

# Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Newsletter: At Pepperdine's Weisman Museum, art that speaks for the trees



Amir Zaki, "Close Friends," 2017, on view in the upcoming group show "To Bough and to Bend" at the Weisman Museum. (Amir Zaki / Diane Rosenstein Gallery)

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AUG. 20, 2022 8 AM PT

It's the dog days of summer and I'm currently obsessing over the aesthetics of [Latin American gelatin-gram](#). The designs are [truly flawless](#). I'm **Carolina A. Miranda**, arts and urban design columnist at the Los Angeles Times, and I've got all the Jell-O content, not to mention some essential arts news:

## Pick a tree

I've been thinking a lot about **trees**.

There are all the environmental reasons for which they are top of mind: Trees are [ecological workhorses](#), they are filters, they provide shade, they offer [critical habitat](#) (which manicured turf grass lawns do not).

They are also, increasingly, dead. Ravaged by climate change and mega-fires. "Six of the seven largest wildfires in California history have occurred in the past two years," reported the **Washington Post** [in a story](#) published this week about how scientists are grappling with how to manage the trees that remain. "In that period, up to nearly one-fifth of all naturally occurring large giant sequoias on Earth have been killed."

On a recent drive up to **San Francisco** with trees on my mind, I was reminded of the devastation as swaths of scorched landscape would fade in and out of view from my windshield. It made me think of [a recent essay](#) by **Rebecca Solnit** in **the Guardian** — an essay about a 300-year-old violin that is also a meditation on trees. "I often think of what we are doing with our frenetic burning of fossil fuels," she writes, "as a sort of war against the trees."

Without trees, we barrel recklessly toward extinction.

This makes an upcoming exhibition at the **Frederick R. Weisman Museum** at **Pepperdine University** in **Malibu** (an area well acquainted with fire) particularly poignant. "**To Bough and to Bend**," a group show that takes the **tree** as its binding theme, opens at the museum later this month. Organized by Cara Megan Lewis, Meaghan Ritchey, Vicki Phung Smith, Linnéa Spransy Neuss and Michael Wright, [it originally opened](#) on **March 11, 2020** — the day the World Health Organization

declared COVID-19 a pandemic — at **Bridge Projects** in Hollywood. Because of the pandemic, it went largely unseen.

A lot has happened since then — including Bridge giving up its gallery space last month and shifting, instead, to a roving curatorial model. But, thankfully, “To Bough and to Bend” has been resuscitated at the Weisman. It was one of the shows I had on my itinerary for that weekend in March when we all ended up going into lockdown.

The show has work that addresses environmental questions, such as **Billy Joe Miller’s** installation of melted materials drawn from the Paradise fire or **Kieran Dodds’** overhead views of the isolated patches of forest that surround churches in Ethiopia.

But there is also plenty that explores the culture and aesthetic significance of trees — be it the literal pattern of a tree’s form or the ways in which trees function as symbols of creation (the **Bodhi Tree** or the **Tree of Life**), as well as death. Included in the exhibition is an image by **Ken Gonzales-Day**, a Los Angeles artist who has long tracked the history of Mexican American lynchings in the West, a history that leads him to the trees on which these murderous actions took place.

The show’s catalog, which is worth reading, opens with diagrammatic responses to the simple prompt: “**If you could be a tree ...**”

Sculptor **Kazuo Kadonaga** chose the Japanese buna, a type of beech that taught him patience, while **Amir Zaki** selected the Monterey cypress for its “unusual and dramatic forms.” **Leonor Jurado**, an Ecuadorean artist based in Los Angeles, chose the Polylepis, an Andean tree otherwise known as “the paper tree,” for the sheets of fiber that protect it. “I find it highly poetic,” she writes, “plus its branches possess intense siennas and red colors.”

I’d probably pick the **mangrove**. I love the idea of being a seed that gets swept away by a current and ends up dropping roots wherever it happens to land.

*[“To Bough and to Bend”](#) opens at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum on Tuesday, Aug. 30; a reception and a curator-led walkthrough will be held on Sept. 10, starting at 3 p.m.; more on the [Bridge Projects](#).*