

**CATHY WEBER**  
Understory/Overstory



**CATHY WEBER**  
**Understory/Overstory**

A site-specific installation for the Missoula Art Museum

August 28, 2018 to January 12, 2019

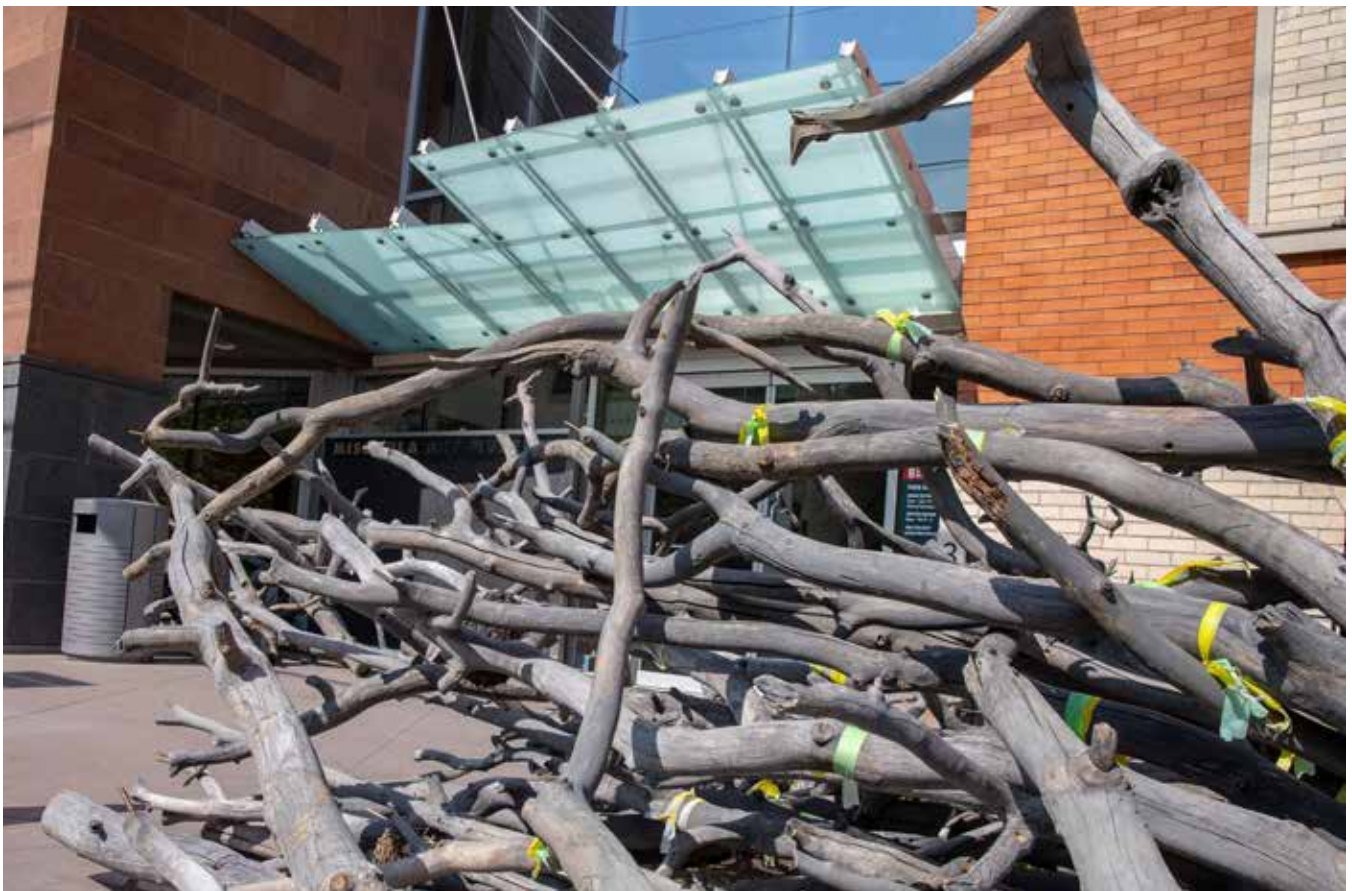


Copyright © 2018

Missoula Art Museum  
335 N. Pattee Street  
Missoula, MT 59802

Design by Jon Lodge  
Photography © 2018 Slikati Photo + Video  
Artist studio image by Tim Speyer  
Learn more at [www.cathyweber.net](http://www.cathyweber.net)

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States.



## PREFACE

Our first collaborative experience with artist Cathy Weber at MAM was creating the immersive installation and catalog of her *Grief Series* in 2000. The project left an indelible imprint at MAM and all across Montana in its MAGDA tour. Weber jumps in with both feet and shares her whole self with collaborators and audience alike. Here again at MAM with her *Understory/Overstory* installation Weber has given us a wonderfully immersive experience. What the exhibitions share, though decades apart and divergent thematically, is a sense of the sacred. Both celebrate the sanctity of life and love. Weber is an exceedingly generous soul, a hard worker, and a natural born educator. We are very pleased to again have her bestow her artistic gifts here at MAM.

– Laura J. Millin, Executive Director



## CATHY WEBER: UNDERSTORY/OVERSTORY

Walking into Cathy Weber's immersive art environment *Understory/Overstory* is akin to experiencing poetry with your whole body. The combined metaphors of 'forest' and 'birds' are accessible and immediate, but the effect is unsettling and mysterious, yet wonderful in the sense that means 'full of wonder.' Weber has stained each branch—gathered from her property along Grasshopper Creek in the Pioneer Mountains—a unifying variation of gray to elicit connotations of deadfall, silver branches hardened by sun, water, wind, and life cycles. By contrast, each ceramic bird is glazed a luminescent black, which reflects, mirror-like, the surrounding environment in its lustrous surface. In this way, each black bird becomes a small pool of darkness in which to lose yourself, a tiny black hole where your gaze fixes and falls, a point of calm, even while you imagine the hush and flutter of wings.

Weber's site-specific installation of found-and-altered trees recreates a magical forest populated by black birds that alight in branches and rise in a murmuration on the gallery walls.





In fairytales, the forest is a metaphor for things kept hidden, magical, or secret. It is the arena into which the hero or heroine ventures. The confines of the forest delineate the sphere of action in which the narrative takes place. It is a place of refuge, worship, transition, or transformation. In a Jungian sense, forests are the expression of the perilous aspects of the unconscious. In the American mind, they are complicated by overlays of pristine wilderness, purity, and virginity, as well as national sovereignty.

Fairytales began as oral tradition, are honed through numerous re-tellings, become fixed when they are collected through the efforts of now-famous compilers, and are re-contextualized and reinterpreted by artists like Weber. While Weber isn't telling a specific story in her installation, she is utilizing the component parts of the fairytale form. Fairytales contain equal parts fantasy and horror—at root they are cautionary tales with variations on ageless themes of loss of innocence, poverty, greed, desire, love, despair, and hope. In these stories, people are forever getting lost in forests, both literally and figuratively. The dark woods are the antithesis of city, society, and culture, outside the boundaries of what's known and understood, outside the limits of civilization.

The bird, on the other hand, is an abiding and potent symbol







of hope, peace, and freedom. Emily Dickinson writes in her most quoted poem from 1891:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

Birds almost always possess a positive connotation. The mystic and visionary Saint Hildegard of Bingen writes in her *Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum/The Book of the Subtleties of the Diverse Nature of Creatures*, begun in 1151, “Birds symbolize the power that helps people to speak reflectively and leads them to think out many things in advance before they take action. Just as birds are lifted up into the air by their feathers and can remain wherever they wish, the soul in the body is elevated by thought and spreads its wings everywhere.”

Birds are seen as mediaries between the earthly and divine realms, between the ground and sky, between flesh and spirit. In Egyptian religious thought, each person was comprised of five distinct parts—the body, the *ba* (the personality or conscience), *ka* (breath or divine spirit), name, and *akh* (the judged or transfigured soul). The *ba* took the form of a bird equipped with a human











head, representing the person set free from the corporeal body, free of physical constraints, and exited the body from the mouths of the dying.

In fairy tales, birds give those who can understand their language special knowledge, or people can be transformed into birds. However, the symbolism of a flock of birds can be indeterminate, and here is where Weber's use of this metaphor grows complex. Does the flock of alighting black birds have a negative connotation? Can they be interpreted as menacing? Or are we witness to some phenomenon, an amplification of possibility? Both? Black birds don't give up their secrets easily. A bit like luck, they can either be good or bad.

The title *Understory/Overstory* refers to the ecological relationship between upper and lower forest vegetation that expresses the diversity, composition, and structure of the ecosystem. Understory is the term for the area of growth beneath the canopy, while overstory indicates the upper crown cover. Ecosystems are interconnected relationships and interactions between living organisms and nonliving components (such as air, water, and soil) that cycle nutrients and transfer energy. By extension, Weber references this cycle and flow of energy throughout the installation.



Rather than focus on a single relationship, she is concerned with an array of relationships that culminate in a community that includes us as viewers. The gallery in this case is an arbitrary confine, the walls of the bell jar that she uses to focus our gaze. She implicates us into the environment as viewers, the third part of her drastically reduced language of birds, trees, and us.

The viewer's agency in Weber's art is an essential part of the interaction between artist and viewer. Weber's work has always been about the interplay between natural and human systems. She believes we have a responsibility to the natural world and to one another that takes the form of justice and community. With *Understory/Overstory*, the disruption of ecosystems is as much a metaphor for the inequities experienced within human communities as it is for the consequences of human decisions playing out in the landscape. The concept of environmental or climate justice implicit in Weber's installation is that everyone participates in a system that is mutually beneficial and sustainable. Clean environments and clean communities are a right as much as an ideal. Author Gretel Ehrlich, in her book *The Future of Ice*, reaffirms the implicit qualities found in nature when she writes, "Everything we need to know about beauty, justice, time,





movement, subtlety, and surrender is here.”

Weber imagined this installation after she visited an outdoor sculpture by Scottish artist Nathan Coley at the National Galleries of Scotland titled, *There Will Be No Miracles Here*. It is a 19-foot-tall scaffold with neon text. This statement was taken from a royal proclamation made in 17th century France at a site of frequent miracles. Coley’s interest in community and how personal, social, religious, and political beliefs make up our cities—and thereby ourselves—resonates with Weber. Her response to this sculpture was, “of course there are miracles.” Upon reflection, Weber realized that her whole artistic practice is premised on her belief in miracles—miracles surround us, beauty is everywhere, and art is integral to the human experience. Miracles are those events not explicable by natural or scientific law, considered to be mysterious, phenomenal, supernatural, magical, or the work of divine agency. Weber wrote, “What best motivates me in my work is the potential to uncover, expose, and describe the sacred. The fruits of the earth and the human heart offer the language. Working is the prayer.” By working with common, humble materials, Weber hopes to make beauty accessible and to create a shared space and shared experience for her viewers.





*Understory/Overstory* expands upon the metaphoric language Weber has developed in her oil paintings and illuminated manuscripts, where she depicts handmade and natural objects arranged in lines to create visual poems. Weber's syllabary includes symbols drawn from medieval manuscripts and book plates. Her object poems are complex visual arrangements that play with the symbolic and metaphorical weight that we assign to found objects—bird skulls, smooth stones, feathers, snake skin, pieces of bark. Recently, when she began making ceramic birds, arranged in narrative groups or carved or painted with narrative elements, it was a natural extension of the specific visual language that she had developed over the past decades as a dedicated visual artist. She retains a loosely cataloged collection of feathers and skulls, rocks and twigs, arranged around her studio like still life paintings, only dustier. Weber is a consummate craftsperson and confidently handles a wide array of materials and forms—from artists' books to illuminated manuscripts, intimate watercolors, beaded miniatures, ceramic forms, and room-sized installations— that fluidly blend the symbolic, the figurative, the narrative, and the unspoken. Her identity as a painter has been confounded by the joy of making ceramic birds, explains Weber. "So many people have



said how meaningful the birds are to them. I am interested in the relationship: the space between the artist and the person who ends up with the birds.”

As an institution, MAM is committed to artistic innovation and supports the creative process by maintaining a focus on artists. Given this commitment, we strive to create opportunities for artists to realize ambitious projects, especially the creation of new work, site-specific installations, or large-scale art works. Cathy Weber's *Understory/Overstory* is all of these things together. Weber is unapologetic about her love of 'seminal objects' like sticks and birds that operate as archetypes in our minds. In describing the project she says, "I have always represented sticks and birds, always had an affinity for the shape of sticks, always responded to the direct line of the shape of the stick." To her a branch is a line drawing in space. Weber's installation, like the structure of the fairytale itself, points to invention, innovation, subversion, and disruption as continued possibilities. In *Understory/Overstory*, Weber's carefully considered and reduced palette, forms, and symbols have all of the formal restraint and emotional power of haiku.

–Brandon Reintjes, Senior Curator







## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a lot of love, support, and community to get a project like this to take wing. *Understory/Overstory* could not have come together without the following members of my support system and tribe:

**Missoula Art Museum** Laura Millin, Executive Director, who has offered decades of unfailing support for me, my work, and countless other artists in our region; Brandon Reintjes, Senior Curator and my frequent partner in crime, whose thoughtfulness and encouragement always help the artist articulate her vision; John Calsbeek, Associate Curator; and the rest of the brilliant staff at MAM. Vibrant and well-established art institutions are the essential thread connecting an artist to a larger audience. The Missoula Art Museum is an exceptional treasure in this regard, and our shared creative culture is carefully and skillfully nurtured by MAM's devoted staff.

**Missoula Installation Team** Dylan Ritter, Chris Guttenburg, Kim Lugthart, Amelia Calsbeek, Chuck Irestone, Josh Goins, Keith Anderson, Tom Javins, Taylor Samson, Brandon Reintjes, and John Calsbeek.

**Dillon Studio Assistants** Rita Rodriguez (maestra of the molds), Gail Kuntz, Charlie Lenny, Koshay Main, Beth Sullivan, Jimmie Magee, Chuck Irestone, Shaun Oelschlager, Cory Birkenbuel, and Sophia Leonard.

**Mold Makers** Brett Binford of Portland's Mudshark Studios, for the molds that make bird-populating at this scale possible; Chris Antemann, queen of the cross-pollination toward the making of art; and Ali Reintjes, for generously sharing her technical expertise.

**Fellow Travelers** Deb Sporich, proprietor of The Bookstore in Dillon, my work-wife and the ideal business partner for the last 30 years; Jerry Hawkins, for expert dog-care and decades of love (laced with foul jokes); and Karl Tivoli Olson, for the perfect words when mine fail.

**Free Birds** In memory of Jack Crichfield and Pansy Bradshaw. They form the foundation on which this work lovingly rests.

**Rio Crichfield-Weber** My son, studio/installation assistant, and an art-maker coming into his own. Rio, you've grown gloriously into adulthood. I'm grateful to have seen you grow and I am now grateful to have reclaimed, from the child that you were, all that landscape inside my head on which I now make art.

**Tim Speyer** Companion, co-adventurer, and collaborator in love, life, and art. You got hooked by the art, but that was only the hook. Your presence in my life offers gifts well beyond what I had imagined possible.





