

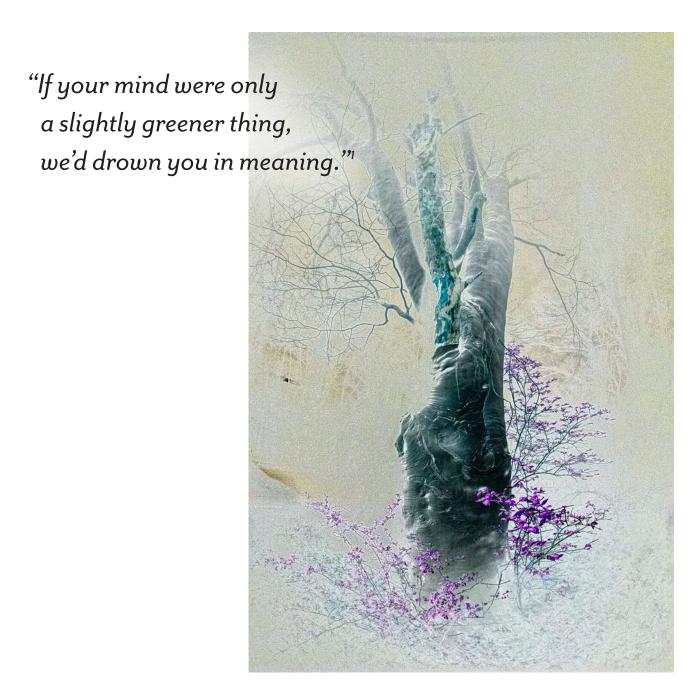
Seeing Green: A Year in the Forest

New Work by Dan Kistler

September 12-October 21, 2023

Opening Reception: Tuesday, September 12, 5:00–6:30 p.m. Special Homecoming Reception: Friday, October 13, 5:00–6:30 p.m.

James K. Schmidt Gallery Voney Art Center, Principia College Elsah, IL 62028



Front Cover, Left to Right: Look Up to Me (detail), Stand By Me (detail), and Say Goodbye to Me (detail), 2023, digital / archival prints, 40 x 60 inches each

Above: Join Me, 2023, digital / archival print, 40 x 60 inches

Right: A Walk in the Woods (detail), 2023, digital / archival prints, 8 inches sq. x 80









Seeing Green:Three Ways to Think About Trees

by Kristin Martin

What is a tree? Think of one. Probably most of us can call up a vivid moment that features a tree.

Sunlight sparkling through maple leaves brings me back to first grade at Bird School in Plymouth, Michigan. I have a seat next to the window that looks out onto a courtyard where I am captivated trying to count the greens. Already I know I am an artist but I don't yet have names for all the subtle flutters of colors I am seeing. Light from the window blows out the rest of the memory. In what seems like a dark frame now, other students are seated at their rows of desks around me. A limp American flag is posted on a stand near the chalkboard while Mrs. Faust is trying to teach what I think might have been a math lesson. Only the maple tree invites me to be amazed.

People can see more shades of green than any other color.² That can't be an accident.

By all accounts, a tree looks like it should be a noun. It can be a large, solid thing (or a medium spiny thing, or a thin, whippy thing) that hurts if you run into it.³ But it's not. A tree only looks like a noun because it's a bunch of overlapping verbs condensed in time and space.

Roots thrust into the substrate to suck up water and nutrients. Cambium (between the bark and the heartwood) simultaneously builds an inner cylinder of xylem cells that pump water up from the roots to the leaves and an outer cylinder of phloem cells that bathes the tree in sugars heading back down in the opposite direction. Twig tips thicken and split the air. Flowers burst open. Fruits accumulate. Seeds release.⁴ Secret messages even fly between tree species—just beneath our feet.⁵

Dan's creative practice is like a tree—a dozen different making processes (pressing together, flowing in opposite directions, bursting open,

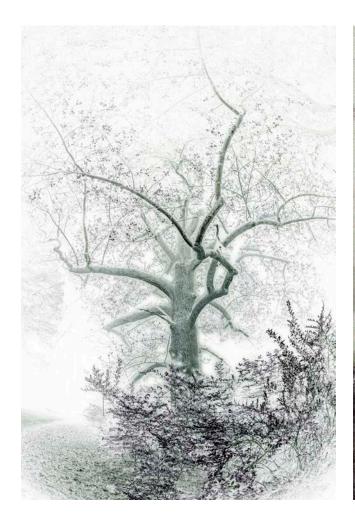
and releasing little artifacts for future investigation) in close proximity, together producing a visible idea.

For Dan, making is thinking.

In his new book How to Read a Tree, Tristan Gooley summarizes George Loewenstein's Hot-Cold Empathy Gap: "It states that we are bad at understanding a frame of mind when we are in a different one."6 If you are bored, for example, it might be hard to imagine feeling alert and inventive. This principle applies in the physical world as well. In Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning Implicit in Dan's exhibition is a conviction novel The Overstory, his character Bill Wester- that our survival depends on looking for ford teaches his daughter Patty about trees as

they drive through the Ohio countryside. When she asks why her classmates think all trees look the same (instead of noticing the details of different species like she is learning to do) her father explains that, mostly, "we only see things that look like us."7 This is why motorists miss seeing motorcycles—even when they are plainly visible in their mirrors. People driving cars are (unconsciously) only looking for car-shaped vehicles on the road. This narrow way of framing expectations can result in an LBFTS crash—Looked But Failed to See. A fatal mistake.8

and seeing the trees.



Above: See Me, 2023, digital / archival print, 40 x 60 inches



Above: Get Close to Me, 2023, digital / archival print, 40 x 60

On 12 July 2019, The Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art) in Paris, France opened an immersive exhibition assembled by a community of artists, philosophers, anthropologists, and botanists called *Trees* in English. The exhibition's original French title, Nous Les Arbres (which literally translates as "We the Trees"), caught my attention as I was preparing for Dan's opening. Somewhere between the original French, and the English translation, the trees lost their voice.9 Like the Lorax in the famous cautionary children's tale by Dr. Seuss, Dan's exhibition gives the trees their voice back; it "speaks for the trees." 10

Identity

First, Dan presents trees as living beings possessed of a certain kind of sentience. In place of an introductory block of text to orient viewers entering a gallery or museum exhibition, Seeing Green opens with a calligraphic patchwork of about 80 photographs, each eight inches square. Featuring forms the artist found on the forest floor, A Walk in the Woods hints at an ancient, elaborate language with which most of us have lost our fluency.

Entering the gallery, a series of eight largeformat digital photographs of individual trees on nearly white backgrounds pulls the viewer's attention to the left. The people-sized scale of this set (each 40" x 60") encourages the viewer to read them as portraits of individuals whose stories have been overlooked and undervalued, like Bishoppe Kamusinga's photographs of the participants in Untold Black Stories: A Downtown Visual Listening Tour. 11 This exhibition filled the windows of downtown Alton, IL from 15 May-11 July 2021 and gave viewers the opportunity to see the faces of some of their Black neighbors while listening to recordings of them telling their own stories at a time (during the pandemic) when human connection was hard to find.

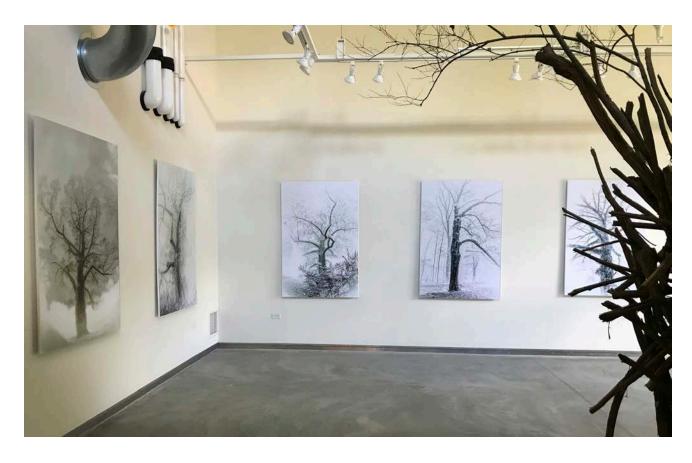
It is hard to avoid making a connection between Dan's tree portraits and the work of British artist Tacita Dean, who created a set of large photographic images of ancient trees for a 2006 solo



Above: Dream of Me, 2023, digital / archival print, 40 x 60 inches

exhibition in Switzerland. Her central work in the series, called Majesty, depicts one of the oldest oaks in England. "Massively enlarged and printed on four overlapping sections of fibre-based paper," this piece stands at almost 10 feet tall and 14 feet wide (3000 mm x 4200 mm). The actual tree is estimated to be at least 800 years old and was surveyed in 2014 to have a girth of more than 40 feet (12.2 m)¹²— meaning the trunk is roughly 12.73 feet (3.88 m) (or two Dan Kistlers end-to-end) wide.

While Dean painted translucent white gouache over the background of her enormous black and white image to emphasize the form of the burly trunk and gnarled crown, Dan uses digital processes, including color inversion, to feature his trees. 13 These eight portraits emphasize both the



Above: A gallery view showing five of the eight tree portraits and the edge of the We've Been Invaded installation. Photo by Kristin Martin. Below: We've Been Invaded (view from inside the gallery), 2023, bush honeysuckle branches, screws, and wood shavings, 13.5 feet tall, 10 feet wide, 69 feet long.



singular dignity and the vulnerability of individual trees, from the forest on his property and from the Principia College campus. They stand like a receiving line, inviting viewers into the gallery.

Both the analog and the digital approaches isolate the importance of the central figure, but the bits of blues, shocking pinks, and violets revealed by Dan's process illustrate the invisible energy generated by trees going about the extraordinary business of living. The digital color inversion could also call to mind other mediated modes of sight, like night vision goggles or infrared sensors. It may be worth asking how technology distances us from our monumental, leafy neighbors, and how it helps us see them more clearly.

Imbalance

The exhibition title *Seeing Green* can also prompt us to consider how trees have been, and continue to be, exploited by extractive capitalism.¹⁴ Whole forests are shredded and pressed into packaging and pulped into toilet paper.

Dan's three installations (Fate, We've Been Invaded, and Wanted: Dead or Alive) explore themes of wasting, congestion, and criminalization—all forms of objectification that develop when a system is out of balance.

In a direct reference to Korean American video artist Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha*, Dan's work titled *Fate* visualizes a mechanism for the commodification of trees. ¹⁵ Dan replaces Paik's seated Buddha statue with a tiny fir tree in a pot and the small, rounded television screen with a roll of toilet paper mounted on a low wall. The function of Paik's surveillance camera—essentially reducing the Buddha to a two-dimensional consumable image on the screen becomes the role of the viewer. We are complicit in reducing these great, complex beings to flat squares of toilet paper.

We've Been Invaded, an advancing armature of invasive bush honeysuckle that appears to scramble over the heretofore disused sculpture garden, press through the plate glass window, and bifur-

cate the gallery space on its north-south axis. Thick as a wrist, the looming limbs almost seem to move (if you unfocus your eyes a bit), like a nightmarish version of Dutch artist Theo Jensen's wind-powered *Strandbeests*—huge, airy, arthropod-like creatures (constructed from cream-colored plastic piping used in the Netherlands to protect electrical cables) that appear to scamper erratically across the beach of their own accord.¹⁶

The third installation, Wanted: Dead or Alive, continues the exploration of exploitation, but with more emphasis on the spectacle of consumerism. Ironic brand elements peek out from the pile of paperboard packaging tumbling from the cardboard coffin: "Amazon" (which used to



Above: Fate, 2023, mixed media installation, $18" \times 37" \times 52"$



Above: Wanted: Dead or Alive, 2023, mixed media installation, 72 x 60 x 88 inches.

refer to the largest, most complex rainforest on the planet and now mainly means mountains of brown boxes), "Nature's Bakery," "outdoor fresh," "life cereal," and Apple's ever present icon... which is definitely not edible. A wild west WANTED poster makes the conditions of this capitalist relationship clear. Yet in spite of their sent a particular option that can be selected. 17 pleading (Understand Me, Join Me, Stand By Me), The little conifer Dan has left to die in the cardboard coffin is living proof (for a little while longer, at least) that the trees do not want to be wanted in this way. Convenience is a pick-pocket that robs cheerful consumers of their empathy. What if we consumed all the trees? Then where would we be?

There's a lot to unpack here. But excessive packaging is also the point of this piece.

Icon

Have you noticed yet where the color green is actually present in this exhibition? Down Up / Under is standing on its head (See image on page 12). Do we see the green more because it's unexpectedly upside down?

Aside from the living component of Fate, most of the green can be seen in pieces that point to the symbolic roles trees play in human culture. Returning back to the lobby, we recall that several of the squares in A Walk in the Woods feature bits of still-verdant leaves and seed pods for us to read.

Meanings condense from written language to icons the way a tree's growth process presses sapwood into dense heartwood inside the trunk. When sapwood becomes heartwood, its role within the tree changes. No longer concerned with the day-to-day transfer of nutrients from leaves to roots and back again, the heartwood's job is to hold the tree up.

We can just glimpse Imbalance through the invasive installation. The iconic maple leaf shapes in this oil painting on attached panels stand in for all forests. Colors typically associated with one season or another streak into each other. The warmer colors, red especially, practically pulse with intensity (see image on page 11). Beyond signifying complex ideas with deceptively simple forms, graphic icons (like the apps on your phone) can repre-



Above: Mother and Child (detail showing a sycamore bowl decorated with gold leaf), 2023, egg tempera and gold leaf icon painting on wood panel, five hand-turned sycamore bowls, and six wooden stands made from bush honeysuckle branches, 72 x 21 x 78 inches. Photo by Kristin Martin.

We could choose the trees.

On some level, we already have. Maybe you or someone you know is taking (or teaching) a computer science class this semester. Have you heard talk of roots and trunks and branches of code? Our connection with trees runs deep. Emergency responders rely on phone trees. Analysts working in marketing, medicine, and machine learning design decision trees, genealogists construct family trees, and we even use the same words in English (trunks and limbs) to describe tree bodies and human bodies.

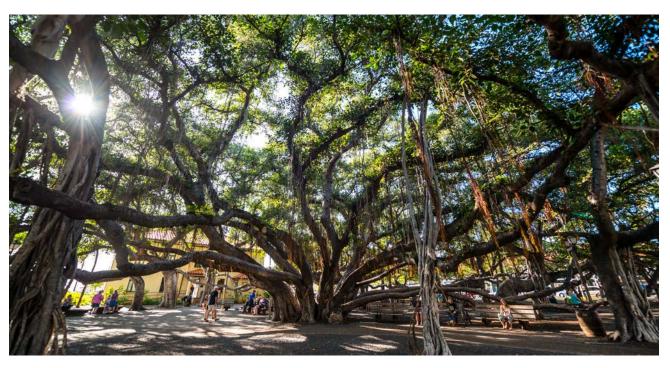
As with any long term relationship or faith practice, though, the commitment is to keep choosing. In Greek Orthodox tradition, a religious icon represents something sacred, and becomes something sacred itself, through the care of the artist who made it. Dan's altar-like piece, Mother and Child, is an invitation to develop a ritual practice of honoring and respecting trees. To create this piece, Dan used painstaking, traditional practices of painting with egg tempera and gold leaf on a wood panel. Bowls he turned on a lathe from fallen sycamore, their cracks filled with glints of gold leaf, are lifted up on handbuilt roots."²³ Amen. honeysuckle tables.¹⁸

Virgin Forest. Mother of Trees. Tree of Life.

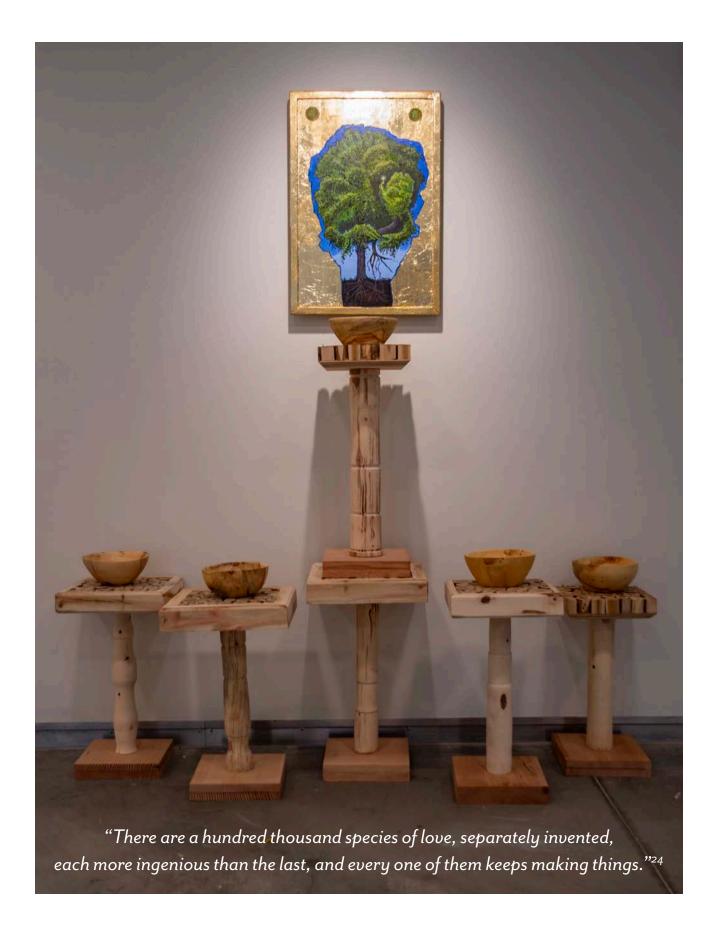
Our relationships with trees as symbols go so far back that it appears the English words for Tree and Truth come from the same Indo-European

After the firestorm on August 8 that devastated parts of Maui, and took hundreds of lives, Lahaina's historic banyan tree might still be alive.²⁰ Planted on April 24, 1873 as a symbol of faith (commemorating 50 years since the first Protestant missionaries came to Lahaina), it now stands as a symbol of hope for those who survived the fire.²¹ "Just days after the fire," reports MauiNow, "volunteers arranged for water tankers to come by and douse it with hundreds of gallons of water every few hours. Maui arborists, landscapers, and volunteers formed a hui [a Hawaiian word that means a group of different people united in a common purpose] to care for the tree and now it's receiving unprecedented love in the wake of the disaster."22

Arborists who took samples from the tree in late August say they are seeing "new life in the



Above: The historic Lahaina Banyan Tree on Maui, HI, USA, photographed on 06 January 2016 by anouchka / iStock by Getty Images.



Endnotes

- 1 Richard Powers, The Overstory (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 4.
- Robert Jimison, CNN Animation by J.R. Canedo and Rafael Mayani, "Colorscope: Why We All Need Green in Our Lives," CNN Health, June 5, 2017. https://tinyurl.com/2y7538ex.
- In 8th or 9th grade during one of those awkward trust exercises, I meant to put my palm out to prevent one of my best friends from bumping heads with an oak trunk, but I wasn't fast enough. I'll never not be sorry about that.
- 4 "What is a Tree? How Does it Work?" *Colorado State Forest Service*, accessed August 19, 2023. https://tinyurl.com/bdhvtad3.
- It seems that mycorrhizal networks (associations of fungi and bacteria that form symbiotic relationships with trees (by connecting to their roots) can facilitate the transfer of nutrients and distress signals even between tree species!
 - Valentina Lagomarsino, figures by Hannah Zucker, "Exploring the Underground Network of Trees—The Nervous System of the Forest," *Science in the News: Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences*, May 6, 2019. https://tinyurl.com/mpkr92m5.
- 6 Tristan Gooley, How to Read a Tree (New York: The Experiment, 2023), 178.
- 7 Powers, 114.
- 8 "Motorcycles Are Missed Because Drivers Aren't Looking For Them," Association for Psychological Science, October 25, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/2yvxsptd.
- If Dan's exhibition really speaks to you, I would highly recommend exploring the *Nous Les Arbres* exhibition catalog or website.
 - "Exhibition: Trees, from July 12, 2019–January 05, 2020," FondationCartier pour l'art contemporain, accessed August 19, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/u8jfxnrj.
- 10 Dr. Seuss, The Lorax, (New York: Random House, 1971), 26.
- Bishoppe Kamusinga graduated in 2016 from Principia College (and took some graphic design classes from Dan). These portraits lined downtown Alton, IL. from 15 May–11 July 2021. As of September 2023, Bishoppe's portrait of Evelyn and Yvonne Campbell still fills the window of My Just Desserts on Broadway. "Untold Black Stories: A Downtown Alton Visual Listening Tour," *Jacoby Arts Center*, accessed August 19, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/67snfmcj.
 - Ron DeBrock, Alton Main Street Wins State Honor, *The Telegraph*, October 28, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/mur9z9h6.
- "Pedunculate Oak—1269," *The Conservation Volunteers*, accessed 08 September 2023. https://tinyurl.com/yhadpz2y.
- "Tacita Dean CBE, Majesty, 2006," *Tate: Art and Artists*, accessed August 18, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yem4kx4e.
- "Green" or "greenbacks" being slang for American paper dollars.
- "Exhibition Guide: Nam June Paik, October 17, 2019–February 9, 2020," What's On: Tate Modern, accessed August 20, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/568ka73y.
- 16 "Introduction," Strandbeest, accessed August 20, 2023, https://www.strandbeest.com.
- 17 "Icon: Meaning & Use," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed August 21, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/a56wyfk5.
- Rev. Thomas Fitzgerald, "The Holy Eucharist," *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*, September 3, 1985, accessed August 22, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/5n72ws5m.
- "Tree," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed August 20, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/3kv3xbbr.

 Truth is also one of seven words Christian Scientists use as names, or synonyms, for God. The English word *Trust* also comes from this same Indo-European root. See Endnote 3 for irony.
- Kevin Allen, "A Ray of Hope: The Lahaina Banyan Tree," *Hawai'i Magazine*, August 17, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/4wx8xrjp.
- 21 "Lahaina Banyan Tree Celebrates 150th Anniversary, April 22," *MauiNow*, April 22, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/3589fa8m.
- "Lahaina's Famed Banyan Tree Showing Signs of Life Three Weeks After Destructive Wildfire," *MauiNow*, September 4, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/mt7c9ect.
- Michelle Broder van Dyke, "Landscaper Predicts Lahaina Banyan Tree Is 'Going To Be Fine,'" Spectrum News, August 31, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/5n83e987.
- 24 Powers, 144.

Left: *Mother and Child*, 2023, egg tempera and gold leaf icon painting on wood panel, five hand-turned sycamore bowls, and six wooden stands made from bush honeysuckle branches, 72 x 21 x 78 inches.



Above: Imbalance, 2023, oil on wood panels, 59 x 24 inches.

Artist Statement

the land around my house of bush honeysuckle, a highly invasive species that takes over a are. And I still have lots of questions and more forest. My forested land was (and in many parts still is) so thick with honeysuckle you could not My artistic practice begins with reading and rewalk anywhere and could not see more than a search, sketching and drawing—and bike ridfew feet. It seemed like a place of total chaos. I inq. I love to connect ideas that come out of my knew nothing about this forest. I have spent my life surrounded by trees: I grew up in the Pacific sketches or short lists of words. I will often put Northwest with its forests of pines and firs, I lived in Michigan for a number of years (a state largely the back burner of my thinking. On bike rides I rural and forested), and then moved to a piece of land in the woods of southern Illinois, where I have lived for the past 25 years. In all that time, I soon after a ride to write down more ideas. never looked deeply into what trees are.

When I was offered the opportunity to put together this exhibition, I had no idea what my work for a walk. What it really all boils down to is I would be about. But then it came to me. While walking back to the house after a couple of hours of cutting honeysuckle, I realized I should use this opportunity to study my forest. And I have done just that. The work in this show is the result of a to what I have made, connect that to what I am

Starting about two years ago, I began to clear year examining my forest. I have gained some understanding of just how truly magnificent trees ideas to explore.

> reading—translating those ideas early into quick these aside for a time and let them simmer on use the time to run through 10, 20 different versions of an idea and often return to the studio

> Next comes a series of "what if's" (what if I combine this idea with that?). I let my curiosity go like to make stuff—make, make, and make some more—then find out just what it is, how parts of what I have made are connected, what parts are dead ends or one-offs, and by paying attention

feeling and thinking about.

The process of making a lot of stuff, and then figuring out what it is, is my way of getting away from my background as an illustrator—where the idea for the work I created was already outlined and defined by the client. When I try to work toward a preconceived idea, the work often fails to have much depth or allow for other interpretations. Art is a process of ideas unfolding and refolding, combining then reducing until what is left is what is needed to tell the story, share the idea, or ask the question.

I began my research with a list of books that approached the subject of trees and forests from the perspective of science. At first I thought this was what I needed to do—learn all I could about the trees so I would be able to identify each one. But that approach felt both too limited, and just too much. Nothing was really translating into any kind of drawings or ideas. The forest I was standing in, no matter how much I read, still felt like chaos—unknowable and secret. So I kept digging. Along the way I found two books—one specifically about trees and one about chaos that helped me find my direction.

In The Overstory by Richard Powers, I came across this sentence: "to see green is to grasp the Earth's intentions." I do not fully understand what is meant by that sentence, nor do I claim to understand the Earth's intentions. But the sentence did stay with me and was a constant reminder to me that perhaps it is my duty each day to see green.

Another book that helped me in my observation of the forest and the creation of this work was Why Fish Don't Exist: The Story of Loss, Love and the Hidden Order of Life by Lulu Miller. The author talks about humankind's fear of chaos and its attempt to bring order to chaos. To do this, everything is named and categorized. From this, order is established. The problem is once something is named, and the category established and described, we as humans stop looking. We assume we know what something is because it



Above: Down Up / Under, 2023, oil on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

has been named and fits in a category...and we understand the category. But I believe (as does the author) this limits our growth and understanding—and our ability to make connections.

I have come to see trees as great teachers of how to live on this earth:

- Trees live in communities (forests) and build relationships and communication networks. Most of this community building takes place underground. There, the trees share information and materials. (What is the community I live in and what are my networks?)
- A healthy forest is one that is diverse—in tree species, in plants, insects, animals...etc. (How do I see diversity in my day to day existence?)
- demise or weaken their community. (Are we tions. taking too much from our environment?)
- put forward the concept of a "mother tree."
- Trees are rooted to one place for their entire lives and live lives longer than we can quite Dan Kistler imagine. (What have I put my roots down into?) Associate Professor of Art,
- Trees give back to their communities through- August 2023 out their entire lives. (What do I do to actively give to my community?)









Trees grow to the light, and in doing so, they create their own unique shapes and structures. (How do I see this in my life?)

- Trees can live singularly—picture that lone tree in the middle of a huge field with no other trees nearby. (But is this truly a full life?)
- Trees have no need of humans to do what they do. All they need from humans is the space to live as they know how to do.

• Trees do not take too much from their envi- In some small degree, the work I created for this ronment. Doing so might bring about their exhibition explores these observations and ques-

Trees cannot speak, but I wonder what they would • Trees care for one another. Some scientists even say about us if they could. If trees had sight what would they observe about us? If trees could hear, would they tell us to be guiet and listen?

Principia College





About the Artist



Dan Kistler is a visual media artist living and working in southern Illinois. His pathway in art includes an undergraduate degree in studio art from Principia College, two years of classes at The Center for Creative Studies, a decade of work as an illustrator in the Detroit market, an MA in drawing from Webster University, and 27 years of teaching art at Principia College. Kistler's current work is taking a number of directions. In photography he has stepped back into the darkroom and has fallen in love all over again with film photography—the grain, the anticipation, the unexpected results, and the touch it takes to get an image worth working with.

Special Thanks

Opening an art exhibition is a group effort. cannot thank Instructor of Art History Sara Borja I would first like to express gratitude to **Dan** enough for taking the time to read and comment Kistler for preparing this new body of work and installing it in the James K. Schmidt Gallery for the benefit of the Principia College community and its visitors. It was a treat to hear Dan's thoughts about his making process as we walked through the exhibition-in-progress in early August. Over the next few weeks before the opening, I was privileged to witness some of the pieces (especially We've Been Invaded) take on a tor, each contributed their time and expertise to life of their own and develop further in relation to the gallery space and to the other works around them, creating almost the aesthetic equivalent of And finally, many thanks to all of my colleagues an ecosystem.

I would also like to thank Professor Paul Ryan for mentoring me in preparation for my first semester of gallery management. His years of experience and willingness to answer questions—even from Prague—is much appreciated. Graphic Designer Bruce Rea did a great job with print production for this exhibition and I am extra grateful for his speedy and professional turn-around time. I

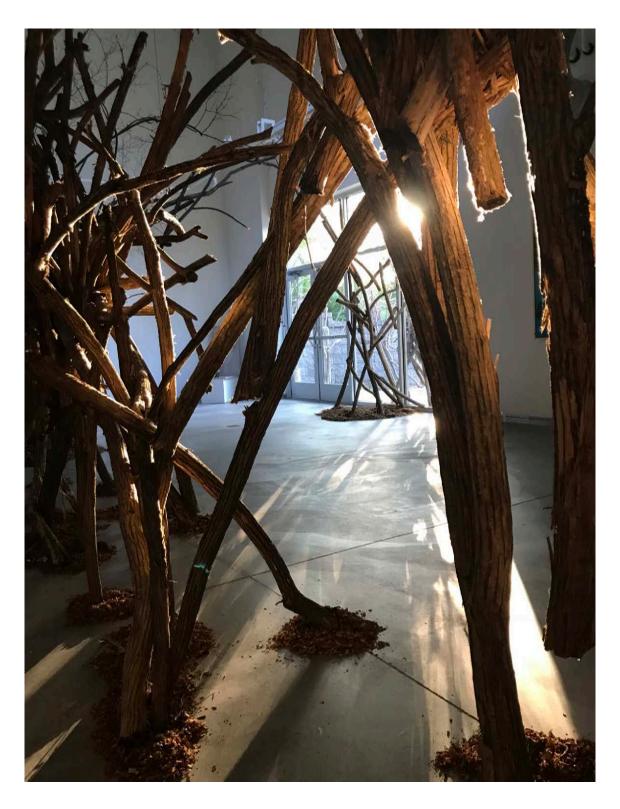
on my catalog essay before it went to publication. Her expertise as an art historian and careful attention to detail were extremely helpful.

Deb Wold, James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar, Graham Littell, 2022-2024 post-graduate teaching intern in the Department of Art + Art History, and Jon Hosmer, Principia College Web Direcensure the successful launch of this exhibition.

in the Department of Art + Art History for supporting the important educational resource that is the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

Kristin Martin Assistant Professor of Art Principia College

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