. These limbs enabled my younger brother to build a treehouse in one of them. He reconstructed and improved his tree fort over the span of his entire childhood. Two landmark pear trees and the black walnut emphasized the flow of the landscape. Our driveway curled into a tidy clearing in front of the barn, with a gentle downward slope on the northeast side of our yard. Shapes indelibly carved into the fond memories of my early life.



*Figure 1: Tree identification according to the adventures of a child growing up in the Connecticut woodlands.*

Our giant eastern white pine came crashing down in a storm one night, leaving a gaping hole. The swishing sound of its needles forever silenced.

Some of these childhood trees still stand today. They have survived aggressive onslaughts of tree illnesses, insect invasions, super-storms, and an overly precautionous tree removal system, as their land is claimed and “developed.” They’ve endured decades of stress. Some of these trees germinated and became a part of the earthly cycle of seasons even before my parents and grandparents sprouted on this planet. The trees that have not survived still stand statuesquely in my memory; they are carved forever into the stories of my childhood years. Vacant areas are left on the land where they grew, despite the engraved apparitions of the ghosts of once complete arboreal eco-systems that have vanished. They are still alive in my mind, somehow lurking in the landscape. Why are so many of them no longer alive within the landscape they graced? Why and where have all the dead trees gone?

I did not realize the depth of the bonds I had developed through years of association and proximity to these giant living organisms. They had grown and firmly rooted themselves throughout my heart and my life. Landscapes emptied of their distinctive arboreal presence; cut and removed, came flashing into my mind’s eye as afterimages. The sensation of loss is visceral within me. I stood as a witness to some of these trees as they were destroyed. The clear cutting of the landscape next to my childhood home left me shocked, numb with grief and a distinct pain in my soul—they were reduced to huge piles of chipped wood within hours.



Figure 2: One hundred plus years of tree growth, simmering.

The sensuosity of trees carved with ever forming textures and dynamic counter balancing architectural structures fascinates me. They are crossroad organisms exchanging energy within the multitude of communities that encompass me, an artist that constantly turns to nature to observe and learn. My curiosity and concern are ever present flames that fuel my constant embrace of *nature as an essence* rather than a mere collection of objects. This essence is part of the connection we share with trees, now scientifically termed as “sentient beings.”

It has been discovered that plants also communicate with each other, have intelligence, and pass information intergenerationally, just like we humans do. In a forest, they are dependent on each other and exchange information through carbon, nitrogen, and other chemicals. In a way, it is EXACTLY like we do, but we are so bent on a human-nature separation that we do not easily understand that such a separation is an illusion: plants are also sentient beings, as is planet Earth itself. This shows, beyond any possibility of doubt, that we live in a world of systems which, if disturbed too much, has effects on human beings, animals, and plants.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Tsukayama Cisneros, “The Scientific Evidence that Trees Communicate and are Sentient Beings.” *Writings and Musings on Culture, Photography and Politics* (blog), July 19, 2019. <http://www.culturelookingsideways.com/blog>

My environmental awareness would eventually collide with my artistic endeavors. As an *Artist in Residence* at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon in 2006, I was obliged to create a sculpture and deliver a lecture at the Grand Lodge. The long drive into the North Rim section of the canyon revealed acres of recent and extensive fire damaged ponderosa pine groves. They could be seen on both sides of the road. Trees that once stood with magnificent stature had succumbed to flames.

These blackened trunks resembled human beings with their stark silhouettes. Instead of depicting the scenic expanses of the canyon like most resident artists, I sculpted the hollowed humanlike forms of burned trees. I investigated and portrayed these blackened shells—giant beings transformed into the blackest richest carbon-streaked statues I had ever seen. Only simple differences between human forms defined them as trees, such as their frozen stance.

The wildfires left acres of scorched earth, but this was a transitional phase, a moment in the forest lifetime. Other burn sites had already begun to exude life with wildflowers, weeds, grasses, and “ephemerals”<sup>2</sup>. By taking occupancy of the barren carbon rich soil, nature had converged on an *environmental opportunity*. The land was an open garden for seeds, roots, and animals. Life was flourishing at the heels of the charred forest devastation.



Figure 3: Carol Van Duyn, North Rim Fire, 2006, 14”x12”x12” Pit-Fired Terracotta clay, collection of Grand Canyon

In 2015, Contemporary artist Katherine Mitchell began making a series of writings and drawings as “talismans” for the healing of the ailing oak tree that grew in her front yard and symbolically for all trees and for the earth itself. In “Ghost Trees,” 2017, Mitchell was inspired by what she described as a “crumbled charcoal [burnt] landscape” she encountered near Yellowstone. In “The Lone Tree,” also created 2017, she creates a solitary tree detached from the mycelial web that naturally connects trees to a community of other trees.” Mitchell talks about her work as, “poetic, rather than scientific, but nevertheless, the science and the message that we are living in an endangered world comes through,” and “The health of our trees, and by extension our forests, is a bellwether of the ecological state of our planet.”<sup>3</sup>



Figure 4: Katherine Mitchell, Hearing the Trees, 2015

<sup>2</sup> “Ephemerals are short lived plants growing only during favorable periods.” *Britannica*. April 22, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/science/ephemeral>

<sup>3</sup> Donna Mintz, “Katherine Mitchell ‘hears the Trees’ in her Poetic Exhibit at MOCA GA,” *Access Atlanta, The Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Sept 8, 2021 <https://www.ajc.com/things-to-do/katherine-mitchell-hears-the-trees-in-her-poetic-exhibit-at-moca-ga/NIFUDCXOAND4FD3TCRCRFTE6YI/>

## Parcel 2 • “Individual—existing as an indivisible whole”<sup>4</sup>

**Stalwart** is sculpted from raku clay as a hollow form. *Stalwart*'s branches flow in a circular pattern giving a sense of her evolving growth pattern. She bears a broken branch that rests at the crown of her canopy. *Stalwart* was fired in a reduction atmosphere—placed in a can with oak leaves that were ignited by the 1750-degree kiln heated sculpture. The surface is rich with trapped carbon. The exuberance of bright markings on her belly shaped trunk radiates glowing flecks of color, symbolic of *Stalwart*'s thriving surface growth suggestive of lichen and moss— each mutually benefitting from each other.

Is *Stalwart* an “individual,” or is she “indivisible” from the whole of life as a community? She is an individual, special, and unique. But not—she is contained within nature as we all are. *Stalwart* projects a universally vulnerable belly which may one day succumb to starvation, illness, drought, and violence, *or be embraced with respect, nurturing, and love.*



Figure 5: Carol Van Duyn, *Stalwart*, 14"x10"x10" Raku

Artist Olga Ziemska also works with the concept of people as an aspect of nature. Ziemska suggests that we return “meaning back to nature,” by “making the human body a part of the whole, not the whole part.” Blending the body in—and showing how easily it can mesh, morph, and disappear. In her environmental sculptures, Ziemska is also looking for this unseen and profound connection, expressing the relationships between all aspects of life and living beings.



Figure 6: Olga Ziemska, *Stillness in Motion*, 2002

Ziemska simultaneously invokes imagery of forests and gray cells to draw attention not only to their structural similarities, but to their shared existence as growing, evolved things. The most frequently recurring theme in Ziemska's work is the myth of separation between humanity and nature. Ziemska wishes not only to correct mistaken conceptions of our species' place in the order of things, but also to make palpable our dependence on and duties towards the environment. “I don't think the current dictionary definition of 'nature' is enough because it doesn't include humans. I think if a lot of people were to be connected to nature, a lot of things would be different.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Individual.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. April 2022. <https://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/individual>

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Clark, “A Brain Grows in Tremont: Public Works of Olga Ziemska.” *Collective Arts Network, Cleveland, CAN Journal*, 11/2014 <http://canjournal.org/2014/11/brain-grows-tremont-public-works-sculptor-olga-ziemska/>

“Art can be used in a way that communicates universally beyond cultural language and cultural understanding, to a type of visceral understanding that encompasses all of nature and all of humans”—Olga Ziemska



Figure 7: Carol Van Duyn, *Vagabond*, 2021, 30"x24"x14", fired reclaimed clay and underglazes, oxides



Figure 8, detail; *Vagabond*, faded luggage, once treasured adventure containers, now abandoned

### Parcel 3 • Dimensions of Community; Loss, and Abandonment

*Vagabond* asks how we *categorize* that which is not similar to us; *the other*. Categorizing humans as separate from nature is similar to our process of distinguishing and isolating people within our own human society. Instinctively, I sense that we are all part of the same whole and no part will continue to exist on its own, devoid of a larger context. Separating humans from nature we will wither and die. I sculpted *Vagabond*, a bold architectural frame, from low fire red earthenware. It is punctuated by cracks and warping connection points encrusted with a growing veil of oxidation. It is in an active state of decay, pre-staging eventual collapse.

The stringent angularity of the frame as a retainer of object containers which were once individual travel suitcases that accompanied their owners on journeys to unspecified destinations is symbolic of societal systems that have categorized and subsequently institutionalized vagrants—people who have diverged from properly fitting into society, unsightly wanderers, who may also be ill. This stronghold stands in stark contrast with the loosely stacked cascading suitcase shells. Cascading downward, colors fading, their usefulness now relinquished. Treasures once contained within, are nowhere to be seen, having been dispersed, and now vanished into oblivion.

Similar classification systems label buildings as “condemned” or “abandoned,” and land as “derelict” or “degraded”—these are spaces we consider empty, vacant, and forgotten. However, they are not. The *whole* of life encompasses all. The tide of reclamation by nature is already present and occupying it—emerging as rust and decay. Decomposition has set in, often before vacancy; new life emerges and seizes space continuously.

Gilles Clément, horticultural engineer and landscape architect, writes in “Praise of Vagabonds,” that he “sides with the garden, with the planet considered as such...”

With the gardener, Earth passenger, privileged matchmaker of unexpected marriages, indirect and direct actor of vagabondage, vagabond him(her)self...A troubled world decries the invasion of life forms from elsewhere. Strangers, plants, animals, how dare you reach our shores?<sup>6</sup>

Clément describes abandoned areas, and landscapes that are made of more than what has been preserved,

There are cities of concrete, oceans of oil, fields of nitrates, and a whole series of nameless, biological interstices: the abandoned areas. Urban, suburban, rural, maritime, coastal. We find them everywhere. The term “fallow” is loaded with shame, connoting a loss of human power over land. “Abandoned,” a more elegant term, designates the withdrawal of humans from a space, with the intention to return. Such areas remain, for a while, undocumented. It is a blissful oblivion for vagabonds: who cares about the butterfly bushes in a vacant lot? The area is not abandoned for everyone; this term, the height of anthropocentrism, discards whatever is not linked to human activity. Nature does not forget virgin land. Whatever is abandoned by humanity offers a welcoming surface for plants and animals—especially those that are outcompeted elsewhere. The flora and fauna of abandoned areas are not necessarily ubiquitous. Ruderal plants are at home in the debris of opened, disturbed, rocky places offering light and freedom of expression. Abandoned areas produce a bio-logical series that exponentially increases global diversity. We often speak of pioneer individuals, beings come to conquer abandoned or exposed soil. The flora of slag heaps is no different from the vegetation of rocky slopes in the mountains. Whether the mountain is natural or artificial matters little to pioneer species.<sup>7</sup>

*Abandonment, wild and wilderness* are terms that are fundamentally intertwined within the conceptual aspects of my work. There really is nothing that is abandoned or derelict. This became obvious to me as I hiked every day in different environments of the North Rim. I observed life in a constant progression—seizing every opportunity to gain a progressive foothold and thrive in any and all circumstances. Aristotle pointed out that

“nature abhors a vacuum.” No space is vacant, it is only human assumption that determines *vacancy* as a space that is waiting for human domination—to fill, revitalize or *improve* what appears to be *open*. I am compelled to explore abandoned and decaying buildings and properties, searching for evidence of life. I look for traces of living and breathing, occupying life—all aggressively reclaiming “our” space rapidly.



Figure 10: Fairfield Hills Hospital in decay, Newtown Ct. Closed in 1995, now hosting flora and fauna.



Figure 9: Hearthstone Castle in Danbury, Connecticut. Interior roofs collapsed; the forest is taking over.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Clément, “In Praise of Vagabonds,” *Qui Parle*, vol 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Clément, “In Praise of Vagabonds,” *Qui Parle*, vol 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011, pp. 278-79



Figure 11: Carolý Van Duyn, View from the Top Floor Terrace, 2021, 28"x14"x14

In **View from the Top Floor Terrace**, swirling growth spills out above a dark stonelike foundation supporting remnants of an architectural construction. Visually, one can explore deep interior spaces—passages leading from one cavity into another. Black and maroon chambers suggest warmth and life within. Exuberant swirls of brightly glazed swirls symbolic of living energy escape into the sky from the flat roof top. Tentacle-like forms dominate the space above the lower structure. Each protruding terrace below show signs of hazy green growth covering the surfaces. Soon the structure may be completely engulfed and consumed by this spilling out of unpredictably exuberant life.



Figure 12: detail, View from the Top Floor Terrace, protruding green terraces suggest that nature has reclaimed human made surfaces.

#### Parcel 4 • Micro, Macro and the Net

As my sister and I hiked the wild areas of Tilden Park on the outskirts of Berkeley California, we came across two women crouched on the ground under a Live oak. They were intensively observing a decaying piece of wood. Naturally we had to investigate. The women introduced us to a tiny blob, of which they had taken many photos. We investigated these images, they captured microscopic forest-like alien beings—a species commonly known as slime mold. From this new discovery, I began to visualize *tinier*, even microscopically sized forms. My sense of the importance of scale shifted as I explored the paradox of the vast significance of microscopic life in our environment, intrinsic to every aspect of life. I have consequently learned that these single cell organisms represent the earliest cell differentiation to nerve cells; they organize and move as a single body in search of food sources. According to Wikipedia,

They feed on microorganisms that live in any type of dead plant material. They contribute to the decomposition of dead vegetation, and feed on bacteria, yeasts, and fungi. For this reason, slime molds are usually found in soil, lawns, and on the forest floor, commonly on deciduous logs. In tropical areas they are also common on inflorescences and fruits, and in aerial situations (e.g., in the canopy of trees). In urban areas, they are found on mulch or in the leaf mold in rain gutters, and also grow in air conditioners, especially when the drain is blocked.<sup>8</sup>

How would a re-scaling of “micro” sized life forms to larger proportions influence how humans feel in relationship to them? Intentionally focusing on communities that thrive in the less obvious dimensions of our existence, I fantasized what life exists under our feet, in the earth.

<sup>8</sup> “Slime Mold”. *Wikipedia.com*. edited 15 March 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slime\\_mold](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slime_mold)





Figure 13: Carol Van Duyn, *Mycelium Coven*, 2021, 20"x14"x12" fired brick clay, oxides, and underglazes.

I sculpted a cluster of organic shapes, imagined forms that exist anywhere, hidden, and unidentified.

In *Mycelium Coven*, an intimate cave contains a gathering of pod like rhizomes. They appear to congregate. Glowing hot colors form the core of this piece, dominating the space with heated intensity. The top section is a crownlike mass of *fibrils*, which flow into the upper atmosphere. I imagine this upper cluster to be a fruiting body of some kind. It is the only section of my sculpture that has a satin sheen, symbolizing above ground atmospheric moisture nurturing the life below it. The ochre-colored cave cradling the voluptuous forms within is encapsulating and signifies a sacred space. I imagined this hidden grouping as a convention, or a "coven." These round bodies seem to connect in a conversational unity of exchange, as if they are entwined in a secret gathering. The cavern setting could even be seen as a refuge, or a sacred space. I envision a strong female presence within. This brings to my mind mother earth worshipping religions such as Gaianism.

Author Walter Cruttendan writes,



Figure 14: detail, *Mycelium Coven*

The Gaia theory was first introduced in 1979 by James Lovelock in his book *Gaia*, a New Look at Life on Earth. The basic idea is that the earth is a self-regulating entity. While the theory was a scientific one, it launched a new pantheism religion known as Gaia worship or Gaianism, whose practitioners are known as Gaians. Gaians believe that by being connected with nature they will be closer to Gaia. There are several different methods that they may use. The first, is of course, to spend time outside in nature and get to know nearby green spaces. Similar to the ideas of Wicca, when you spend lots of time in one area you develop an intimate relationship with the land. Mindful observations and awareness help to heighten the relationship with Gaia. Others believe that learning about the earth, and how its different parts connect is a method of worship. They reflect on the wonders of the goddess and begin to see that it is not possible to understand the goddess.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 15: *Slime Mold; Arcyria denuta*, photo by Barry Webb

After my introduction to slime mold networks, and fantasized clustered mycelia in *Mycelium Coven*. Realizing the enormity of the minute, unseen and underlying systems and networks supporting all foundations of life gave me a greater perspective on the deeply meaningful connections I have developed with trees, including the wild woods that I played in as a child.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Cruttenden, "Gaia: Recognizing Our Role on a Living Earth," *Ancient Origins*, 22 January 2019 <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/gaia-0011368>

The principle of interconnectedness fundamental to the forest as a body, and nature as an indivisible whole— includes me, the trees, and the unseen minute life forms that interconnect creating an unspoken but vital connection between all of us. This concept of communication is explored by Forest Ecologist Suzanne Simar, who refers to trees as social creatures. She describes communication as chemical exchanges with neighboring trees in mutual defense systems.

Trees are linked to neighboring trees by an underground network of fungi that resembles the neural networks in the brain, she explains. In one study, Simard watched as a Douglas fir that had been injured by insects appeared to send chemical warning signals to a ponderosa pine growing nearby. The pine tree then produced defense enzymes to protect against the insect.<sup>10</sup>

Keep in mind that all trees and all plants — except for a very small handful of plant families — have obligate relationships with these fungi. That means that they need them in order to survive and grow and produce cones and have fitness — in other words, to carry their genes to the next generations. And the fungi are dependent on the plant or the trees ... because they don't have leaves themselves [for photosynthesis]. And so they enter into this symbiosis in that they live together in the root, and they exchange these essential resources: carbohydrates from the plant for nutrients from the fungus, in this two-way exchange which is very tight, almost like a market exchange. If you give me five bucks, I'll give you five bucks back. It's very, very tightly regulated between those two partners in the symbiosis. But, yes, all trees and all plants in all of our forests around the world are dependent on this relationship.<sup>11</sup>

As I ponder my relationship with trees and the forest including all things seen and unseen, I wonder if I have been communicating over all these years on a physiological or chemical wavelength. Why do I search for trees I have known, seeking them out as I would old friends and acquaintances? Why does their proximity compel me to reach out and touch their trunks, smell their bark, savor their colors, listen to their sounds, study their architecture? Beyond their obvious beauty and carbon-trapping, land stabilizing usefulness, I still cannot explain why I feel such primal pain when trees are lost. I am responsive to them as if I am their sister, daughter, or mother—a human entity in a community of vast networking tree villages.

**Earth Tongues** is a portrait of a miniature life form existing within a vast kingdom. I have magnified an actual mycelium to engage the natural inquisitiveness of the human eye. Last summer I purchased a parcel of land in Mid-Coast Maine. I designed a small cedar house, carefully considering the land that it would be built upon. Construction



*Figure 16: Caroly Van Duyn, Earth Tongues, 24"x14"x14" fired clay, oxides and underglazes*

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<sup>10</sup> Dave Davies, "Trees Talk to Each Other. 'Mother Tree' Ecologist Hears Lessons for People, too," *Fresh Air*, NPR, May 4, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/04/993430007/trees-talk-to-each-other-mother-tree-ecologist-hears-lessons-for-people-too>

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

started over the summer. I cleared several closely knit stands of spruce and fir. In this process I spotted a tiny patch of shiny black “paddles,” about one inch high. They grew in a small circular nebulous under a balsam stand. It was obviously a community. Luckily, I had spotted them in time and avoided their destruction by forming a bright ribbon barrier around them. The distinct color and growth characteristics of these miniscule creature-like paddles concerned me. Were they toxic? My research revealed that I had a tiny colony of *Glutinoglossum glutinosum*, or *Earth Tongues*. I wanted to portray this dramatic discovery by shifting from the minuteness of its real size to a magnified, scaling up sculptural rendering in which three individual paddles form a cluster. My intention worked as *Earth Tongues* elicited emotional responses of curiosity and inquisitiveness in this odd and otherworldly life form, hidden within the forest environment.

### Parcel 5 • The Lowliest of the Low



Figure 17: Carol Van Duyn, Forest Wall Mural, acrylic on trashed cardboard 96"x144"

**Forest Wall Mural** was painted in quiet interludes over the first year that I occupied my studio. I couldn't wait to fill my main wall with a forest. At least something that reminded me of woodlands. I chose cardboard as my surface to paint on. Cardboard is a material that is lowly, humble, misunderstood, often discarded after one use. It is a functional material that is touched by many uncaring hands. It is thrown, dented, smashed, consolidated, and left to disintegrate in a pile of waste. The lowliest of the low, manufactured from trees.

Clay is also a humble material. I often rescue clay that has been discarded and proceed to recycle it. It is left on studio shelves, trapped in boxes and bags, silently dormant, just piles of congealed dried mud. Reclaiming earth materials is a frequent activity in my studio. I pulverize dry clumps into dust, add water, add paper pulp for added strength, and make a slip. I then wedge this into a beautiful workable clay body. Essentially, I'm working with trees and mud. This physical rescue, resuscitation, and nurturing process is an intrinsic part of my core female artist self—the self that explored the woods and climbed trees to gain a view of the world as a young sapling myself. Branches, rusted metal fragments, glass shards, often anything that I can scavenge is potentially an art material. I am, too, an opportunist by nature. Gaining insight into the forest and the trees within it, I am entering into a completely new level of art making. This is reflected in all aspects of my creativity, from the conception of an idea to the manufacture of form, to the consideration of materials I utilize. A deepening awareness of my connection to the realm of all living elements is the foundation for my expression of all that I have loved, and all that I have lost.

Freelance journalist Nadia Herzog writes the following about clay,

You might not think of *ceramics as a recycled material*, with all that plastic, paper, and metal around, but you would be wrong. Nowadays, things made out of clay and porcelain are being seen as a compost raw material, and a recycling subject. Actually, recycled ceramics are becoming a new artistic form. In a way, ceramic stands as a symbol of the ecological awareness. Artists are giving their best never to waste a ceramic again. And the recycled artwork is on the rise in such wide range of art pieces, from abstract to linear, from a color splash to richly decorated objects, and from traditional clay pots to innovative masterpieces.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 19: Carol Van Duyn, Resource, graphite on paper, 9"x12" 1/23/22



Figure 18: Carol Van Duyn, Consumed, graphite on paper, 9"x12", 3/13/22

## Part 6 Art, Science, and 2+ Degrees Celsius

I never thought of myself as an environmentalist in my artistic expression. But it turns out that I am, by nature. I cannot be separated from the overarching directive of my own passionate concerns which are motivated from the core of my heart—it guides the artist who I have become, residing within me. My thoughts and my artistic vision have evolved simultaneously and instinctively, perhaps because I was a child entrenched within the environment of the woods.

Hans Ulrich Obrist writes that “Ecology will be at the heart of everything we do”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Herzog, Nadia, “Contemporary Ceramic Art - the Return and the Appeal of Clay”, *Widewalls*. May 24, 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/contemporary-ceramic-art>

<sup>13</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Ecology will be at the heart of everything we do,” *The Art Newspaper*, Feb 3, 2020 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/02/03/hans-ulrich-obrist-ecology-will-be-at-the-heart-of-everything-we-do>



Figure 13: Remember Nature, 2015, Gustav Metzger

In our current moment of ecological danger, we should remember the visionary artist Gustav Metzger, who died in 2017. Metzger was my friend and he never stopped telling me that artists should create works that address the urgent dangers that society faces. He called on the art world to use their agency to get people to wake up to the threat of the destruction of the planet. As he put it at the opening of the exhibition *Facing Extinction* in 2014, a destruction that is taking place in and of nature at an unprecedented scale.<sup>14</sup>

Metzger said only months before his death, “not only can art cause change, art must cause change.”<sup>15</sup>

*Neucom Vivarium* is an installation created by Mark Dion in 2006. A massive fallen tree is transported and placed into a greenhouse enclosure, enabling diverse life forms already living on the tree to thrive. Mark Dion looks beyond life into the critical stages of *re-sourcing* for new life to thrive upon—the cycle of regeneration. An experiential artwork, Dion’s intention in *Neucom Vivarium* is to,



Figure 20: Mark Dion, Neucom Vivarium, 2007

“Acknowledge or even enhance the uncanniness of nature—the wonder of the vast complexity and diversity within a natural system...[This] work has a dialogue with science, as most of my work does. And I think that was true for the Hudson River people as well. Their engagement with travel, their relationship to spectacle and scale—all of those things are built into the way that a number of contemporary artists work with these kinds of issues, myself included. Though for us, it comes through the filter of earth art as well. Earth art added the ingredient of contemporary environmental science. The earth artists weren’t necessarily very environmentally oriented and certainly not very conservation oriented. Some of the stuff that I’m doing really involves a political discourse added onto the conceptual elements that the earth artists were interested in...In some way, I want to acknowledge or even enhance the uncanniness of nature and the wonder of the vast complexity and diversity within a natural system. I want to show how difficult it is for us to grasp, not just conceptually but also practically. How difficult it is for us to figure in all of the variables that you would need to replicate a forest. We’re trying, but we can never do it perfectly. That’s one of the most interesting aspects of the piece for me.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Metzger, Gustav, “*Ethics into Aesthetics*,” West, 1.12.2017-04.02.2018. [http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17\\_11\\_Gustav\\_Metzger/press](http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17_11_Gustav_Metzger/press)

<sup>15</sup> Metzger, Gustav, “*Ethics into Aesthetics*,” West, 1.12.2017-04.02.2018. [http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17\\_11\\_Gustav\\_Metzger/press](http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/17_11_Gustav_Metzger/press)

<sup>16</sup> Art 21. org, “*Neucom Vivarium*, Mark Dion Interview,” Art 21.org, 2016. <https://art21.org/read/mark-dion-neucom-vivarium>

I feel that it does matter if artists make environmentally responsive works of art. The idea that we can and will reverse global warming or mass extinctions often culminates in extensive and depressing conversations, often politically influenced. We are in it—an impending human created emergency; the interval of geological time referred to as the *Anthropocene Epoch*. Pando, the largest organism on earth, is a Quaking Aspen Forest located in Utah. It is said to have about 47,000 trunks attached to one root system. Although it looks like many trees, it is actually a forest comprising one tree. Radical climate change, and our human impact are now straining this organism, forcing it to fight for survival. Like Pando, we are also fighting for our own species, as well as most other species on this planet.

In **Generational**, three angular forms flow together, precariously balancing a circular sphere. It *was* balanced, until the sphere accidentally fell from its cradle. It came crashing down on my studio floor and shattered. I was stunned but sensed a metaphor in this event. It was broken, but I have since replaced it. I embraced the event as an opportunity to actively remake the sphere— symbolically regenerating the sphere once again in balance, hoping that what is yet to come will potentially find the critical balancing point. Two degrees Celsius is the point that scientists have calculated that could begin to trigger a mishap of epic proportions. To me, this is the metaphor that *Generational* constitutes, an unbalance that precipitates the sculpture’s sphere to tragically tumble downward and smash it into unfixable parts. Its cradle is unable to hold on. Are we pitting unformed generations of new life on a trajectory to come crashing down? How might we regenerate a replacement if our life-giving cradle is dangerously unbalanced?



Figure 21, Carolyn Van Duyn, *Generational*, 2021, 24"x14"x14", reclaim clay, underglazes, oxides

Within the New York Botanical Gardens there is a tract of 40 acres of original old growth virgin forest. It was never logged. Alan Weisman has observed,

“Never cut but mightily changed. Until only recently it was known as the Hemlock Forest for its shady stands of that graceful conifer, but almost every hemlock there is now dead, slain by a Japanese insect smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, which arrived in NY in the mid-1980’s. The oldest and the biggest oaks, dating back to when this forest was British, are also crashing down, their vigor sapped by acid rain and heavy metals such as lead from automobile and factory fumes, which have soaked the soil. It’s unlikely that they’ll come back because most canopy trees here long ago stopped regenerating.”<sup>17</sup>

I witnessed the demise of such a hemlock forest along the shores of the Saugatuck River close to my childhood home in Connecticut. The land now contains the decaying carcasses of these magnificent native trees. It is no longer a forest, but a parcel of mixed second growth hardwoods and barren ledge.

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<sup>17</sup> Weisman, Alan, *The World Without Us*, New York, Picador, 2007.



Figure 22: Olafur Eliasson, 2014

Artist Olafur Eliasson creates installations that seek to engage people in conversation on climate change through direct tactile installations. These pieces cannot be avoided; they are massive and completely engulf public audiences. “Art doesn’t stop where the real world starts” says Olafur Eliasson. As the designer Michelle Chiu describes *Ice Watch*, an Eliasson installation from 2014;

City dwellers in Copenhagen were allowed to and encouraged to interact with the melting ice blocks, grasping the reality of their temporary forms afflicted by heat and time. Eliasson said the piece allowed the ability to “reach people in a way that reports, graphs, and data could not”. The artist encouraged viewers to reflect upon their understanding and perception of the physical world that surrounded them. This moment of consciousness, when the viewer pauses to consider what they are experiencing, has been described by Eliasson as “seeing yourself sensing.”<sup>18</sup>

### Parcel 7 • Avenue

I don’t like alarm—I crave home, harmony, and coziness. I am a creature of comfort. But I am also a crusader at my core. My parents journeyed to this continent after the violent oppression of WW2. They longed to unite with the “wild frontier” of America. I have unknowingly committed myself to finding what remains of that wilderness. Artistically, I am working towards an artistic expression that speaks a universal language, clearly evoking what I have witnessed as the blatant oppression of our wilderness. We may not currently understand the deep miracles of life in all of its forms. But the discovery of *connectedness* on every level of life beckons us to examine whether we have the right to destroy forest systems and the sentient beings around us. Millions of acres of subservient land—and the wildness that exists there, whose language we are deaf to, are entities that we have placed beneath us to uphold our material needs, supplying us with comfort, recreation, and resources for our hungry consumption.

**Avenue** is an enormous ceramic sculpture consisting of four clay types. Most of it is sculpted from reclaimed clay. *Avenue* depicts a man-made landscape that is dominating a stretch of clear-cut land with buildings stretching out and progressively rising higher as the central urban section is reached. Natural tree resources have been harvested and utilized to form an underlying infrastructure to give support to the hierarchical human world sitting



Figure 23: Carolý Van Duyn, “EKG”, Original conceptual sketch for “Avenue”



Figure 24: Carolý Van Duyn, Avenue, 37"x11"x144"

<sup>18</sup> Michelle, Chiu, “How Olafur Eliasson uses Art to Drive Conversations on Climate Change,” *Ux Collective*, Aug. 20, 2020, <https://uxdesign.cc/how-olafur-eliasson-uses-art-to-drive-conversations-on-climate-change-5d10fe60bd52>

on top of them, much like a master with slaves in waiting. These subdued trees continue to exude strength as if they are determined to overcome the oppressive landscape above them. The 17 trees persist as a unified column. Their strong arm like branches project areas of intense color. Their root systems are entwined as if holding hands—are they are still alive? A green moss like texture appears here and there at the edges of the bleached city. Nature with its connections and ability to communicate is intact. An intricate system of life is exchanging nutrients in a symbiotic relationship while the city appears vacant, cold, and inhospitable. The most satisfying unspoken praise for *Avenue* came from a professor who silently walked around and embraced the rounded bellies of all seventeen tree. Her embraces appeared to be an instinctual reaction to the soft undulations of the tree forms. I quietly observed and wondered if I was bearing witness to an unspoken language of communication similar to the one that I have been striving to decipher in my connection to trees? I have “heard” my own perceptions in the woods and read many writings that have tried to describe this connection, such as those of Henry David Thoreau who wrote extensively about trees. Richard Higgins, author of “Thoreau and the Language of Trees” writes,

“Thoreau wrote prolifically about trees from 1836 to 1861. Although he observed them closely and described them in detail, he did not presume to fully explain them. He respected a mysterious quality about the trees, a way in which they point beyond themselves. They bore witness to the holy for him. Trees emerge in his writings as special emblems and images of the divine”<sup>19</sup>

I chose to create seventeen interlocking trees, seventeen as a prime number which is divisible by 1 only, or by 17. The principles of absolute math. No longer out of reach, but in front of us. Two degrees Celsius. The issue is no longer whether we can reign in our environmental condition but when *it will reign in our greedy species*. Will we crumble, just as the city that once possessed an avenue lined with shade trees, and will it be baked into a hostile lifeless desert? Large cracks in our planning, politics, the persistent plague of fundamentalism, dishonesty and greed have culminated into potentially evolving into disintegrating landscape.

Unlike Easter Island society, which was totally self-sufficient for 1,500 years, all countries today depend economically on other countries for some essential resources, including food and energy. All countries today are interconnected through living together in the same increasingly polluted atmosphere and oceans. In the next century we risk more than just societies of fragile environments collapsing one by one. We also risk a collapse of world society, an outcome for which there are already warning signs. Surprisingly, many educated people who should know better deny the seriousness of the risks ahead of us. History has important lessons to teach such people. Collapse has already befallen many societies that were at less risk than our societies are today.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Higgins, “Thoreau and Trees: A Visceral Connection.” *american forests*, June 2, 2016. <https://www.americanforests.org/article/thoreau-trees-a-visceral-connection/>

<sup>20</sup> Jared Diamond, “Ecological Collapses of Past Civilizations,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 138, No. 3 (Sept. 1994), p. 369.: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/986741>



If rights had been extended to the giant sentient tree-beings upholding *Avenue*, could the city and the forest mutually benefit in a symbiotic relationship? As a species, will humans be able to mediate our extensive needs, moderate our behavior and embrace a basic survival plan?

### Thoughts and Images from the initial sculpting phases of *Avenue*...



*Figure 25: Avenue begins as "Allee", a tree lined forest path*



*Figure 26: Canopies removed, the trees are fitted with circular cones to support an infrastructure.*



*Figure 27, Triangular bases are strategically placed to uphold the coming weight of an urban landscape.*

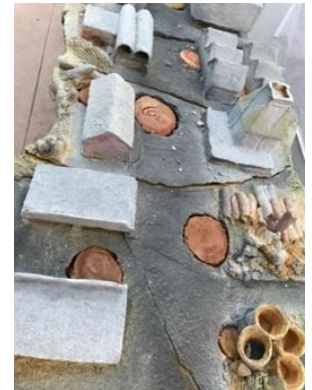


*Figure 28: Wet surfaces will transform into hard pavement connecting superstructures. Trunks are reminiscent of the tree giants that once flourished below in the treeless Avenue.*



*Figure 29: A metropolis has evolved, yet it currently appears vacant—colorless and desolate.*

*Figure 30: The pavement is dramatically cracked, as if it dried out and was baked by the sun. Harvested and forgotten tree clumps are still evident.*



*Figure 31: Gaping drainpipes, like mouths, now empty. Cylinders that once exported effluence of some kind, or sucked energy into human domains—either or both...*

*Figure 32: Green growth appears to be emerging—in crevices, corners, lots, and crumbling structures; life is quickly filling voids, seizing opportunity and regeneration will soon dominate the vacant Avenue.*



“Trees persist. Mankind as we know it will probably not.”-Peter Wohlleben

Forester Peter Wohlleben writes that recent *humane awareness* now extends rights to animals, as we come to realize that they have complex emotional lives. People think about how they buy meat to promote humane treatment of animals. It turns out that even insects have emotions. Wohlleben points out that we kill living things for our purposes, and, because we are also a part of nature, we need other organisms for survival. But do we help ourselves only to what we need from the forest ecosystem? Wohlleben asks, do we spare trees unnecessary suffering when we do this?

It is okay to use wood as long as the trees are allowed to live in a way that is appropriate to their species. And that means that they should be allowed to fulfil their social needs, to grow in a true forest environment on undisturbed ground, and to pass their knowledge on to the next generation. And at least some of them should be allowed to grow old with dignity and finally die a natural death.<sup>21</sup> What would our world look like humans simply stopped existing? Lately that idea has been especially pertinent, as the global COVID 19 pandemic has kept people inside, and emboldened animals to return to our quieter urban environments, giving us a sense of what life might look like if we retreated further into the background. Weisman who wrote “the world without us” spent several years interviewing experts and systematically investigating this question: what would happen to our planet -to our cities, to our industries?<sup>22</sup>

Will it be essential to us as human beings to move away from our egos so that we can produce a healthy world? What will that world look like, and what art will survive? In “The World Without Us,” Alan Weisman thinks that only some art will survive. The city has succumbed to nature, and nature is seeking new opportunities to thrive.

“Amid the rubble of Manhattan financial institutions that literally collapsed for good, a few banks stand; the money within, however worthless, is mildewed but safe. Not so the artwork stored in museum vaults, built more for climate control than strength. Without electricity, protection ceases; eventually museum roofs spring leaks, usually starting with their skylights, and their basements fill with standing water. Subjected to wild swings in humidity and temperature, everything in storage rooms is prey to mold, bacteria, and the voracious larvae of a notorious museum scourge, the black carpet beetle. As they spread to other floors, fungi discolor and dissolve paintings in the Metropolitan, beyond recognition. Ceramics, however, are doing fine since they are chemically similar to fossils. Unless something falls on them first, they await reburial for the next archeologist to dig them up.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*, Vancouver, Berkeley, Greystone Books, 2015, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> Emma Bryce, “What Would Happen to Earth if Humans Went Extinct? *Life’s Little Mysteries*, August 16, 2020 <https://www.livescience.com/earth-without-people.html>

<sup>23</sup> Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*, New York, Picador, 2007.

I am considering the “burial” of *Avenue*, returning the fired clay to the earth. Although much artwork has been deemed anonymous. *Avenue* is not a signed artwork; therefore, it may join these anonymous artworks. Although it is known that I created it, will it even matter? Its historical precedent would be the burial of the *Terracotta Army* in China. I may formally record this event; thus, the artwork would culminate into a performance piece. This large ceramic artifact will be a time capsule extending beyond my own lifetime. I am convinced that as an overly greedy species that we are logically going to succumb to nature, a process that has already begun. The very shocking current war disaster of Russia invading Ukraine is catastrophic to both to humans and the earth’s fragile ecosystem. War should have ceased decades ago, though we can’t seem to help ourselves. But nature can, and it will.

Alexander Von Humboldt, who lived from 1769 to 1859, was a visionary scientist who foretold the onset of climate change. The evidence of global climate change was as evident to him during his lifetime almost 200 years ago as it is to us today. As Andrea Wulf writes,

In this great chain of causes and effects, ‘no single fact can be considered in isolation’. With this insight, (Humboldt) invented the web of life, the concept of nature as we know it today. When nature is perceived as a web, its vulnerability also becomes obvious. Everything hangs together. If one thread is pulled, the whole tapestry may unravel. After he saw the devastating environmental effects of colonial plantations at Lake Valencia in Venezuela in 1800, Humboldt became the first scientist to talk about harmful human-induced climate change. Deforestation there had made the land barren, water levels of the lake were falling and with the disappearance of brushwood torrential rains had washed away the soils surrounding mountain slopes. Humboldt was the first to explain the forest’s ability to enrich the atmosphere with moisture and its cooling effect, as well as the importance of for water retention and protection against soil erosion. He warned that humans were meddling with the climate, and this could have an unforeseeable impact on future generations.”<sup>24</sup>

In an interview with Maya Lin about the 2021 installation of *Ghost Forest* in Manhattan, New York, Osman Can Yerebakan writes,

On Earth Day, Maya Lin and I stood in Manhattan’s Madison Square Park surrounded by dead trees. The artist and architect had just completed *Ghost Forest*, an installation of fifty lifeless cedars cleared from New Jersey’s Pine Barrens, where rising sea levels and salt-water infiltration now threaten the woodland ecosystem, slowly rotting trees from the inside. Tragic figures, the cedars remain standing as they perish. A soundscape composed by Lin and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology activates their stillness with the vocalizations of cougars, wolves, beavers, and whales once native to Manhattan Island. *Ghost Forest* will remain intact, while the surrounding foliage changes from spring to summer and eventually fall...<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Andrea Wulf, “The Invention of Nature, Alexander Von Humboldt’s New World,” New York, Vintage Books, 2016

<sup>25</sup> Osman Can Yerebakan, “Maya Lin on Planting a Ghost Forest in Manhattan,” *Interview in ArtForum*, June 22, 2021 <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/maya-lin-on-planting-a-ghost-forest-in-manhattan-86134>



“A memory of germination, vegetation, and abundance and a harsh symbol of the devastation of climate change. The height of each tree, around forty feet, overwhelms human scale and stands as a metaphor of the outsized impact of a looming environmental calamity.”<sup>26</sup>

Figure 33: Maya Lin, Ghost Forest, 2021, Madison Square Park, NY

## Parcel 8 • Saplings

I was 14 when I took my first ecology class. It was fascinating, but also deeply disturbing. I found myself in an emotional turmoil—angry, depressed, and resentful. I realized that if I was camping in the forest, I could be poisoned if I drank from what appeared to be beautiful crystal-clear streams. I naively thought that our wisdom as a society would surely remedy this problem and stop industrial pollution—halting their evil deeds. Instead, ecology became politicized. In fact, it was the widespread exposure through the press, access to information, dramatic leaps in photo documentation and our collective demand for universal rights that exposed our impending situation. Surely, this knowledge would lead to fixing things, I thought. But altering, distorting, and denying scientific data also blossomed. I now realize the intricate web of consumption and industry will not stop. We all depend on it for our comfort. As the collective whole of an earth species, *we are the problem*.

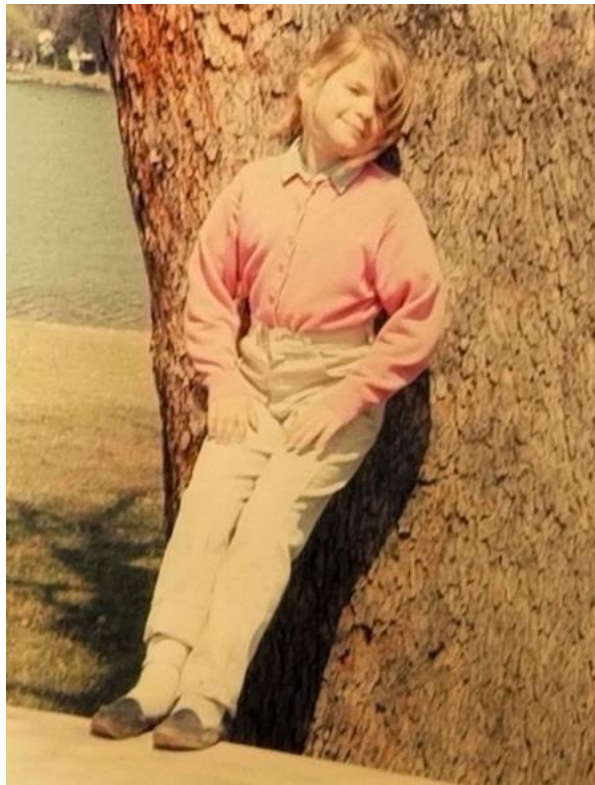
I carry within me significant concepts that I will continue to explore in my own wilderness of thought and experience as an artist living in the present time and moving forward into the future. In the grand scale of life on this planet both the macro and the micro elements of all living forms are clustered at the fulcrum point of a critically fragile balance. Awakening empathy for the sentient world of the environment through my artwork, is my essential quest. I hope and imagine that my ongoing artworks can shape tangible voices for lives in the form of sculptures that speak in ways other than our human language, reaching further than verbal disputes about what the future may or may not hold.

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<sup>26</sup> Pace Gallery, “Maya Lin Ghost Forest, 2021,” *Artist Projects Pacegallery.com*.  
<https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/maya-lin-create-new-installation-madison-square-park/>

The experience of *wilderness* is uncanny and vital for children—fostering an understanding of the interconnectedness of living entities and their survival. This insight is what initiates deep and humble respect for life and ultimately allows us to invest our minds and hearts towards a healthy existence for many more future generations.

My work attempts to engage our species as a community just as the trees themselves seem to have gradually become infused within me. Such is the powerful and instinctual wavelength that captured my childhood imagination and has become the fuel for my creative passion.



*Figure 34: "The Artist as a Young Sapling growing in front of an earthly giant..."*

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