

JILL LEAR: Witness Trees of Texas

by Judith Taylor

Jill Lear's interest in trees has taken her to far parts of the world. For Lear, trees are a vehicle to explore structure and order. Her expressive work is grounded in place as she seeks to discover the role a particular tree has played in its locale. Such is the case with her newest series, *Witness Trees of Texas*.



Rio Frio Landmark Oak I, mixed media on paper, 41 1/4 x 24 1/4 in.

On a trip to Austin a few years ago, Lear discovered Treaty Oak, and soon after learned that Texas A&M has extensive documentation on the state's historic trees. In the spring of 2014, she set out with a friend to explore these treasures on a 1,300-mile road trip. Heading west from Dallas on IH-20, they stopped in Cisco to see the Half-Way Oak—a gnarled, old live oak standing sentry on the windswept land— and then turned south toward San Saba. En route, they listened to one of Lear's favorite books, S.C.

Gwynne's *Empire of the Summer Moon*, a historical account of the 40-year battle between the region's Comanche Indians and white settlers for control of this area.

Just outside of San Saba stands a 400-year-old live oak known as the Matrimonial Oak or the Wedding Tree. Legend has it that Indian councils met here; however, it was the stories of Indian braves and maidens who were wed under the sheltering boughs that gave the historic tree its name. Settlers continued the tradition by exchanging their own vows here, adding to the site's extensive lore. "And what is lore but a way for us to understand who we are and where we came from?" asks Lear, who watched as a wedding party gathered on

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the day she photographed the tree.

In Kyle, they found the Auction Tree, a giant live oak which served as the site of the public auction of town lots. In Rio Frio, they visited the Landmark Oak standing as a monument to the Frio Canyon. Back in her studio in Idaho, Lear captured the essence of these trees in large-scale mixed media works on paper. Relying on perspective, she conveys structure and hints at the history of each. The arching canopy of *Kyle Auction Oak* suggests a gathering place. The movement in color emphasizes the expansive reach of the sheltering branches. The vertically formatted *Landmark Oak* points to Lear's stylistic agility. Here the eye moves from the reaching foreground to the serpentine branches in the distance. The unexpected perspective combined with saturated color and blocks of negative spaces push the composition to near abstraction.

In all, Lear visited 20 historical trees, each of which she pays homage to in a collective piece titled *Witness Trees*. Presented in a grid format, the 20 images, each 8 x 8 in., represent the trees that, says Lear, "are so tightly woven in with stories, myths and the traditions over hundreds of years . . . having witnessed hangings, burials, wars, and peace treaties."



Jill Lear, *Goose Island Oak I*, mixed media on four panels, 60 x 44 in.

Lear was most awed by the Goose Island Oak—the Big Tree as it is called—

which is estimated to be a thousand years old. The coastal live oak, one of the largest in the nation, has a trunk diameter of over 11 feet and a circumference of 35 feet. “The first thing I wanted to do was to run to the foot of it and lie down on the grass looking up into its branches. Aside from being impractical (too many mosquitoes to pause for very long), it also seemed rather disrespectful! So I walked around and around it, looking at it from all angles and perspectives, trying to sear it into my memory.”

On paper, Lear translates this experience in two paintings of the Big Tree. Both show a more experimental use of color than past work, with the palette being slightly muted and at the same time highly saturated. In the vertical composition the seasonal hues accentuate the massive trunk and the solidness of the branches, both of which have allowed it to withstand hurricanes over the centuries. In the horizontal, nine-panel painting, Lear’s lens pulls away from the trunk to provide a full view of the Big Tree and allows us to contemplate place.

“Lear has a special gift for using the white of the paper to complement the figure ground relationship and keep the eye engaged. The trees themselves appear to be both everywhere and nowhere in the composition.”

In order to create these large-scale interpretations, Lear renders the compositions in sections which viewed together comprise the whole. The result is a deconstructed view with each part being a minimalist painting on its own. For presentation, the sections are archivally mounted on wooden panels. Lear is fond of the grid format as it reinforces her desire to convey structure and order in the

natural environment.

Alongside the large-scale works, Lear shares a miniature painting of a smaller tree located about 100 feet from The Big Tree titled *Attendant Oak*. She chose the title because “all the oaks around the Big Tree look like courtiers surrounding their monarch. This one, with its wavy limbs, looks to be worshipping the Big Tree from afar.” In the painting, the expressionist strokes of shimmering color float within negative space creating a decidedly lyrical response to place—a quality typical to Lear’s work.

“There is confidence in Lear’s marks,” notes artist and writer Veronica Ceci, describing them as “deliberate without abandoning spontaneity.” Ceci goes on to point out that “Lear has a special gift for using the white of the paper to complement the figure ground relationship and keep the eye engaged. The trees themselves appear to be both everywhere and nowhere in the composition.”



Columbus Oak I, mixed media on paper, 22 1/2 x 41 1/4 in.

Asked about her Texas-inspired paintings, Lear talked about process: “A transcription emerges of not only the experience of being in and thinking about Nature, but also about the way in which we process the world around us. I move from the particular place itself—a topographic study involving measurement, proportion, negative space and positive forms—to the general, the idea of territory, light, space and sound. Then, by subtraction, I paint the experience of being there; letting only the major lines and colors of the landscape remain until, like the tree, its significance survives.”

Witness Trees of Texas, an impressive series of mixed media works on paper, will open at Gallery Shoal Creek on April 24 with a reception for the artist.



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