

# ARTISTRY AND MORALITY OF MARIETTA PATRICIA LEIS AND ROBERT MACFARLANE



*It is worse than boorish, it is criminal to inflict an unnecessary injury on the tree that feeds or shadows us.*

*- Henry David Thoreau*

No, the title is not a misprint; both the world wide web and the wood wide web are templates for connections and communications. The world web connects humans and the wood web connects trees. Together they are essential for sustenance, support, and solace. Together they are the basis for the visual art of Marietta Patricia Leis and the verbal art of Robert Macfarlane.

Marietta Patricia Leis is exhibiting selections from her series ENGRAINED: Ode to Trees (2019) as part of ALCOVES 20/20 No.2 at the New Mexico Museum of Art until February 9, 2020. The exhibit is a symbiotic ode to trees and their representations, an appreciation of their value for supplying shelter, food, shade, rest, purification, and beauty. Ultimately, trees and their replications as created by Leis are the purest forms of physical rebirth and spiritual regeneration. The artist reflects about “walking among trees to dispel the stress of life and maintain mental health.” The viewers of her works can achieve the same transformation.

Her paintings Symbiosis I, II are green portals or windows into the forest, glowing with a subtle illumination. They are not monochromatic, but varied in tone and texture, a result of many layers of painting and sanding. The paintings actually grow like trees, gifting us with translucency and peace. The layers of paint can symbolize the rings of the tree. The viewer actually feels like falling in and moving through the canvas, as if entering the world of *Green Mansions* (1904), the romantic and ecological novel by W. H. Hudson which praises the wilderness while warning of the danger of man encroaching upon nature.

Resting on the floor below the canvases are Traces 1,3,2, parts of a salvaged limb from a mimosa tree which fell on Leis' roof during a storm. She saved the pieces of the tree and transformed them, granting us continuity and reclamation. The association with world wide deforestation due to clearings, fires, pollution is inevitable. Another one of her trees, this time a spruce, is the inspiration for *Splinter*. The 30 foot high tree died on Leis' property and, unfortunately, had to be cut down. Again she preserved the pieces which she sanded, equating grains of wood with brushstrokes. She also equates the living form with the dead lying on the same spectrum of our world. The ultimate experience is of memory for loss and hope for rebirth.

Leis uses the forms of print, paint, sculpture, video, and photography to express her environmental concerns; "I worry about our incredible blue and green planet's survival." We honor her theme when we appreciate her artistry.

We can support the sustainability of trees by protecting forestlands, controlling land clearing, and reversing climate change. Trees support us by providing food, medicine, and air. What is remarkable is how trees support each other. Robert Macfarlane, author of *UNDERLAND* (2019) provides the verbal counterpoint to Leis' visual imagery. The book convinces the reader of the vital interconnection between the human and the natural world. Just as humans generously empathize with and help each other, so do trees. Macfarlane describes how trees can sense when one of them is lacking nutrition or is falling under stress. They actually develop joint underground root systems to share nutrients to nurse the patient back to health. The healthy trees develop hyphae, microscopically thin fungi, which connect at the cellular level and weave together underground root systems, a true wood wide web. Individual trees do not compete for resources; they collaborate and nurture each other. This is a lesson we can all follow.

If there is human meaning to be made of the wood wide web, it is surely that what might save us as we move forwards into the precarious, unsettled centuries ahead is collaboration: mutualism, symbiosis, the inclusive human work of collective decision making extended to more-than- human communities. (Macfarlane 113).

Marietta Patricia Leis sculpts and paints, Richard Macfarlane writes and explores. The least we can do is to consider their thoughts and expressions.

**Written by Sharon McCawley, Curatorial Docent at the New Mexico Museum of Art**