

## My BFA Senior Year Thesis Project About Trees: Connecting artistic lineages in my work between then and now.

I'm writing this to talk about some of the themes in my BFA work that are resurfacing now; to outline connections, lineages of themes that carry forward to my current work.:

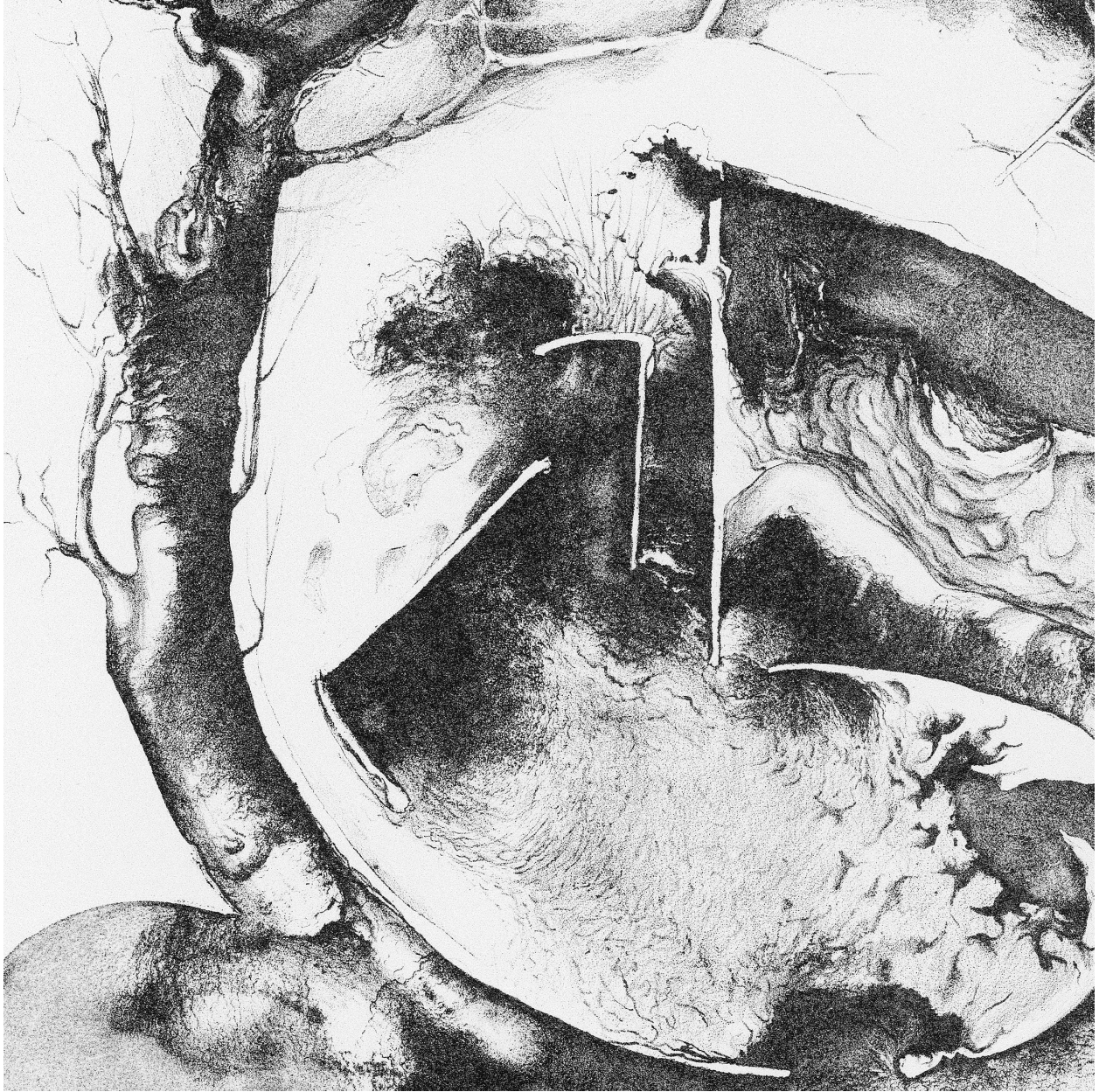
It was spring of 1982, my junior year in the Fine Art/Sculpture Department at Parsons School of Design; my third year in New York. I was homesick for nature; the farms, fields and forests where I grew up. A friend from school invited me for the weekend to his home in the Berkshires—an 1800s one-room schoolhouse he was renovating. Behind the house was a big field; behind the field were miles of forest. While my friend was at work, I spent a magical day wandering in the forest. The forest had an ancient, forgotten quality. I found wild watercress growing in a stream. The trees, the landscape, felt like ancestors; present, quiet, timeless. I thought about trees; to write, and draw them.

In senior year, I moved from East Village to a shared apartment in Hoboken, just across the Hudson River from Parsons. Our apartment was 10 blocks from the Path Train that crossed under the river to 14th St. in Manhattan. My favorite walk home each night from the Path Train, was through Stevens Institute of Technology, a beautiful grassy campus with meandering paths that wound between massive old trees, and along cliffs overlooking the Hudson, with the most spectacular view of New York City I'd ever seen. It was the beginning of the Palisades. I was drawn to the thick mass, the stolid presence of the trees; and the bold forms of the cliffs. This landscape nourished me. There the idea for my senior thesis project was born—a life-size hillside and tree. I sketched trees, and made a wax model for my project. In my lithography class, we were working with tusche. I made a moonlit tusche-wash drawing of a hillside and tree. Then with a fine lithography pencil I wove delicate organic plant forms, wood patterns, underground forms, into the painting.



"Tree Lithograph," 1983, 11 x 15, lithograph on cotton rag. Print method - tusche wash and litho pencil on lithographic stone.





Tree Lithograph - detail.

For my sculpture—to embody the solid weight and mass of a hillside and tree, I chose concrete for the base, and joined wood for the tree. Using wood joinery expanded on my junior year final sculpture project, "Between Heaven and Earth," where I first used Japanese joinery. I took History of Japanese Art and Architecture in fall of junior year. I was attracted to the simplicity of the beautiful joinery in the Japanese structures.





"Between Heaven and Earth," 1982, 5.5'h x 5'w x 4'd wood, limestone.





"Between Heaven and Earth," detail.

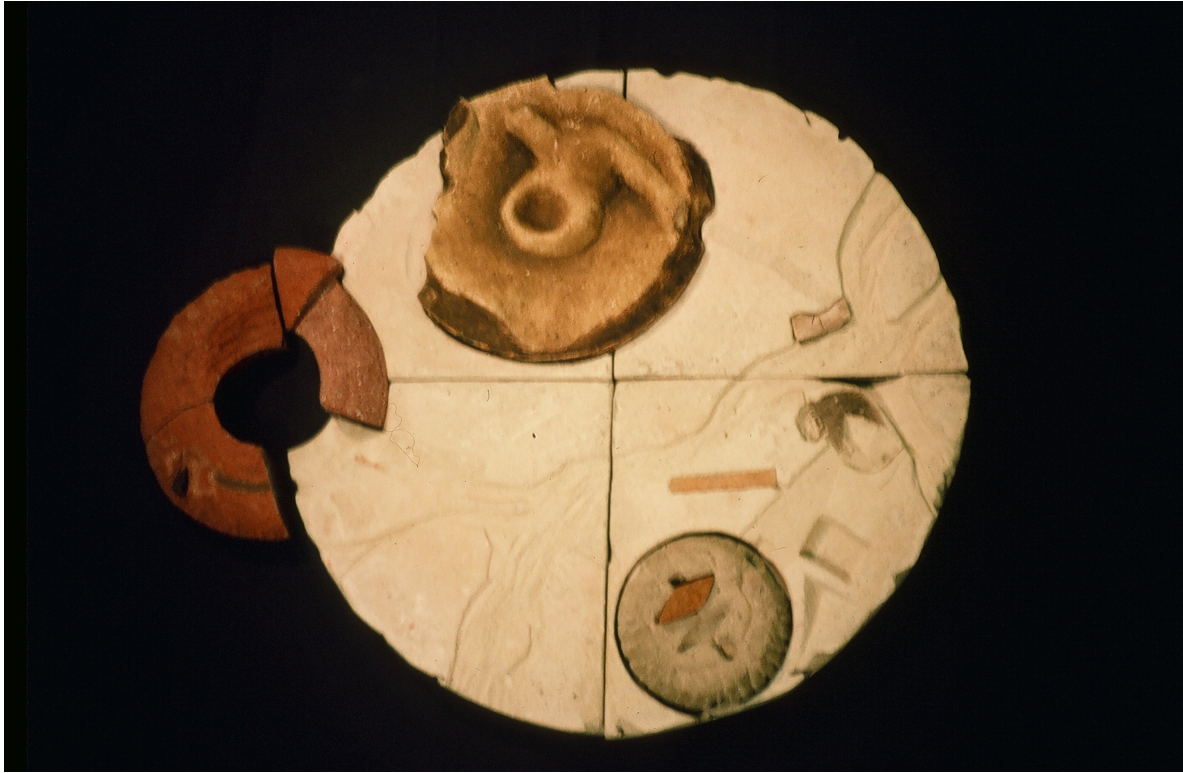




"Between Heaven and Earth," detail limestone centerpiece - overlays of cultures etched in the land.

That year I also experimented with drawings and sculptures on the floor. We learned of the Nasca Lines in our Native American Folklore class. I thought about markings on the surface of the land —layered remnants of cultures going back in time; about drawings and sculptures that make us aware of how our feet touch the earth. Some themes from that time continue, or are re-emerging now: ways that things connect and inform each other; cultures as overlays of memories embedded in the land — and trees.





"Untitled." Traces on the Earth -Sculpture for the Floor, 1982, plaster, stone, brick, terra cotta, sand-cast plaster.

A big tree was being taken down in Washington Square Park, a few blocks south of Parsons. Friends helped me bring some big log sections on a sculpture cart back to my studio space. I finished my model, and began to loft blueprints from the model to scale. I wanted to make the hillside in solid concrete. Don Porcaro, the head of the sculpture department, panned that idea. He suggested I make a rebar frame with wire lathe and cover it in masonry cement. When I complained that it wouldn't feel massive enough unless it was solid, he told me we'd never get it out of the basement to the gallery. "Don't worry, it will be heavy enough," he said with a grin. I bent rebar in a series of curved ribs, like a boat, following the contours of my model. I researched the strongest wood joints for diagonal angles cantilevered up in the air. Trees are better at creating their joining places to let branches soar, than I could be. I learned respect for how trees form themselves.

As I was creating my sculpture and body of work on trees, I wrote my senior thesis. I was writing about the forest in the Berkshires. I had a moment of automatic writing. Some ancestral memory dropped into me and spoke through my hand as I wrote. "Trees are the intermediary between earth and sky." (I was 22 when I wrote this 39 years ago. Though it needs editing, I've decided to leave it as I wrote it then):

"This year I decided I would work with the idea of organic structure, as opposed to my work last year which employed architectural vocabulary. My sculpture last year was very static, and I wanted to explore a dynamic subject matter. Organic form is aligned and structured by the flows of energy, whereas, often, man-made



forms are in opposition to them, and hence more rigid. The essential difference is to create form which releases energy rather than contains it.

During a weekend I spent in the Berkshires I had an experience which gave me the idea for my sculpture this year. It was this, a long sloping hillside, a swelling mass with a singular and fundamental energy, whose voice, if it had one, would be a low rumble. At the top of the rise, a tree springs, gaining strength and hardiness from this monumental force. The tree surges up, dispersing into branches, inseminating the air, diffuse, atmospheric, swept through by the wind. There is an exchange between the hillside and the tree, a transformation of energy. Each evolves, changes, rejuvenating the whole, receiving, giving back, according to its nature.

I began to study the structure of rocks and trees, going to parks and trying to get a feeling for my environment. I did drawings at first, but found that this process was too slow for the kinds of information I was gathering, which was more experiential and spontaneous. I photographed. I became aware of trees as conscious beings with an incredible strength and self-knowledge which allows them to soar up in great bursts of self-expression. Nothing is held back in the form of a tree. This gestalt of energy held a power for me.

What is there in the nature of trees that draws me, captures my fascination? What are they that I am striving to be? There is a center, a core, and extensions that reach above and below, diminishing from broad roots and limbs to the finer distinctions of branch and twig, and that which is not delineated, eloquently implied. And then there are buds, leaves, fruition in progress. Or defoliation, the coming again to cold reality, recognizing only that which is currently achieved, being once again naked and vulnerable to the world, reduced to the chilling essential in order to find new life, unworked potential. And winter is the long internal sleep before activity begins.

Each limb traces the form which lies closest in its environment. The weight of the lowest bough extends along the surface of the slope, only to spring abruptly for the horizon. Topmost branches scintillate, spraying out beyond their reach, to the sky, sunwards, or mysteriously poised towards the moon, reflectively drinking tangent frequencies of light.

An artist follows the paths of nocturnal ambiguities, acutely conscious, sensing more than seeing, to raise clarity into form, recognizing at daybreak the crystalized thought, esoterically produced for all to see.

Human beings could be more like trees, growing stronger for the branching out, profiting by all changes of weather; the distilling cold, and the incubating heat of the sun. The tree is unabashed before its situation, transforming to meet each



season, redefining its essence, in tune with each moment. The tree stands in time like a rock lies in a stream. It is the demarcation, we the variable, of place. Its changes are subtle. It reaches gradually into the dark, dense, subconscious earth, the womb and provider of all life. It rustles with every movement of the wind, swaying slowly, carrying quivering vibrations deep to its roots. It constantly transforms its origins. The tree is the intermediary between the lifetime of the earth, and the lifetime of a human being, Trees create a network of energy about the earth.

If one could see everything that exists as energy structured by pattern and rhythm, then a tree could be a receptacle, a unifier for all this. Polar in form, it is the artery which merges earth and air, darkness and light, motion and stasis, digesting rock, and thrusting upwards with hydraulic force. The tree is rhythm embodied. It is time measured out in form. And as all phenomena exist as frequencies of energy, the tree is nourished by them all.

My sculpture, "Cliffhanger," weighs over a thousand pounds. Part of my ambition in doing a large piece was to commit myself to following through on one idea. The building of Cliffhanger has required a tremendous will. I have undergone the same transformation of energy that I originally saw in the tree, of generating a great strength towards the realization of its form.

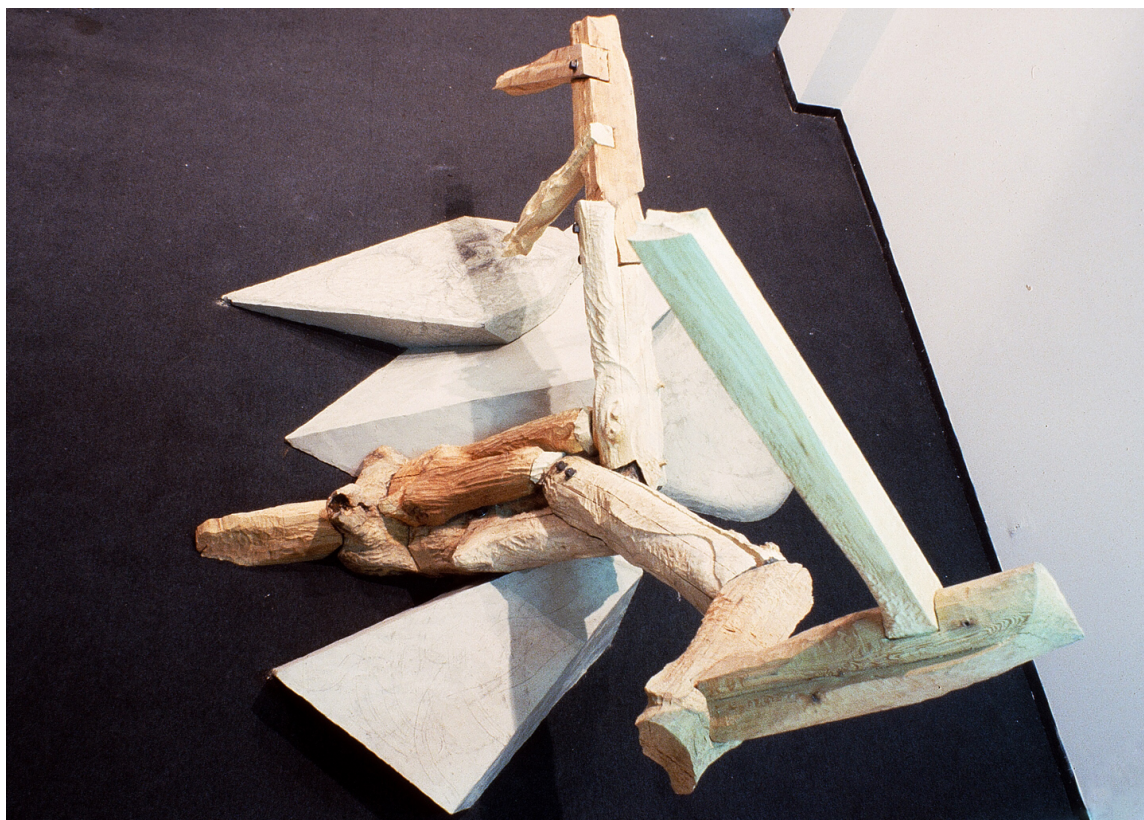
My original ideas of what building this sculpture would be like were quite romantic. I found that there was no romance in building this piece. It was hard work. My activities until the very end consisted purely of construction. I was learning about stress and technical specifics. I felt more like an engineer than a sculptress. But when I finally returned to carving the wood pieces, I found that I had lost my more decorative tendencies. I feel now that I am working towards a hardier, more realistic beauty.

I built this sculpture in 5 months. Our Senior Thesis Sculpture show had to be in April, a month early. All pieces were so big, April was the only time the whole gallery was available to fit them all. I named it "Cliffhanger," because it was touch and go whether I'd finish it in time. I was pleased with the power of the piece. It was also my first experience of profound exhaustion.



Cliffhanger - 1983: 10'h x 10'w x 7'd, wood, steel, reinforced concrete.





Cliffhanger – Overhead view.



Cliffhanger - detail.