

Art and Cake, July 7, 2018

The Forest for the Trees with Sant Khalsa
The Museum of Art & History, Lancaster, CA
May 12 - July 15, 2018

By Jody Zellen



"The Forest For the Trees" is the umbrella title for a series of one person exhibitions at the Museum of Art & History, Lancaster. On view simultaneously are works by Greg Rose ("Tree Fiction"), Constance Mallinson ("Me, Me, Me"), Timothy Rober Smith ("Revised Maps of the Present"), Osceola Refetoff ("Land Artifacts") and Sant Khalsa ("Prana: Life with Trees"). These artists investigate the relationship between humans and the natural world, specifically with respect to damaging the environment. While both Rose and Khalsa have a particular interest in trees, it is the 40-year trajectory of Sant Khalsa's work that is the focus of this review.

"Prana: Life with Trees" gives viewers a chance to see a wide range of approaches and images that span Khalsa's forty-plus year career. The earliest works, are black and white self-portraits and small photographs of the Maryland landscape that display elegant compositions and formal beauty. Khalsa's first images of Southern California (where she has resided since 1975) are entitled *East Highland, CA* from "Intimate Landscapes" (1982-83). These silver gelatin prints are a personal and contemplative investigation of trees, plants and hills, a landscape that is open and expansive: so different from the urban climate of New York City where Khalsa was born and raised. The longer she photographed this landscape, the more aware she became of mankind's impact. These photographs sensitively document the mark of humans and according to Khalsa, "These photograph have become documents of a historical era and lost paradise. They are images of memories, recollections of my first romance with our extraordinary California landscape."

Throughout the 1980s Khalsa continued to photograph the area around San Bernardino. Images from "Distress Signals" are telling pictures of Khalsa's growing frustration with how development was changing the natural landscape. *Screw in the Earth* (1989) juxtaposes tall palms with a similarly shaped drill. *End/Begin* (1989) documents a sign nailed to a tree in the forest with scheduled time for some kind of labor. *Paving Paradise* (1989-2010) continues these investigations. It is a body of work about the changes Khalsa has observed along the 96 mile long Santa Ana river. In these photographs she presents the beauty of nature in contrast to the man-made. As she states, "My often disquieting photographs address complex environmental and societal issues and reflect upon my various ideas concerning my/our relationship with the river -- as place of community, economic resource, recreational site, natural habitat, sanctuary, and both source of life and destruction."

Rebirth (2018) is a recent series of color photographs that exhibit one of the marvels of nature: a tree's ability to regenerate after fire or other destructive forces. In these beautiful and encouraging photographs, Khalsa depicts the unbelievable— new green growth from seemingly dead, broken trees. In the exhibition, ten small framed works are hung on the wall bookended by two larger photographs. Where the trees in *Rebirth* have a seemingly hopeful and positive future, the nature captured in a previous series of color photographs, *Arroyo Seco* (2016) are trapped in concrete. In *Arroyo Seco*, Khalsa photographed along the Arroyo Seco under the Colorado Bridge (during a residency at Pasadena City College) documenting places where gray concrete and green moss, leaves and stems intersect. Here we see small trees struggling to survive in relation to giant concrete supports. Like in all Khalsa's photographs, she beautifully frames these elements to bring attention to hints of life in desolation as well as the shapes and architectural details in relation to the quality of light.

While Khalsa is primarily a photographer, she has an expansive take on the medium and integrates her pictures into sculptures as well as installations, some of which are also on view in this exhibition. These range from the evocative recreation of *The Sacred Breath* (1992/2018) an altar that includes a cutout image of lungs filled with tree branches, to *Trees and Seedlings* (2000-2017) where black and white transparencies of burnt trees are sandwiched between glass and slotted into lengths of wooden planks of varying sizes that lean against the wall to reference the way lumber is sold.

One of the newest works in the exhibition is *Growing Air (Prayer Wheel)* (2018), a spinning clear glass cylinder topped with a green ball also made of glass. Inside the cylinder is a small tree. The cylinder is embossed with Morse code. This work (entitled *Prana*: life force or vital principal in Sanskrit), includes a small tree—a giver of oxygen that is necessary to keep the planet alive. Placing it in front of a window creates a relationship with the trees that line the street below.

A particularly important project from the Spring of 1992 is titled *Growing Air*. In collaboration with scientists and as part of a reforestation project, Khalsa and some of her students visited Holcomb Valley in the San Bernardino mountains, to plant more than 1000 Ponderosa pine seedlings (Khalsa herself planted 1000 and four of her students planted 100 each). The area had been clear-cut by settlers in the 1860s and Khalsa wanted to both reforest it to bring it back to life and to improve the quality of air in the inland empire. This ongoing project is represented by a video clip of the planting from 1992, as well as color photographs taken in 2017 depicting a large grove of tall healthy trees. The action of *Growing Air* exemplifies Khalsa's commitment to her subject, as not only does she document changes in the natural landscape and make exquisite and intimate 'portraits' of trees, but also actively works to better the planet. Khalsa's art speaks to the impact the industrial world has had on nature and while not didactic or prescriptive, her message is to tread carefully and understand that nature can exist without man, but humans cannot exist without nature.

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