

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Art of change 21
The forest, branching out as an exhibition theme
Pauline Lisowski and Alice Audouin
16 April 2021

ART OF CHANGE 21

The forest, branching out as an exhibition theme

The forest is now emerging as an exhibition theme in its own right in the field of contemporary art, and is no longer just in natural history museums.

Last year, the Fondation Cartier in Paris hosted an exhibition on an unprecedented scale on the theme of the forest: "Nous, les arbres" (We trees) (July 12, 2019 – January 5, 2020), bringing together a multiplicity of views from both scientists, indigenous peoples and contemporary artists. At the same time in Paris, the Zadkine Museum also offered "Le Rêveur de la Forêt" (The Dreamer of the Forest). The immense success of the forest as theme in Paris sadly couldn't be consolidated in London because of the pandemic. The exhibition "Among the Trees" brought together 37 international artists at the Hayward Gallery working on the same theme (August 1 – October 31, 2020).

In 2021, forest mania continues. The Fondation Cartier exhibition will be presented at the Shanghai Power Station from July to October 2021. This Chinese adventure will be enriched with works by local artists. Since the beginning of March, the group exhibition "Im Wald" ("In the Forest") at the Kunsthhaus in Grenchen, Switzerland has brought together ten artists (including Julian Charrière) concerned the presence of the forest in society, revealing it to be both a source of peace, and also fear and profit...

The forest as a place of the imagination can also be found in the cardboard installations of Eva Jospin, exhibited since March 13 at the Het Noordbrabants museum in the Netherlands.

Open since February 6, the "Tree Story" exhibition at MUMA (Monash University Museum of Art) in Melbourne, Australia brings together Australian and international artists (Janet Laurence, Agnes Denes, Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, Reena Saini Kallat, Katie Paterson) exploring what we can learn from trees. A major figure in this exhibition, Janet Laurence, is now devoted to the rebirth of the Australian forest following widespread bushfires. This exhibition is complemented by a series of podcasts.



Image: Alex Hanimann, Trapped (Reh), 2018, ©Alex Hanimann, courtesy Galerie Skopia, Genova / Erwin Olaf, Im Wald, 2020

Since October 31 last year, "Tree Time" at the Science Museum of Trento in Italy has been inviting us to renew our relationship with forests in the context of climate change. The works of twenty international artists (including The Harrison Studio, Ursula Biemann, Sam Falls...) are mixed with historical and scientific analysis.

This more political dimension will also be found in Berlin. During his 2020 residency at Gropius Bau, Hong Kong artist and environmentalist Zheng Bo wondered how plants practice politics. His "Wanwa Council" exhibition, which will be open in June, will bring the results of his research, including the "Drawing Life" series of trees and wild plants. The exhibition takes this approach further: it has grown out of the Gropius Bau into the "Gropius Wood", as Zheng Bo calls the community of plane trees that can be found to the west of the building.

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On the gallery side, "Im Wald" (In the Forest) is the title of the exhibition by German photographer Erwin Olaf at Galerie Ron Mandos in Amsterdam, Netherlands. From the Alps, the artist questions the hubris that characterizes the relationship between humanity and nature. Giuseppe Penone is currently paying homage to Walt Whitman with "Leaves of Grass" (named after a collection of poems published in 1855) at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, ahead of his major solo exhibition at the BNF in Paris. "The Many Voices of Trees" by David Nash, at the Lelong Gallery (temporarily closed) in Paris, reflects his 50 year relationship with trees. The Stephen Friedman Gallery in London exhibits Luiz Zerbini, whose work is inspired by Brazilian primary forests.

Public space is also establishing itself as somewhere for artistic intervention on the theme of forests. The art curator Klaus Littmann is to follow up his surprising "FOR FOREST, the Unending Attraction of Nature" from 2019, which was an installation of a forest filled football stadium which gave tangible form to a dystopian future where forests could be reduced to spectacle like a zoo; Littmann is taking aim again in the spring of 2021 in the heart of his city, Basel, with "Arena for a Tree". This time, rather than a forest, a single tree will be planted, selected for its better resistance to global warming. Littman's latest activity echoes a major exhibition at KBH.G in the same city, "Tree Connection", once again dedicated to the theme of the forest with artists mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Es Devlin, artistic director of the next London Design Biennale – which carries the eloquent theme: "Can we Design a Better World?" – will plant a forest of four hundred trees in the courtyard of Somerset House next June. This project called "Forest for Change" intends to raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of UNEP, and responds to a desire to bring trees into the courtyard of Somerset House, which had prohibited them when designing the building... 250 years ago!