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Forest Encounters

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by Leah Weinstein



About the Artist

Leah Weinstein's artistic practice investigates connections between material culture and the social ideals of a larger collective. Using everyday objects and readymade materials to create sculpture, textiles and performance, Leah examines relationships between individuals and collectives, subjects and objects, action and display. Her professional experience includes illustration, and designing sets and costumes for contemporary theatre and dance companies. She completed a Masters in Fine Arts from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, and her work has been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, Touchstones Nelson, and City of Richmond Public Art Commissions.



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Forest Encounters

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... to listen to the forest is also, primordially, to feel oneself listened to by the forest, just as to gaze at the surrounding forest is to feel oneself exposed and visible, to feel oneself watched by the forest.

—David Abram

Dark Woods, Forest Monster, Forest Faeries, Folklore

Forests are places of mystery and sensory aliveness, full of scents, textures, and for those with active imaginations, fear and enchantment. In fairytales and popular culture, forests are places where witches dwell and large predatory creatures lurk and hide.¹ The mythology of the forest is that of a place of magic and lore. It is also a place of colonial consumption, where settlers arrive with surveyor's tools and a giant saw or feller buncher in tow, first to map out the terrain and then to mow down every viable tree for pulp and lumber. To experience a forest, alone or with others, is an opportunity to face oneself, one's imagination, and cultural associations with the land.

As an artist, settler, and uninvited guest on Coast Salish lands, my research asks: How do I navigate the forest-as-subject in my art practice? My experiences with forests draw largely from my occupation as a tree planter, where I worked in remote areas of British Columbia, Canada for 14 years. Witnessing clearcut after clearcut, I was confronted with the sheer devastation wrought by the commodification of these spaces. Alongside the destruction from logging, these experiences deepened my respect for living environments. While working in the bush, I often felt the stillness of the surrounding forest, and a sense of being alone, but the land was never truly still, and I was never really alone—I was part of a diverse and very alive ecosystem.

Insect Buzzing, Hawk Circling, Chipmunk Chirping, Ant Crawling, Chainsaw Humming

As we collectively find ourselves confronting our imbalanced relationship with the land, I grapple with this lack of balance through my art practice. Through this work, I reflect on my experiences in forested spaces to lean into my personal relationship with the land—leaning into my awe and my fear. My connections with the natural world are mediated by language and cultural associations, such as the notion of forests as renewable resources to be managed.² The forest as a subject feels thorny and elusive. It calls for a bodily presence, and a slowing down and attention to *timefulness*, as Geologist Marcia Bjornerud articulates—an awareness of and attention to the larger durations of time in relation to the earth.³

Forest as Resource/Forest as Perceiving Subject

As a tree planter, I scrambled across a thousand clearcuts, planting seedling after seedling, often navigating steep, rugged, coastal terrain. Occasionally I climbed over massive, fallen trees—perfect, ancient monoliths with giant, sweeping branches—that were logged and then left to rot. Due to damage, access issues, or the fluctuating prices of lumber, they were deemed not worth the expense of hauling them out. These occasions would amplify the sense of careless destruction of the logged sites that we were brought in to reforest. I often wondered: What does the forest see? What does a tree perceive?

Inspired by these experiences, *Tree Chair Prototype* (2023) asks: What would we be present to if we were to consider the world from the vantage point of a tree (see Figure 1)? Created for empathetic imagining of the trees' perspective, this work calls for an attuning into *timefulness*, and listening to the language of the forest.

Leaf Rustling, Bird Singing, Branch Crunching, Quiet Listening, Imagination Running

I encountered many animals as I traversed these deforested sites. On one occasion, as a branch crunched beneath my feet—as it had so many times that day, planting tree after tree—I heard a crunching echo about 30 feet away. I paused and looked up. A pair of sharp eyes amid a furry golden red and grey face peered back at me. It crouched down behind a log. A lynx! I thought, before I felt a quick rush of awe and fear. It slunk away silently.

This happened on many occasions, with a sudden appearance of elk, deer, coyote, or bear. After the initial shock, and sometimes a scramble to safety, I would marvel at their majestic beauty and wonder how they felt about our intrusions into their homes. At the

same time, I began to feel afraid of these surprise encounters. Eventually, to cope with this fear, I invented an imaginary protective creature to ease the anxiety of the real proximity of cougars and bears. This worked surprisingly well, as my rational mind understood that it was not the *real* bears that I was afraid of. I would conjure my protective companion whenever my anxiety caused me to startle and pause, listening intently to every rustling leaf. These experiences stayed with me and have become a subtle yet consistent underlying theme of my art practice. I find myself continually returning to themes of shelter, survivalism, and collectivity.



Figure 1. Weinstein, Leah. *Tree Chair Prototype*, 2023. Found chair, ratchet straps.

With *KitKat / Apocalypse Dress* (2013) I explore the question: How can I prepare for uncertain futures (see Figure 2)? Created to ease the anxiety of unknown and precarious futures, *KitKat / Apocalypse Dress* (2013) is a reversible garment with two exteriors. One side is hi-visibility nylon, covered in pockets containing small items, some useful and some not-so-useful (hatchet, fishing line, knife, penny whistle, KitKat bar, small toy). The other side is Melton wool, designed for stealth and warmth. Created before the pandemic, this work investigates a prepping mentality, anticipating the need for immediate action in the face of a potential disaster.

Ecologist and philosopher David Abram writes about the imagination as a tool for perceiving beyond what we can gather with our senses. He states:

Imagination is not a separate mental faculty . . . but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact . . . with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible. (1997, 58)

The idea that the imagination is an extension of our senses resonates with my approach to making. Imagination is often missing from the way I experience more-than-human worlds. As I navigate each tree, leaf, root system, insect, and creature, I am aware of my limited cultural knowledge of the forest. However, through my research *and* my imagination, I continually grapple with the tension between a sense of cultural disconnect from the land and my felt experiences of being in the land, with the land, immersed in its vastness and power.

My Body is from the Earth, the Soil, the Air, the Water

As a child and later as a young adult tree planter, I was not afraid of the woods. I became afraid after many experiences and over many years. These experiences are layered upon layers of history, upon layers of resource extraction, upon layers of cultural disconnect.

My work embodies the contradiction between my desire to connect with the forest, and our collective cultural disconnect from these wild habitats. As a way to contend with this contradiction, and in an effort to address my desire to offer some consolation and comfort to these forest creatures, I created *Garment for a Cougar, Prototype* (see Figure 3). I aim to underline the feebleness and inherent naivety in offering a wild animal a garment. I speak to that foolish desire, the foolishness of human efforts to build and fortify our own sense of security, at the expense of all other creatures. The more destruction from logging that I witnessed, and the displacement of those creatures whose homes were being destroyed, the more anxiety I felt in the forest.



Figure 2. Weinstein, Leah. *KitKat / Apocalypse Dress*, 2013. Mixed media.



Figure 3. Weinstein, Leah. *Garment for a Cougar, Prototype*, 2021. Studio process.

Cougar Slinking, Owl Swooping, Quail Running, Lynx Crouching

Abram investigates why Western culture is cut off from living environments, and he explores ways that written language severs connections with the living forms they represent (1997, 144). He articulates how our senses are synesthetically intertwined with written language instead of with the natural world: “our senses are now coupled, synesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar tree, ravens, and the moon” (1997, 138). Abram goes on to discuss how, in oral traditions (such as the Koyukon people of northwestern Alaska), as the environment changes, the local language evolves along with it (1997, 140). As Western colonial cultures are cut off from the landscape through the neat packaging of language, our awareness of the natural world diminishes.

Currently, with unprecedented forest fires and floods, expanding our awareness of the natural world has never been more urgent. Language helps me to understand the land through a rational lens, but at the same time, it hinders my receptivity of the ever-changing natural world. Using my imagination, I can investigate a tree as a perceiving subject. This process bypasses my rational mind, opens my senses, and allows for a wider perspective, and the possibility of perceiving subtler messages from the land.

Breathing Deeply, Tree in Earth, Raven Talking, Tree in Earth, Frog Hopping, Tree in Earth, Crunching, Listening, Tree in Earth

Replica tree after replica tree after replica tree—I plant. Although I have seen a lot of land, by road, by boat, by helicopter, I keep seeing the same clearcut, the same tree, over and over again. The ways that I have interacted with the forest have largely been through the repetition and labour of planting trees. I explore the aesthetics of repetition in *Safety Pins for Unknown Futures* (2015) (see Figure 4). Here I puncture the cloth thousands of times with safety pins. This notion of repetition and sameness is embedded in a colonial perspective of the land. To investigate this repetitive labour, I push the object (in this case, safety pin) beyond its sameness in search of a larger perspective—beyond a singular resource, into a mass of materials that seems to take on a life of its own (Bennett 2010).

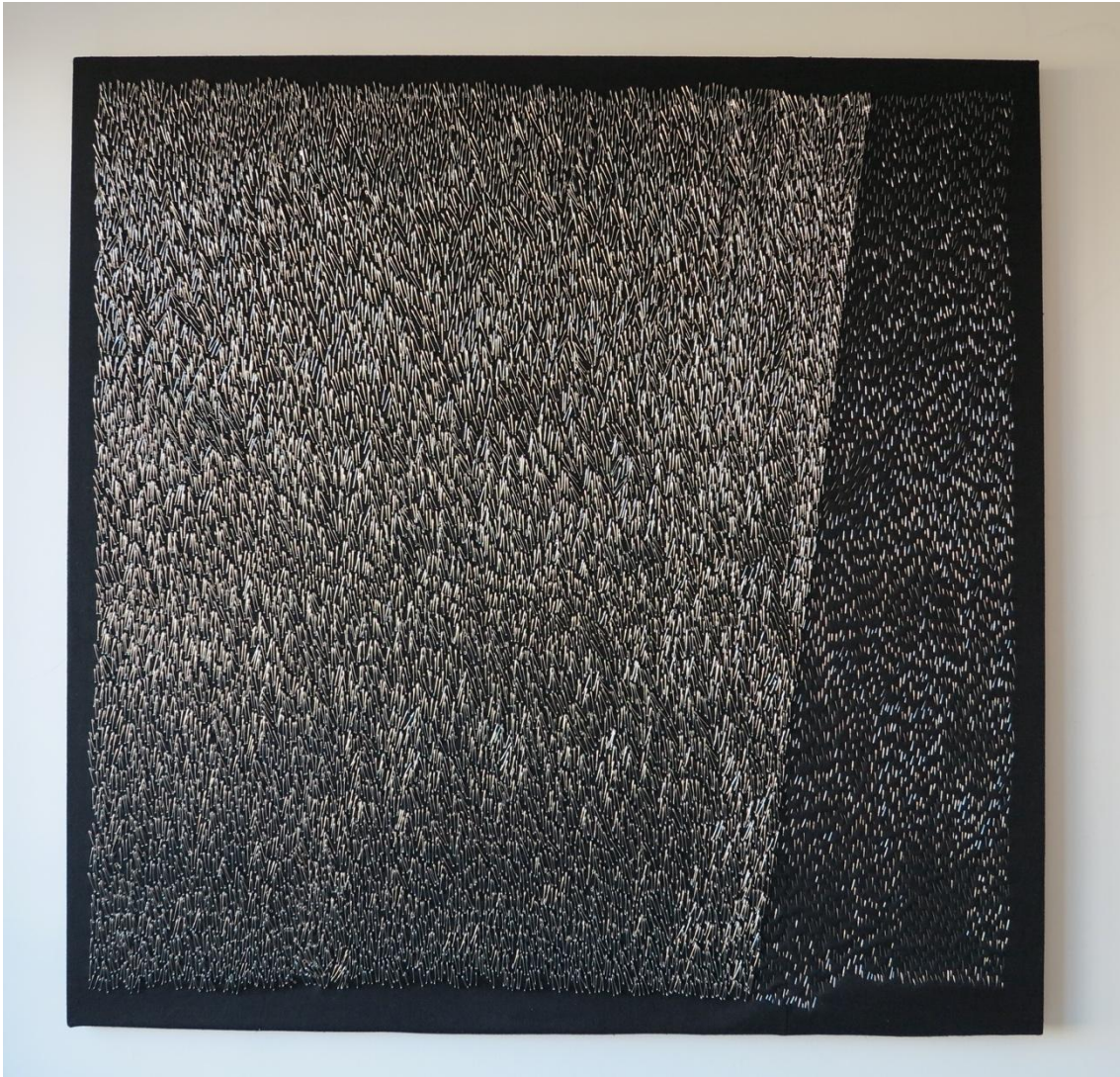


Figure 4. Weinstein, Leah. *Safety Pins for Unknown Futures*, 2015.

Forest Creature, Tree, Stone, Vibrant Matter

Another work, *Projects for micro utopias/How to build a fire in a revolution* (see Figure 5) follows a similar thread of enquiry. Through repetition, the singular objects (found wood and match sticks) are arranged to create a larger form. I listen to the materials and imagine how they might arrange themselves. In this way, I aim to acknowledge their potential agency, as vibrant matter (Bennett 2010).

This notion of materials as participating agents is helpful when acknowledging the challenges embedded in our cultural understanding of the land. Stones, earth and water all act, seemingly of their own volition. Perhaps they too are experiencing and perceiving others. In order to investigate these tensions through my art practice, I ask these questions: How can sculpture reframe the way we see the natural world? How can

sculpture generate “joy, terror, and collective thinking” (Haraway 2016, 31)? How do I investigate collective experiences of the landscape? How is the forest social and how does it communicate with us? How do I examine my relationship with the land, as a settler of mixed European and Jewish heritage on unceded Coast Salish territory? How do I confront and speak to an urgent need for conservation of wild spaces?



Figure 5. Weinstein, Leah. *Projects for micro-utopias/ How to start a fire in a revolution*, 2014. Found wood, matchsticks. Photo by Scott Massey.

Collective thinking, embodied activations

Another aspect of tree planting that has influenced my thinking, is being part of a close-knit collective. Each year we spent several months living together, in our small community of adventure freaks and rugged outdoor enthusiasts. We loved and suffered together, and we were stuck, day after day, month after month, facing challenges collectively. I explore the complexities of working together in several artworks, including *Garment for Collectives* (2013) (see Figure 6).

With this work I create opportunities to explore the trials and tribulations of working collectively. By creating and facilitating experiences in shared spaces, I propose that these turbulent times call for collective action and working together in embodied ways. My current research includes collective engagement through outdoor, walking

micro-residencies with other artists. In these sessions we explore embodied imagining within a variety of forested landscapes, listening to the land with our bodies. Through these investigations I examine how various elements—such as material forms and social engagement—mitigate or accentuate my experience of the land.

Both material elements and social relationships offer a sense of shelter. My studio work investigates ways that visual and tactile materials—including matchsticks, wood, tarp, and ratchet straps—can act as an interface between my body and the natural world—sensing, sheltering, and communicating. How do these materials highlight our human vulnerabilities? How do collective experiences help expand our sensitivity to more-than-human worlds? How do my explorations of materials and social experiences weave together or collide?

Using sculpture to explore and critique a settler relationship with the land, my artistic research aims to create new relationships with the forest landscape, while investigating connections between material culture and the social ideals of a larger collective. Through this work, I empathetically examine my impact on the forest, and the forests' impact on me.



Figure 6. Weinstein, Leah. *Garment for Collectives*, 2013. Mixed fibres, zipper, hooks. Photo by Hoda Hamouda.

Notes

¹ See Marco R.S. Post's descriptions of fairytales and popular culture (2014, 3).

² Vyse, et al. further describe this impact as "The physical ability to significantly modify forested landscapes may potentially affect other natural resources and systems if impacts to these resources are not considered" (2010, 130).

³ Geologist Marcia Bjornerud writes about the perspective of "timefulness" in relation to geology. She writes: "Most humans . . . have no sense of temporal proportion—the durations of the great chapters in earth's history" (2021, 56). Later, she expands on these ideas, adding: "Like inexperienced but overconfident drivers, we accelerate into landscapes and ecosystems with no sense of their long-established traffic patterns, and then react with surprise and indignation when we face the penalties for ignoring natural laws" (56).

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