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Artist Statement - *Sacred Tree Habitat*
by Justin Freed

“I will build an altar from the broken fragments of my heart.”
—Rabbi Yehuda Hachasid, Poland 1700’s.

This multimedia installation was first going to be called *Broken Vessels*. I was going to use fallen trees to represent the political brokenness in society. I thought initially that I couldn’t present an ode to nature as I had done with *Water Refuge* in 2015. The times are too perilous.

Ironically, *Sacred Tree Habitat* is an ode to nature. I’m not going to stop doing what I love. And yet this show is also a response to brokenness. It is a plea for healing, inner and outer.

The installation will include hundreds of photographs and a few videos projected on scrims in a cyclical form. There will be a soundscape, prints and sculptural forms.

Various kinds of trees will be seen from different angles. I am in awe of the beauty of trees, their architecture, their lines and textures. Their ingenuity and resilience. We are their beneficiaries and relatives. We share 25% of our DNA with them. They give us breath, life. I have included **fallen and broken trees**. They evoke the bones of dead ancestors and my own to come.

Recently, books have appeared that tell how trees communicate and nourish each other, such as *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben and novelist Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*. These and other books have given me heart and heartbreak. I came to realize that the project, which began as an aesthetic response to the beauty of trees, was also about mortality, my own and the planet’s trees.

During the preparation for the show, two thoughts kept bubbling to the surface:

Trees are sacred.

Everything is connected.

This interconnection is itself sacred.

There is nothing new in those ideas. But I can’t help but think that only the embrace of those ideas could save our planet. This is so obvious that I am almost embarrassed to write these words. But nonetheless this is not yet embraced sufficiently, which is the message of *The Overstory*.

Sacred Tree Habitat is dedicated to souls in need of healing. My goal is to provide a place in which people find respite and inspiration. *Water Refuge* had that effect and led to my installations of water videos in the cancer centers of two Boston hospitals. My hope is that this show can have a second life as well.

“Education”

To have lived long enough
and not too far from the dying
of a couple of ancient trees
the high leaf and flowering
above broken arms to have known
one great tree full and sturdy
then in my own years
the arbitrary swords of sunscald
lightening scar scab rot
in the woods behind our house
uprooted storm-thrown hemlock
(hurricane of ‘thirty-eight) a humped
and heaving graveyard do you see that

it’s good in one ordinary life
to have witnessed the hard labor
of a long death the way one
high branch can still advance alone pale green
and greener into the sun’s
nutritious light

—Grace Paley