Witnessing Trees

'In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I feel that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me…'

Trees arrest me—both as living creatures and as an earthly element. From fragile seedlings to thriving saplings to towering trunks to hollow snags to the detritus of fallen limbs and rotting stumps, the earthly landscape in which I live is populated with trees and littered by tree parts. Without their forms, their ambiences, their ecosystems, their playfulness with light, their recycling of the air, indeed without their very matter—their wood—my art would never have emerged into life. In sculpting my artworks, I have become, whether I will it or not, sculpted in turn by trees and so a witness to them.

But trees litter the earth in yet another manner—as disposable reams of paper, as particle board concocted from sawdust, as a cheap material in mass-made, prefabricated, disposable items. And trees gain a shoddy second-life in the images of their grains imprinted on plastic veneers simulating real wood. As a philosopher and artist I worry about this technologically-driven simulation of trees and indeed of all living entities. As a teacher I confront classrooms of students, whose gazes are increasingly absorbed by screens engaged in the electronic mimicry of trees and other living entities. Increasingly abstract, our perceptions of the living world lose contact with its living flesh. An important element of my artworks is that they involve touching and being touched by the living tree, as well as its mortal skeletons and decaying tissues. In doing so, my work takes as much issue with the ethics of leaving-no-trace as with the technology of unbridled manipulation. We must touch trees and make our mark upon them, if they are to touch and make their mark upon us. And in engaging in this co-functioning, this touching that is touched, we must learn the humility of making a mark that takes seriously what trees offers us in their right, in their flesh.

In a controversial passage in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty reports on how the forest gazes at the artist, even as the artist gazes at the forest. This is an odd claim, since

certainly trees are without a gaze in that they are without even an eye in which that gaze might rest. And yet is it so fanciful to claim that trees respond to my passing among them? To touch a tree is to find my touch returning to itself strangely altered, irremediably marked by arboreal flesh. The very frisson of bark against my skin, the tenacity with which a green leaf clings by its stem to a limb—these are not solely of my flesh, even as they come to make their way into it. Similarly, to gaze upon a tree is to find my gaze, in its evanescent but insistent touching of all that it lights upon, also altered and marked by that which it has encountered. In remarking upon this altering and marking of my perceptions, I become a student of the tree—it instructs me on how to adopt its life into the life of my own body. Here another sort of second-life is granted to the tree than that offered by the screens and plastic veneers of our technological appropriation of trees. And, as a corollary, the trees of my artworks also alter, mark, through their flesh, my perceptions of my own living flesh, my very subjectivity. If not an active eye, the tree is, at the very least, a contoured and strangely active mirror, a borderland, through which my gaze and so my body returns to itself uncannily displaced and renewed. The tree claims and inhabits my gaze, bringing me to myself precisely by making the circuit of my seeing and touching move beyond myself into a flesh that is alien to my own and yet still its kin. No matter how shrill or eerie the disjunction of wood and muscle might be, each of these species of flesh instantiates itself in my gaze through how the other might respectively approach and embody *its* other.

One important element in my practice of sculpting under the gaze of trees is to approach the forms of trees—their contours, surfaces and volumes—by incorporating their very matter into my artworks. My sculptures are made of trees, even as they allude to trees. A crucial aspect in the magic of the artwork involves how its medium—whether it be oil paint, silver crystals or ceramic glaze—eerily embodies a subject matter as a living entity or earthly element. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in "Eye and Mind," the artist is peculiarly situated to explore how the art medium, serving as an exterior entrance into our perceptions of other beings, at the same instance can enfold her or him within the very bodies of these beings and those beings within her or his body too.[1] The transmigration of the tree's life into a painter's oils and thence into my own body as I look upon the painting is the wonder of seeing—how the outside of seeing, its visible, also brings with it an inside, an invisible.

But to complicate and simplify this matter in the same gesture, in my work the very matter of the tree—its limbs, its bark, its wood, its roots—also becomes the medium

by which the tree makes its invisible life visible. My sculptures are both wooden *and* arboreal. As a result, rather than trees appearing in a medium transcending their own bodies, the very tissues and organs of a tree—heartwood, root, bark, leaf or limb—are already treated as media both expressing and transcending the particular life of that tree. The line of this tree limb before me here and now articulates a life unique to a particular species and even to a particular tree of that species in its particular place and time. And yet that same line moves beyond the life of a tree to suggest other living entities as well. The arboreal line, the wooden gesture interrogates doubly—it addresses the tree as to what it might become in the bodies of others and addresses the onlooker as to how her or his body might participate in the life of trees.

This enfolded participation, in which one's own flesh already finds the flesh of other beings traced within itself, is later termed chiasmatic, a doubled "crossing-over" or intertwining [*interlacs*], by Merleau-Ponty.[2] To exist chiasmatically, as an intertwining with the flesh of all other living entities, means that I am given to exist *in* them and they *in* me, even as I am given to exist *as* myself. In this sense I am not simply an entity, a being, but a creature, a living flesh. I cannot look upon living others without already being marked by and so implicated in their life. For this reason, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty claims that in my very embodiment as a living entity I am already a "witnessing" of how "the other is born"[3] in *its* body, even as I am born in mine. To be embodied is to be gestate and so developmental—to exist one must be born from out of one's body yet again in order to grow into one's body. In this manner living entities have bodies that are radically emergent. The very rings of a bisected tree trunk testify to this radical emergence. And because living entities are radically emergent, their flesh is ontologically and aesthetically promiscuous; it takes on the life of other bodies even as it lends its own life to theirs.[4]

How then, might I participate in the birth of a tree from out of its body, or, alternatively, how might the tree participate in my own birth from out of my body? These thoughts interrogate the artwork pictured here titled "Howler."[5] The body of this arboreal creature is mostly formed from a single fallen branch of a red maple (*Acer rubrum*) wrested loose by a tropical storm that hit the eastern shore of Maryland in 2006.

One of the legs (the back one in this image) comes from an American holly tree branch (*Ilex opaca*) harvested from trimmings of my garden. The "howl" palpably emitting from the creature's neck is the rotting (but since hardened with resin) root of a loblolly pine tree (*Pinus taeda*) found in a clear cut in Southern Virginia. In bringing a loblolly root to double for the outcry of a living animal (who in turn is doubling as a red maple branch), the expressive sound of an animal literally finds its "root"—its wooden, arboreal equivalent. Both the cry and its tree are born into one another and so bear witness to one another in the articulation of this equivalence. To view this artwork is to confront how the howling of all creatures might find a renewed hearing in the howl of this arboreal equivalent.

The act of gathering the materials going into "Howler" was crucial to its making. In being among trees, I find myself proffered a series of choices: Which particular limbs, roots or other earthly materials from among innumerable possibilities are to be harvested? And once in my studio, how might these material elements be refined and then assimilated into a particular piece? To carry out these choices I am called upon to treat the materials lent me by other living entities in a manner that takes seriously the conditions of that lending. The specificity of my approach of a particular tree, my attention to and so witnessing of it, is inspired by how the manifestation of that tree—its lines of growth, its contours of decay—invite *at this very moment* my singular human interpretation. No one can stand in for me in this regard—the tree searches me out. My very identity as an artist is affirmed in the choices made possible for me by the tree and the living world in which it is imbedded. Sometimes my treatment of the tree in this moment, how I come to mark it and be marked by it, is more abstract, and, at other times as in "Howler," a zoomorphic element is suggested. The tree also can become an ideogram, a letter of an existent or yet to be invented alphabet. But even as another living entity or semantic element is evoked, the sculpture still remains emphatically an assemblage of trees, a dendromorph. In the ambivalence of these two modes of seeing, touching and hearing what is before one, the

artwork makes itself known. "Howler" could never had been imagined had several trees not inserted themselves into my own gaze, so that a mode of perceiving and being of flesh that I could never have conceived as my own was proffered to me. Trees have instructed my gaze, have made it pregnant with their life.

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, James Edie, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 166: "The *idios kosmos* opens by virtue of vision upon a *koinos kosmos*; in short, that the same thing is both out there in the world and here in the heart of vision—the same, or, if one prefers a *similar* thing, but according to an efficacious similarity which is the parent, the genesis, the metamorphosis of Being in his [the artist's] vision. It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze."

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Alphonso Lingis, trans., Claude Lefort, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). For instance, see p. 131, editor's note 1, where Lefort quotes Merleau-Ponty: "It is that the look is itself incorporation of the seer into the visible…My body model of the things and the things model of my body…" Later, on p. 215, in Merleau-Ponty's working notes, is found the following remark: "Chiasm, instead of For the Other: that means that there is not only a me-other rivalry but a co-functioning. We function as one unique body." In the articulation of my being I am always already the tracing of other modes of perception and understanding into my own perception and understanding. What is mine is always already traced out in other tongues and eyes, even as those tongues and eyes articulate themselves within my own.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 233.

[4] For an extended treatment of these points within an ethical context, see my "Introduction," *Interrogating Ethics*, James Hatley, Janice McLane and Christian Diehm, eds. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), pp. 4-24. See also the discussion in my "Sensing Environmentalism Anew: Gestate Witness of a more-than-human World in Merleau-Ponty." In *Environmental Philosophy* Vol. 4, nos. 1-2 (Spring and Fall, 2007).

[5] To view additional artworks in this series, see: http://faculty.salisbury.edu/~jdhatley/IDEOGRAMS.htm