

# Collective

*A mark depends on an inscribable surface... For there to be a squiggle we count as meaningful, there must be a context of rules about squiggles and meaning and there must also be a piece of paper or a chalkboard or a screen... Meaning doesn't happen all by itself... Writing depends on paper, which depends on trees and water, which depend on sunlight and comets... if we keep going, we soon discover... a sprawling network of inter-connection without center or edge.*<sup>1</sup>

It is here, in a boundless ecological setting, that we encounter the exhibition *Collective*. Over the course of many years and locations, artists Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux have noticed and documented curious markings on trees: fluorescent numbers, dots and lines; rips, slashes, scratches, grafts, holes and cuts. *Collective* presents us with large-scale portraits of trees in a contemplative environment, where we question our relationship to the trees, the meaning of the marks and how we interpret them.



Bamboo I (Kawau Island), Digital C-type print, custom bamboo frame, 41.5" x 61.5" x 2.25"

Entering the space, we are met with a vertical, floor-to-ceiling stack of photographs, each illustrating a continuous section of tree trunk. The scale is not unfamiliar, but taking the tree out of the forest, we are struck with the monumental details in relation to ourselves. Moving through the exhibition, we are surrounded by a series of photographs, all the same size and format. The photographs are displayed in handmade wooden frames, correlating individually with the type of tree shown in each portrait.

Inherently, the presentation of the work sets up an anthropomorphic scenario for the trees. In the iconography of the West, the portrait format, a vertical rectangle, is an efficient and standardized way of depicting a human figure in photography and before that, in painting. Understanding the portrait as a signifier, we see ourselves in the trees—we might recognize tree bark as skin. We might find a face, a neck, a body. In this work, it becomes clear that the trees are not merely marked surfaces: they are beings with whom we empathize and relate to—bruises, make-up, scars, scabs, tattoos, cuts and all.

Oscillating between the photograph and the frame, there is an inherent disconnect between the material called 'wood' and the figures in the photographs called 'trees,' just as 'beef' is analogous to 'cow.' In both cases, the difference in the terminology is living or dead. Depending on the use of words, particularly pronouns, in the English language, we divide human and non-human beings as more or less kin. *If maple is an 'it,' we can take up the chainsaw. If maple is 'she,' we have to think twice.*<sup>2</sup> Here we can trace the sensibility of the colonizer directly to language itself. In her essay *Learning the Grammar of Animacy*, Ecologist, Writer and Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation Robin Wall Kimmerer describes *The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human.*<sup>3</sup> Adjacent to human value is economic value, and the tension between these two contradictory logics shifts back and forth continuously in the work between the frame, the photographs and language.



Gird (Maple, Kijipuktuk / Halifax), inkjet prints, custom ambrosia maple frames, 37.75" x 24.5" x 2.25"

*Collective* presents many circular philosophical questions, operating in the boundless ecological space mentioned before. Defined as the relationships between living things and their environments,<sup>4</sup> ecology encompasses the inherent interconnectedness and complexity of the themes raised in this exhibition: wood / tree, living / dead, human / non-human, value / worthlessness, language / interpretation. In *Collective*, ecology is working two-fold: not only as a conceptual framework for navigating ideas, but also quite literally, as a close study of trees in their surroundings.

Strategic use of repetition and consistent setting creates what is referred to in science as a control, yielding regularity in how information is delivered and perceived. With a precision and rigor shared by science and photoconceptualism (the *Water Towers* of Bernd and Hilla Becher come to mind) Bellamy and Fauteux present their findings with a paradoxical existential consistency. In *Collective*, trees - an everyday subject - are transformed through presentation and replication. Suddenly, the everyday becomes extraordinary. Like focusing on breathing, there is something transcendent about the straightforwardness of this body of work.

Given the overarching ecological context of this exhibition, inevitably, humans are present. Some of the markings are recognizable signs of forestry and industry, some of the markings could be vandalism, while others are less clear. In any case, humans are part of the environment - whether the trees are stand-ins for our own bodies, or whether we recognize the impact of human activity upon the trees. The implications of human influence shift and deepen, drift and materialize in an unresolved ecological logic.

Jessica Groome



Yellow Birch (Kijipuktuk / Halifax), Digital C-type print, custom birch frame, 41.5" x 61.5" x 2.25"

<sup>1</sup> Morton, Timothy. "The Second Thread." *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2022, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Kimmerer, Robin W. "Learning the Grammar of Animacy." *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2020, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> "Ecological Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecological](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecological). Accessed 20 Sept. 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Kimmerer, Robin W. "Learning the Grammar of Animacy." *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2020, p. 57.