

Art Center branches out, pays tribute to the trees

'Rooted' examines the art of the arboreal, both symbolically and scientifically

by **Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly**

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Following in the footsteps of last year's nature-themed exhibitions that focused on the sky and encounters between humans and non-human animals, the Palo Alto Art Center is currently making like the Lorax and speaking for the trees.

"This community cares deeply about its trees," Art Center Curator Selene Foster pointed out at the opening celebration for "Rooted: Trees in Contemporary Art." After all, she said, "We are named after El Palo Alto, a tall tree."

Through a variety of works by 20 artists, "Rooted" explores trees as subjects, materials and symbols, from fairy-tale whimsy to scientific accuracy.

"The Woulds," by Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth Hope, is a multimedia installation that invites visitors into an enchanted and enchanting geometric forest of colors, wood, mirrors and glass, and a soundscape of bird song.

The woods are a common fairy-tale theme, often representing a transformative experience or journey, Roth Hope said at the opening gala. "We wanted to create a mythological forest someone can travel through and possibly be changed (by)."

Originally commissioned by San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum, "The Woulds" takes inspiration, according to Diaz Hope, from a Jewish folktale in which multidimensional-perceiving sparrows sing to souls as they come down to Earth from the tree of life in Heaven.

"We tried to envision a forest seen through the eyes of these sparrows," he said.

In Azucena Hernandez's pyrographic "Ember" series, on view in the Glass Gallery, wood also serves a soulful -- and poignantly somber -- purpose. Begun in 2015 in honor of Dia de los Muertos, the series depicts the victims of institutional violence and racism, their portraits burned into slices of wood. It is a series that, to Hernandez's chagrin, continues to expand.

"As long as you feel anything, if you look at the portraits and you remember the faces, remember the names, that's my goal," she said at the opening event, noting that it's important that her subjects are seen as real people, not merely statistics or names in the media.

"I think it's very symbolic, the fact that they are on wood," she said, "because they were cut down too soon."

Jamie Vasta uses glitter -- which she noted is commonly associated with messy children's projects and thought of as a "cheap, throwaway thing" -- to create powerfully compelling imagery, including "Inferno," which depicts a raging wildfire, creating an interesting contrast between the festive, sparkly material and the traumatic subject matter.

James Chronister's oil-on-canvas paintings of thick woodlands, "Summer 8" and "Deinze," are difficult to distinguish from photographs at first glance, so meticulous is the detail in the black paint/white background landscapes based on photos taken while hiking with family in his native Montana.

"It's kind of like California is the place I came to remember what Montana was like," Chronister, who's now based in San Francisco, mused.

New Mexico artist Scott Greene's "UV Celltree" and "Fake News" take a humorous look at the "new invasive species" of phone towers disguised as trees, made to blend in with the natural environment (with questionable results). In some of his paintings, the towers have become ecological "snags," or dead trees that become habitat for new life.

Maria Elena Gonzalez's "T2 23-33" was created by using rubbings of the bark of birch trees as musical notation, capturing, as it were, the language and music of the trees (sadly, there's currently no way to hear it at the Art Center).

"When people would ask me if I was a composer I'd say, 'No, it's the tree that's the composer.' I facilitate that tree to sing to us," Gonzalez told the opening-night crowd. "You're looking at the composer: nature."

Stephen Galloway's large-scale "The Royal Oak and Other Stories" is installed in the window spaces in front of the Art Center and in its courtyard. At the opening gala, he said he tries to create unexpected encounters "where there is natural imagery in places where you wouldn't expect it but also being portrayed in ways you don't quite understand, or are not familiar to you straight off." He said he hopes his work helps generate questions and results in viewers becoming more engaged when looking at the natural world.

For all the intriguing works of art on display, the goal of "Rooted" is indeed also to help people appreciate the diversity and beauty of the real, live trees around them and the importance of a healthy urban canopy.

Local oak trees, in all their acorn-dropping glory, receive special attention thanks to the work of artist and educator Ann McMillan, whose oak depictions not only line the wall near the adult studios and in the lobby "nook" but are also contained in a free booklet offered to exhibition goers. In "Oaks of Palo Alto," produced by the Art Center in partnership with [Canopy](#), the Palo Alto-based urban-tree nonprofit, McMillan's illustrations cover both the native California oaks (valley and coast live oaks are endemic to Palo Alto) and the cultivated species found in the city.

"Native oaks are adapted to our climate, critical for wildlife, hold historic and cultural significance and are one of the key components of establishing resilient landscapes in the mid-peninsula," according to the booklet. One of Canopy's major endeavors is its Great Oak Count, which surveys the local native-oak population.

"I was really honored to do this project," said McMillan, who's also a Palo Alto Art Center instructor. "I started out my art life as a scientific illustrator and it was such a pleasure to do it again."

Other tree-appreciation tools include a planned March 15 Arbor Day celebration for families, and Canopy's printed Tree Walk guide to the Art Center's grounds and its surrounding area, with which visitors can take a self-directed stroll and learn more about the trees they may pass everyday and yet know little about (fun fact: The most common street tree in Palo Alto is the southern magnolia). As the ancient proverb quoted on the back of the guide states, "No shade tree? Blame not the sun but yourself."

What: "Rooted: Trees in Contemporary Art."

Where: Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road.

When: Through April 5, Tuesday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday open until 9 p.m. An Arbor Day celebration will be held on Sunday, March 15, 1-5 p.m.

Cost: Free.

Info: [Palo Alto Art Center](#).

Palo Alto Art Center Director Karen Kienzle joins Weekly journalists to discuss the "Rooted" exhibit on an episode of "Behind the Headlines," now available on our [YouTube channel](#) and [podcast page](#).

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