

Reinhard Reitzenstein, WTF (Where's the Forest)

Buffalo Arts Studio

by Dana Tyrrell

Reinhard Reitzenstein is obsessed with trees. Throughout his career, the artist, currently based in Hamilton, Ontario, has demonstrated his dendrophilia through every medium imaginable, and his exhibition at Buffalo Arts Studio proved no different. Reitzenstein is perhaps best known for his spatial interventions utilizing natural elements, such as felled trees, to point toward the fraught relationship between humans and nature. His practice as an artist stems from a singular impetus: to demonstrate how mutually bound ecology and humanity are to one another. This drive seems ever-more relevant in a moment in which we are beginning to see the impacts of an untenable pace of deforestation, pollution, and environmental damage.

Reitzenstein's solo exhibition at Buffalo Arts Studio, titled *WTF (Where's the Forest)*, is the first in an ongoing series titled "Justice in the Arts" that will foster critical dialogue about social, ecological, representational, and economic justice. Reitzenstein's work sits at the juncture of the self and ecology, a site teeming with both possibility and looming danger in the face of climate change. Moving through the first of Buffalo Arts Studio's two gallery spaces, visitors were instantly confronted with *R2*, Reitzenstein's 2019 series of four hand-colored woodcuts on paper. Each of these prints illustrates the artist's head silhouetted in profile, its outline mapped by sensuous, meandering lines. Trees sprout from the skulls of these open heads, their neon colors—highlighter yellow, Day-Glo orange, zippy hot pink, and austere white—all contained within the solid, registration-layer black lines of the woodcut block's native ink.

Reitzenstein quite overtly demonstrates that he has “trees on the brain” with every iteration of his self-portrait in this series, and aimed to entrench himself among the trees through the woodcut process. Both the wood slabs themselves and the pulped, dyed paper he prints on come from trees, and Reitzenstein begins to actualize a world in which his portrait, if not humanity’s, can be indexed among the flora and fauna which sustain us.

In Reitzenstein’s 2019 series of woodcut prints, *Night*, the human body and its scale become implicated. These four woodcut prints are hung side by side and dwarf the viewer with their scale. The effect of their crisp black-and-white wavelength-like lines is instantaneously Rorschach-esque, plumbing the psyche of the viewer. What do you see? Power lines? Rings of a sliced tree? The end of the world? Whereas other pieces the artist presented pointed to singular images, *Night* is generously open-ended. It asks you only to look and be immersed in the countless waves radiating across the printed pages from floor to ceiling.

Buffalo Arts Studio’s second gallery space filled with Reitzenstein’s work became the cinematic crescendo of the exhibition, revealing an entire tree suspended from the gallery ceiling and coated in yellow beeswax. The insouciant scent of the beeswax invited viewers of the piece, *Feel the Buzz* (2019), closer and closer toward this remnant, which was simultaneously alien and unnerving, hovering just above the cracked concrete of the gallery floor. In addition to being suspended and coated in yellow beeswax, *Feel the Buzz* is skewered with antique barometers, which took the temperature of the tree and the environment around it. Always swaying, the piece quietly promised to come crashing down to the floor in a shower of wood and glass if pushed too hard or swung too far, speaking to humanity’s tightrope walk with nature—with ecological ruin pressing down faster and faster on our shoulders.

At the end of this exhibition’s run in June 2019, the tree—felled in March 2019, desiccated, chopped, transported, reassembled, covered in beeswax, and suspended from the ceiling of an art gallery—began to sprout small, new green buds on the tips of its branches. The fact that this took place within Buffalo Arts Studio, a tenant within the Tri-Main Center, which boasts a century-long industrial legacy, is a minor miracle, and a fuzzy green reminder that nature will triumph over humanity even in spite of our wrath, intervention, and destruction.

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Reinhard Reitzenstein, *WTF (Where’s the Forest)*

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