

## ***Magic Wilderness: Dreamscapes of the Forest***

Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, Wisconsin

Curated by Anwar Floyd-Pruitt, Graeme Reid, and Ally Wilber

October 22, 2022–January 15, 2023

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“**T**here are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.”

So begins *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold’s groundbreaking 1949 memoir of his efforts to restore his family’s land near Baraboo, Wisconsin. The sixteen artists featured in *Magic Wilderness: Dreamscapes of the Forest* certainly fall into Leopold’s latter camp: it is obvious they cannot live without wild things, and their evocative works in this exhibition make the argument that none of us should.<sup>1</sup>

The Museum of Wisconsin Art’s mission is to present the work of Wisconsin artists, past and present. Although born and raised in Wisconsin, I finally made my first visit to the museum during the winter of 2022. I was immediately taken by the connections between art and nature throughout not only the current exhibition, *Magic Wilderness*, but also the entire facility

and its permanent collection. This is likely a natural outgrowth of the museum’s locale. The city of West Bend sits within the Kettle Moraine region of southeastern Wisconsin, where remnants of the Ice Age are still visible in kettle lakes, rolling hills, and ridges that mark the landscape once covered by glaciers. Further north, boulder-strewn rivers roll through dense evergreen forests that reach to the shores of Lake Superior. Even Milwaukee, the state’s largest city, a forty-five-minute drive south of West Bend, is dominated by the massive presence of Lake Michigan, its size and scale akin to an inland ocean. One is never far from the powerful presence of nature in Wisconsin.

To enter the museum—a white contemporary building designed by Jim Shields that opened in 2013—I walked a path that winds through a grove of more than seven hundred aspen trees, their white

branches bare against the clear blue winter sky. Inside the building's airy, glass-walled atrium, I experienced the first work in *Magic Wilderness*: Brooke Thiele's short film *The Deer Queen* (2017), which set the tone for the exhibition.<sup>2</sup> Near the misty shores of a Northwoods lake, a woman emerges from the belly of a whitetail deer carcass. A towering female figure wearing an antler headdress, buckskin, and a flowing skirt of camouflage fabric walks through meadows and forest. The otherworldly cackles of sandhill cranes—personified by another statuesque figure with wings—punctuate the sounds of falling trees and rifle shots. The archetypal imagery in the film tapped into my childhood memories of northern Wisconsin: swimming and fishing in tree-rimmed lakes, walking through shadowy forests, and learning to fire a rifle from my uncle, an avid deer hunter. Thiele creates a shamanistic atmosphere that carries the film to its conclusion, in which the wildness of the self collides with that of the landscape.

On the entrance wall of the second-floor exhibition gallery, Aldo Leopold's thoughts about beauty in nature and art provided a framework for the exhibition: "Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through

successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language." Leopold's statement suggests that visual art, along with other modes that appeal to the senses, has the ability to elicit deeper responses to nature that are impossible to describe in words. In *Magic Wilderness*, the museum created an installation that encouraged visitors to experience art—and in turn, nature—through their senses.

Jacob Bautista's *A Forest Follows* (2021–22) led the visitor through the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The piece consisted of tree trunks formed from handmade flax paper that rose from the floor at varied angles, turning the space itself into a forest. A soundscape by Ben Binversie (2022) filled the gallery with birdsong, footsteps, and the wind rustling through leaves. In his sculpture *Bird* (2022), Kevin Giese created a minimalist marsh with invasive phragmite grass that soared from floor to ceiling.<sup>4</sup> The title could be interpreted as ironic: phragmites spread rapidly, destroying the wetland biodiversity essential to native and migrating birds. Likewise, pieces by Andrew Khitsun and Maureen Fritchen explored Wisconsin flora. Khitsun's close-up photographs of fungi and lichens (2022) presented an otherworldly landscape with stunning colors and textures that served as both

abstract compositions and scientific catalogs. Fritchen's sculptures (2020–21), made of polyethylene foam and expired medical containers, echoed the forms of Khitsun's photographs in three dimensions while commenting on the threat to the environment of single-use plastics.<sup>5</sup>

Anchoring the exhibition visually and historically were large paintings by John Colt and Tom Uttech, both former painting professors at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, my alma mater. Of his interest in nature's microcosms, Colt said, "I've never been interested in the panoramic scene as much as I have the little areas—the realms of experience, nature close-up."<sup>6</sup> His Marquette mural (1958), commissioned for Marquette University, dominated the back wall of the exhibition.<sup>7</sup> Forms suggesting trees, islands, roots, and plants—including the wild mandrake, which possesses medicinal and hallucinogenic properties—appear to float and shape-shift, conjuring nature's mysterious qualities. Nearby, sculptures by Kyoung Ae Cho made from branches, stems, pine needles, beeswax, and wood, such as *Duet III* (2009), echoed the evocative shapes in Colt's large-scale work.<sup>8</sup>

While Colt's work zeroes in on nature's more intimate moments,

Uttech's expresses the spiritual, sublime, and epic qualities of nature. Uttech's painting *Untitled (Midsummer Night's Dream)* (1973–74) reveals the painter's early interest in magical realism, a thread that continues to run through his work.<sup>9</sup> Recalling Thiele's film at the museum entrance, a naked woman with a deer head stands in profile, her body turned blue by the moonlight and the flickering northern lights above. A musk ox—an ancient, shaggy, lumbering creature that still survives in the Arctic regions—delicately licks her belly as luna moths flutter around them and pitcher plant flowers droop at their feet. A few years after completing this work, Uttech explained that his paintings "almost always involve northern wilderness and my feelings of the great mystery of it."<sup>10</sup> The exhibition also featured Uttech's *Diptych (Untitled)* (1974), which debuted at the 1975 Whitney Biennial.<sup>11</sup> In the two soaring canvases, turbulent clouds are reflected in still waters filled with dark islands. Gnarled birches seem to peer at us through knots that resemble eyes, marking the trees as wild, mythical witnesses. The permanent collection galleries featured a few of Uttech's more recent works, spectacular narrative landscapes teeming with flocks of birds, herds of deer, and packs of wolves

frantically fleeing an unseen danger.<sup>12</sup> The occasional bear stares out from his paintings, imploring us to behold the exodus. In an essay about Uttech's paintings, the poet and art critic John Yao wrote, "We may finally be starting to see this world, this complex wilderness . . . but it has been watching us all along."<sup>13</sup>

*Magic Wilderness* brought together paintings, photography, sculpture, mixed-media works, and sound to create what the Museum of Wisconsin Art called an "imagined ecosystem." The immersive environment successfully invoked the transformative experience of wild nature, highlighting the myriad ways it continues to enamor and inspire artists, while encouraging viewers to, as Tom Uttech has said, "Get up out of your chair . . . go out into the woods . . . and join the adventure."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Magic Wilderness: Dreamscapes of the Forest,” Museum of Wisconsin Art, last modified December 29, 2022, <https://wisconsinart.org/exhibitions/magic-wilderness/>.

<sup>2</sup> “The Deer Queen,” Brooke Thiele (artist website), last modified January 19, 2021, <http://brookethiele.com/film.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Artist Interview: Jacob Bautista,” interview by Brianna Cole, Museum of Wisconsin Art, October 19, 2022, <https://wisconsinart.org/artist-interview-jacob-bautista/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Sculptures,” Kevin Giese (artist website), last modified August 4, 2020, <https://www.kevingiese.com/home/sculptures>.

<sup>5</sup> “Maureen Fritchen,” [RAM Artist Fellowship Recipients](https://www.ramart.org/artist-resources/fellowships/recipients/fritchen/#works), Racine Art Museum, last modified August 16, 2023, <https://www.ramart.org/artist-resources/fellowships/recipients/fritchen/#works>.

<sup>6</sup> “John Nicholson Colt,” Museum of Wisconsin Art, accessed February 18, 2024, <http://wisconsinart.org/artists/john-nicholson-colt>.

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Tanzilo, “New MOWA Show Exhibits Colt Mural for the First Time in Nearly 50 Years,” *OnMilwaukee*, October 19, 2022, <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/mowa-marquette-mural-john-colt>.

<sup>8</sup> “*Duet III*,” Kyoung Ae Cho (artist website), last modified December 6, 2022,

<http://www.kyoungaecho.com/cho/w5-09Duet3.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Past Auction: *Untitled (Midsummer Night’s Dream)*, 1973–1974,” ArtNet, last modified September 5, 2019, <https://www.artnet.com/artists/tom-uttech/untitled-midsummer-nights-dream-CxRD2SmG3EhDWWMQ3Vboxg2>.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Jerome C. Krause & Tom Uttech: Visions from the North Woods*, ed. Verna Posever Curtis, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Center, 1977), 5.

<sup>11</sup> “Tom Uttech: *Diptych (Untitled)*, 1974,” Artsy, accessed February 18, 2024, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/tom-uttech-diptych-untitled>; *1975 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1975), cat. 119, <https://archive.org/details/1975biennialalexhi/page/118/mode/2up>.

<sup>12</sup> “*Nin Gassinsibingwe*,” Collections, Museum of Wisconsin Art, last modified June 7, 2022, <https://wisconsinart.org/collections/nin-gassinsibingwe/>.

<sup>13</sup> John Yao, “Tom Uttech,” in *Tom Uttech: New Paintings*, exh. cat. (New York: Alexandre Gallery, 2004), n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Yao, “Tom Uttech,” n.p.