



CANOPY

On Helen Lessick's Trees

This monograph was created for the 30th anniversary of *House for Summer*, the living tree sculpture planted in 1987 in Hoyt Arboretum, Portland, OR USA.

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CANOPY

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Considerations on Helen Lessick's Trees

by Victoria Ellison



Through 70 exhibitions, performances, artist's books and public art spanning ten states, on four continents and in collections from New York's Museum of Modern Art to the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, Helen Lessick has focused on the extraordinary in the ordinary. For four decades, she has harnessed natural processes to create art informed by site, including trees in city parks, a singular oak in an urban arboretum, and local soils as cultural catalyst and civic partner. Lessick takes common and relatable imagery and reinterprets it in strikingly unusual materials. As critic Douglas Britt wrote, Lessick's art is "designed to bring poetry out of objects with as gentle a nudge as possible."

'Trees grow and age, they weep and bud, have sex
and offspring — they're joyous.'

"I work with direct-from-the-source materials and natural processes," says Lessick. "Art viewers typically revere the human hand affecting fine art materials. In my work, nature is a sculptural collaborator." Lessick harnesses natural processes to create her forms, which range from treetops bound in a canopy to resonant poetry stamped into a snowbank to text shaved on a cow.

A large part of Lessick's work is inspired by the life of trees, their seasons, cycles, and leafing. "Trees grow and age, they weep and bud, they have sex and offspring — they're joyous," she says. Lessick invites us to wake to these quiet beings in our midst, to consider their systems, resilient life functions and perspective.

Lessick was raised in the Philadelphia area, and her art is rooted in her experiences in the Philadelphia Museum of Art galleries. There she absorbed cultural masterpieces ranging from Renaissance painting to the intellectual mischief of Dada. The city's historic public art and civic plazas were also influential. Though much contemporary art is self-referential, her approach honors "the Hudson River School and Fairmount Park landscape, works reimagining the awe expressed by European artists and designers experiencing North America's

untamed nature for the first time," she says. Neither landscape painting nor design, Lessick works in land installation, a kind of landscape poetry.

Lessick's blue-collar family felt uninvited to Philadelphia's many museums. "School trips introduced me to the art museums; my parents couldn't," she says. So after studying art at Reed College and the University of California, Irvine, establishing a studio and public art practice, and writing and speaking on public art worldwide, she devotes herself to a work style that is inclusive but with far-reaching implications. To Lessick, this approach is vital. "In public art I try to be a diplomat for artworks," she says, "to engage a public that may be uncomfortable with cultural innovation or hostile to art and contemporary artists."

In an overbuilt world, nature can be an afterthought relegated to the ordinary. Lessick inspires her audiences, museum members and park workers, to re-perceive nature's impact in a fresh, spontaneous way. As she asks, "What is the largest living thing you've seen today? Quite likely it's a tree." Helen Lessick's art works to open our minds and eyes to environments and ideas.



Early Winter 2007: Mature trees, leafless in seasonal rains



November 2016: Seasonal trimming



Spring 1987: Arbor Day planting of artist-initiated project

House for Summer

1987-present

Portland, OR

Lessick's 'House' series began as enlargements of her shadow box sculptures. From her early fascination with Joseph Cornell's work, Lessick explored sculpture as exterior form and interior habitat. In gallery, museum and outdoor sites, she made simplified house forms from hay bales chain-link fencing, soaker hoses spouting water or steel pipes spouting fire. Her diaphanous fabric house, suspended high above Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square, floated amid urban architecture.

For the permanent (and permanently changing) *House for Summer* in Portland's Hoyt Arboretum, Lessick chose an west-facing slope to plant 15 Himalayan birch trees in a rectangle. The trees were shaped and trained into angles collectively suggesting the roof of a basic house. On the summer solstice, the rising sun enters the down-slope "doorway," while the leafy roof shades the interior. Viewers may see the metaphor of natural habitat and evolution, experience nature's beauty and refuge, or re-imagine life processes occurring all around us.

Opposite: Summer 2002: Mature Canopy





Through the light of seasons, the tree reproduces, breathes, survives.



House for Summer Events and Performances

House for Summer was an artist-initiated project planted with city permission. Intended as both a sculpture and site for performances, celebrations, picnics and outdoor education, Lessick's 1990 *Kepler's Dream* performances inaugurated the series. Her continuing summer solstice performances mark special events in the living sculpture's life.

1987

Arbor Day: Artist-initiated living tree sculpture planted as temporary public art work. Volunteers Brian Foulkes, Mark Ledford, Ernie Mankowitz, Fred Nilsen, Bob Recken, Bill Sauerwein and Sue Thomas planted the trees purchased by the DreamTime Foundation.

1990

Kepler's Dream: Site-specific installation and two sunset performances by Lessick with dancer Ruby Burns, composer Michael Stirling and lighting designer Jeff Forbes.

1991

Solstice Event: Reading of works by Hildegard of Bingen and Mary Oliver.

1992

5th Anniversary: An ice block bench melts inside the House over two days.

1993

Solstice Event: *Release Re:Lady*. Release of 6,000 Lady Bugs within the House.

1997

10th Anniversary: *House for Summer Songs*. Reading of Walt Whitman poetry.

2002

15th Anniversary: *Rooting*. Living sculpture added to the City of Portland's permanent Public Art Collection.

2007

20th Anniversary: *Arbor Vitae: The Life of Trees*. Native plant giveaway with remarks by Lessick and arborist Fred Nilsen.

2012

25th Anniversary: The trees sough alone.

2017

30th Anniversary: *The Mature Canopy*: Artist Remarks.



View from *House for Summer* interior

House for Summer is maintained by Portland Parks and Recreation and the Regional Arts and Culture Council Public Art Program in an unique partnership established in 2002.

"Birches have a limited life span; this artwork will die. Ultimately, the piece is about transience, being in the moment and recognizing how quickly beauty slips away."

"In my early childhood, my mother led me by the hand, or in her arms, brought me to the lower ridges of Mount Hekla, especially around the feast of Saint John when the sun, visible for 24 hours, leaves no room for night..."

~ Johannes Kepler, *Somnium*, 1634



Kepler's Dream, 1990. A site-specific two-day performance inspired by Johannes Kepler's *Somnium*, a work introducing his theory of a heliocentric universe as a fable and unpublished in his lifetime. *Kepler's Dream* was written, directed and performed by Lessick (above) with dancer/choreographer Ruby Burns (right), composer Michael Stirling and lighting designer Jeff Forbes at *House for Summer*.





Fred Nilsen, introducing Arbor Vitae: *The Life of Trees* performance 2007



Arbor Vitae: *The Life of Trees* performance, with sculpture holding native plants given away to attendees. 2007



Release Re:Lady, 1993 event releasing 6,000 ladybugs, a natural predator

Lessick's performed events at *House for Summer* are conceptual and poetical frames for the biological performances of fifteen deciduous trees in a living tree museum. These public events are part of the larger time frame of Planting, Adolescence and Maturity.

Act One: 1987

Humans gather on a rectangle of earth and plant Himalayan birches as a temporary project above Portland's West Hills. The tree community meshes roots and branches.

Act Two: 1988 – 2006

Bypassing the logging and finishing of the forest products industry, *House for Summer* grows as permanent public art and a habitat for picnickers, revelers, catkins and kids.

Act Three: 2007 to Present Day

The birch trees enter middle age. Anniversary events invite us to acknowledge and celebrate the leafy giants in their world.

'As you step over the threshold and into the little house made from trees, the wind kicks up, making the wall of leaves murmur. And it makes you think back to your childhood...'

Inara Verzemnieks, *The Oregonian*, June 22, 2007



The Trees:

A Play in Three Acts by the Plant Community

2005

Santa Monica, CA

In her week-long installation *The Trees: A Play in Three Acts* by *the Plant Community*, Lessick turned Santa Monica's Clover Park into a theater with staging, fine art tickets and a star: the Santa Monica Millennium Tree. Planted by the city in 1999 as a future celebration site, the Millennium Tree's trunk sported a crown, painted in bee pollen, for the performances. An arboreal pun, this crown invokes the enormous crown Lessick placed on the Tacoma Art Museum for her 1995 solo show *The Crowning Glory of Tacoma*.

The play began with a prelude and a playbill to introduce the star and cast. Lessick laid a red carpet to "give the tree



Playbill and set of fine art tickets to the seven free events.
Designed by Lessick, printed on vegetable vellum by Jeff Wasserman

Opposite Page:

Prelude: A red carpet leads to the Santa Monica Millennium Tree

Right (top to bottom):

Prelude: Millennium Tree on the red carpet with a fan

Act One Scene One: Shelter (eggs)

Act Three Scene One: Repose (two horses were tethered in the shade of the pines)





Act One Scene One: Shelter detail: 100 fertile brown eggs circle the tree

star treatment," she says, referencing regalia lavished on Oscar-night celebrities. The three-act play unfolded over a week. One three-hour scene was presented each day. The curtain on Act I, Scene One, raised at dawn with 100 brown eggs protectively circling a tree trunk. In Act II, bubble machines high in sweetgum branches invoked biosynthesis by iridescent spheres spreading on the breezes. In the spotlight of a tree's vital work absorbing carbon dioxide and "exhaling" oxygen each day, visitors could chase the bubbles and collect art cards describing the life of the tree from seedling to shady giant. In Act II, Scene One, 10,000 ladybugs were released. In Act III, Scene Two, night fell

and blue illumination traced the darkened limbs. "I explore commonalities to resuscitate significance, to generate greater appreciation," Lessick notes.

Lessick also challenges the idea of where art belongs and to whom, tweaking the notion that museums must contain indoor spaces. "An arboretum is a tree museum," she observes and in her work, a museum is anywhere and everyone is invited. Addressing the art world and a wider society unlikely to be found sipping wine within white gallery walls, *The Trees* celebrates the place of plants through play, with a conviction that art can bind society to nature.



Act One Scene Two: Respiration. Bubbles flow from the Sweetgum trees

'Art can bind society to nature.'



Shadow Reliquary

2009

Shadow Reliquary pays homage to a deceased elm tree removed from Lessick's Silver Lake backyard in Los Angeles. The hillside is a large and rare green spot in a center of an urban, particularly youthful, culture scene more focused on the streamed moment than the natural one. Taking large tree sections with bark removed, Lessick scribed the tree's life in ink on the bare wood, in the manner of a graphic novel or tattoo. The work makes us reconceive a tree not as inanimate, but as a body with embodied memory. A tree can live 500 years, but it's as mortal as a human.



'A tree can live 500 years, but it's as mortal as a human.'

'It's really a celebration of seeing nature, in a way that invokes
the early cave painters.'

can shadow

on pl
as if

Unnatural Wonders

2016

For *Unnatural Wonders*, an artist book of 26 parts, Lessick made acorns by wrapping pages from *Unnatural Wonders: Essays on the Gap Between Art and Life* by Arthur C. Danto around clay cores. The acorn sculptures were modeled on individual California live oak seeds. These oaks produce thousands of acorns each year but very few thrive or survive to maturity.

Like much contemporary art, Lessick's work is conceptual. "Acorns, seeds of the oak, are like eggs," she says. "Eggs of birds, insects, reptiles and mollusks live in the tree's environs." Lessick's acorn alphabet resides in specimen jars for observation and inspection. She sees potential and meaning as conceptual symbols that circle back to writing and reality.

Lessick's choice of Danto's text was specific and intentional. Arthur Danto, called "the most consequential art critic since Clement Greenberg" by the *New York Times*, argues in his essays that after Warhol, an art object can be anything – even his art criticism can be conceptual acorn sculpture. Leaving the text legible but fragmented, the work investigates the gap between art and life by focusing on life forms and blurring art theories.

Though not a Quaker, Lessick was influenced by Quaker ideals as a Philadelphian. "Quakers seek a direct relationship with god," she explains. "I strive for a direct relationship with experience, with trees and plants, squirrels and ants, makers and theoreticians." To promote direct relationship with common physical and spiritual impulses, Lessick asks us to observe and wonder, even as we inspect and collect.

Previous page: *Unnatural Wonders* detail

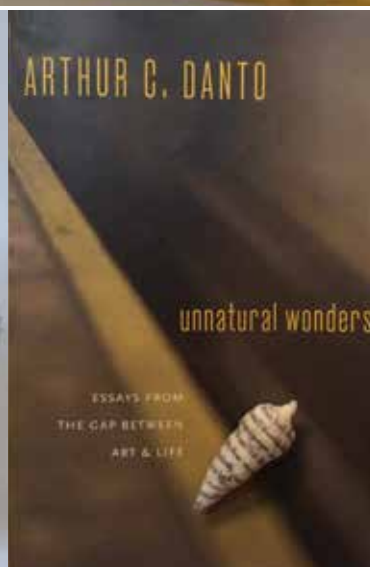
This page: Individual Acorn details

Opposite: (top to bottom)

Unnatural Wonders display shelf

Set of canisters (left), Cover of Danto's paperback, 2005 edition (right)







Quercus

(The Invisible Spectrum)

2015

Descanso Botanical Gardens, CA

Quercus is the scientific name for the oak family. Lessick's *Quercus* (The Invisible Spectrum) focused on one distinguished, elderly specimen in a large oak grove in Descanso Botanical Gardens, northeast of Los Angeles. "To create a contemplative space," she says of her method, "I surrounded the tree with twelve tall mirrors to physically bring viewers' eyes to the tree's perspective." On each mirror, Lessick painted fine lines, representing electrical impulses of the acorn's vascular system interspersed with the stylized heartbeat of eggs. These electrical spectra compliment the subtle ultrasonic — and recently recorded — vascular sounds of living trees. Like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, once rhythmically drowned by tides and now landlocked by climate change, Lessick's work incorporates natural processes. Her stainless steel mirrors, cut into acorn and egg silhouettes, reflect onto the tree trunk. At sunrise, one or more mirrors focus shaped light onto the trunk. Nature-centric artists have done similar works across millennia, including the solstice-measuring installations at Stonehenge and Chaco Canyon. Lessick says, "We've made nature invisible by replacing process with intermediaries." In *Quercus* process is inextricably part of the creative spectrum.







An installation lasting three months, *Quercus* changed with seasonal and solar movement and viewer's perspective
 Lower right: Sunrise reflects an acorn silhouette onto the tree trunk



Philosophy (for John Dewey), 1990 pastel 50 x 38"

Works on Paper

1985 - 2016

Lessick has made drawings and works on paper throughout her career. Her solo exhibits include 'Pastel Drawings' at the Sierra Nevada Museum of Art (now Nevada Art Museum) in Reno, 'Images of Summer,' an installation of singular and grouped gouaches at Seattle's Esther Claypool Gallery, and 'Works on Paper' at the American Institute of Architects in Los Angeles. Also noted for her unique artists' books and public artist book projects, she has taught college level watercolor, installation and sculpture.

Lessick says, 'I use drawing to explore trees as image, object, portrait and process. From conceptualized planting to the unseen life of the tree below grade to the movement of birch leaves in the breeze, drawing is an immediate response to the living giants.' Process and portrait, Lessick's trees on paper capture the liveliness in these sentient, significant plants.



Radical.
2016
gouache on
Bristol board 17 x 14"





Opposite Page (clockwise left to right)

Birch Tree House proposal (unrealized), 1985
watercolor & pencil, 8 x 11"

Calendar of Habitations (detail), 1985
pencil on Arches paper 22 x 30"

No More Room (page 3), 1986, unique 8-page
artist book with watercolor, 11.5 x 15.5"

House for Summer proposal (detail), 1986,
pencil on cream paper 22 x 30"

This Page (clockwise)

Leafing, 2016 watermedia on paper 32 x 24"

Arbor Vitae Playbill (detail), 2007
offset print on blue paper, edition of 100

The Trees: A Play in Three Acts ticket set, 2005,
serigraph on vegetable vellum, edition of 500





Helen Lessick

About the Canopy

Sculpture is a process; a process of accretion, accumulation, selection and elimination. Sculpting with and around living plants brings growth, change and collaboration to my creative process.

I create site-specific sculpture, public art, installation, drawings and books to layer exploration and reflection with context and content. Uniting play and factual research, conceptual practice and creative non-fiction, I examine place.

My subject is the wonder of our natural and built environments. The aesthetics of context and the ambiguity of content interest me, as does our multifaceted use of public sites and open spaces.

I work in and outside the studio, alone and in collaboration. Good fortune delivered civic partners willing to lend their time and resources, public lands and seasonal services, to my creative practice. This generosity is inspiring, humbling and infectious.

Art has the power to harness observation to curiosity, attention to creative wonder. In this body of work I explore the remarkable wonders in our shared canopies.

June 2017

Helen Lessick

Born Langhorne, PA | Resides Los Angeles, CA

Recent Solo Exhibitions

2017: 'Canopy,' Jeffrey Thomas Fine Art in association with Murdoch Exhibition Space & Hoyt Arboretum, Portland, OR. Travelling 2017
2013: 'Works on Paper,' American Institute of Architects, Los Angeles, CA
2009: 'Other Arrangements,' Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, TX
2005: 'Nonet,' Pinckney Center for the Arts, Bend, OR
2002: 'Resident Houses,' Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA

Select Collections

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
New York Public Library, New York, NY
Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Miami Beach, FL
University of Washington Library Book Arts Collection, Seattle, WA

Permanent Public Art

2012: 'Soil Sample: Kenya,' Kounkuey Design Initiative/Kibura, Nairobi, Kenya
2011: 'Hollywood Charms,' Assistance League of Southern California, Hollywood, CA
2010: 'The Poetics of Air,' City Air Treatment Facility #1, Los Angeles, CA
2001: 'Vestige,' Chemistry Building, Reed College, Portland, OR
1999: 'Collect 'Ems,' Safeco Field. Stadium Public Facilities District, Seattle, WA
1998: 'The Uses of Enchantment,' University of Washington, Seattle, WA

Recent Group Exhibitions

2016: 'Broadcast,' Keystone Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
2014: 'CultureLab: Disguise,' Pico Union Project, Los Angeles, CA
2013: 'Ways of Water,' Thoreau Center for Sustainability, San Francisco, CA
2012: 'Turn Here: Artists Promote Environmental Awareness,' Gershman Galleries, Philadelphia PA
2011: 'Bronson Foundation 20th Anniversary Show,' Lewis + Clark College, Portland, OR. Catalog
2010: LAMAG 2010, Barnsdall Art Center, Los Angeles, CA
2004: 'Olympic Project' exhibit on the route of the Olympic torch, Ianna Petropolis, curator.
2003: ISC@GFS, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ
2002: Faire Internationale d'Arte Contemporaine (FIAC), Porte de Versailles, Paris France

Recent Artist's Residencies

2014: Artist in Residence, Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture/Taliesin West, AZ
2014: Writer in Residence, Annenberg Community Beach House, City of Santa Monica, CA
2011: Artist in Residence: Migratory Trees project, Pilgrim School, Los Angeles, CA
2003: Lithographic Residency, Atelier Bordas, Paris, France
2000: Residency Project, Regional Arts & Culture Council, Portland, OR

Select Grants & Awards

2011: International Research Grant, Art Matters, Inc., New York, NY
2000: Bronson Fellow, Bonnie Bronson Foundation, Portland, OR
1998: Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, New York, NY

Education

University of California/Irvine, Master of Fine Art in Studio Art
Reed College, Portland, OR Bachelor of Art in Fine Art

Works in the Exhibit

Sited Works

House for Summer

Hoyt Arboretum
4000 SW Fairview, Portland, OR

Planted 1987 – current

Artist-initiated project with early support of Portland Parks and Recreation and the Hoyt Arboretum Friends Foundation.

2002 Accessioned into the City of Portland Public Art Collection.

Quercus (The Invisible Spectrum)

Descanso Garden
1418 Descanso Drive, La Canada Flintridge, CA

Sept. 1 – Dec. 4, 2016

Temporary outdoor installation in the West Oak grove of the heritage botanical garden in conjunction with Oasis, an exhibition in the Garden's Sturt Haaga Gallery, curated by John David O'Brien. Supported by Gallery and Garden staff.

The Trees: A Play in Three Acts by the Plant Community

Clover Park
2600 Ocean Park Blvd., Santa Monica, CA

Oct. 7 – 15, 2005

Temporary, site-related series of six three-hour installations over one week.

Exploring the contributions of trees at dawn, day and dusk and collectible and fine art tickets on vegetable vellum to the free tree events with masterprinter Jeff Wasserman. Supported by Santa Monica Public Art and Parks Departments. Commissioned by Fresh Art program, Santa Monica Arts Commission, CA.

Studio Works

Once a Tree

2016

Altered commercial wooden chair with wall mounted painting 48" x 60 x 36"

Shadow Reliquary

2009

Four part sculpture with wall and pedestal mounted units exploring the memories of a mature and deceased Russian Elm tree on the artist's Silver Lake property in Los Angeles.

Dimensions variable

Unnatural Wonders

2016

Set of 26 canisters holding papier maché acorns made from the pages of Arthur C. Danto's *Unnatural Wonders: Essays on the Gap Between Art and Life*.

Columbia University Press, 2005

Dimensions variable;
canisters 3.25" x 2.75 x 2.75" each;
shelf is 120" long.



Canopy Exhibit Locations:

Jeffrey Thomas Fine Art in association with
Murdoch Exhibition Space & Hoyt Arboretum

Portland, Oregon

June 7 – July 29, 2017

Pence Gallery
Pinckney Center for the Arts,
Central Oregon Community College
Bend, Oregon

September 24 – October 28, 2017

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Regional Arts & Culture Council

Jeffrey Thomas

And especially Mr. Fred Nilsen

Photography Credits

Brian Foulkes, Pages 6 (1987
Planting), 31 & 33

William Short, Pages 12 & 13
(Red carpet)

All other photos courtesy of
artist



Once a Tree (front and back details)

Once a Tree

2016

Once A Tree is a commercially produced, artist-altered, wooden armchair. Turned by lathes, bent by steam, and coated in paint, the tree is disguised in chair form. Lessick suggests the tree's presence with green paint and white ghost leaves, detritus of an arboreal life.



something extraordinary will happen today
will you see it?

Structural Expressionism
Los Angeles, California

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