

Creative Living

celebrating all good things

Spirit of nature, spirit of love

Pawling artist Bibiana Huang Matheis issues a poignant call to reverse deforestation with her installation, on display in a small Icelandic village. *by Kate Goldsmith*

Writers of fantasy fiction are not the only ones who believe that trees have spirits. Many a sensitive soul has stood in a forest (or even a shady glen) and felt the powerful presence of nature's creation. Even the more practical-minded among us would admit that forests benefit our world in a myriad of ways. So the current rate of global deforestation is problematic, with wide-ranging consequences for all life on Earth.

Since trees communicate in subtle ways, their message can be missed until it's too late; thus it falls to humans who can "speak the language" to translate.

Bibiana Huang Matheis is one such translator. An artist, fine art photographer and curator, the Pawling resident has shown her work throughout the Hudson Valley and beyond. She has curated several exhibitions at venues including the historic Akin Museum in Pawling, Barrett Art Center in Poughkeepsie and The Hammond Museum and Japanese Stroll Garden in North Salem, N.Y., among others. Her honors include the 2014 Dutchess County Executive Arts Award for Individual Artist and the 2015 ArtsWestchester "50 for 50" Arts Award.

Most recently, Huang Matheis was an artist-in-residence at the "Fresh Winds" festival in Suðurnesjabær, Iceland. The international festival ran from Dec. 14, 2019 to Jan. 12, 2020. She describes her installation, "Heart @ Our Forests," as "a plea to the world, from the spirits of trees, to save and replant the vanishing forests."

Commenting via email, the artist said, "'Fresh Winds' is a very prestigious, invitation-only artist-in-residency festival. Forty-plus artists, musicians and dancers from 20 nations were invited to the 2019/2020 residency."

Huang Matheis was recommended by Hudson Valley artist Elisa Pritzker, a former participant in the festival.

"Elisa encouraged me to get back into doing more of my own art, as I have spent several years curating other artists in the region," said Huang Matheis.



Pawling artist Bibiana Huang Matheis recently participated in the "Fresh Winds" artist-in-residency festival in Iceland. Her installation, "Heart @ Our Forests," is a call to save and replenish the world's vanishing forests. *Photos courtesy of the artist*

In her artist statement, she described the project as a juxtaposition of two "forest calamities" – one in Iceland, a country where only about 2 percent of the land is now forested; and the other in Louisiana, the Atchafalaya Basin, a National Heritage Area.

"Here [in the project], I visualize the threatened and fast disappearing wilderness of Louisiana Atchafalaya Basin bayou, the largest wetland forest in North America; and, I visually symbolize the vanished birch forest that once populated Iceland," she said.

Via email, Huang Matheis explained the installation process:

"The photos were taken in the Louisiana Bayou. Ninety-seven percent were turned into black-and-white images. I printed them on 12 large sheets of 8-foot-tall canvas, which I sewed together and painted unifying stripes," she said. "In Iceland, I created the extinct birch tree forest by using

screens, which I cut and painted. The installation art combined all elements."

"Heart @ Our Forests" evokes an eerie beauty with the ghosts of the birch trees, while sending a chilly warning that is mirrored in the images of devastated swamp forest.

"The installation speaks as the voice of the soul from the newly departed bayou trees, joined with the essence of the long-lost Icelandic birch trees at this 'edge the world project,'" Huang Matheis said. "In some images, I either imposed a heart, or a heart was naturally present. The heart is symbolic of love, the love of nature, for what we have and the love for what we lost, and the love for preserving what remains. If you look carefully, in my installation and in forest worldwide, nature is pleading to us."

Deforestation is an increasingly urgent problem: A report by the World Bank in 2016 stated that, from 1990 to 2015, the world's forests shrank by 1.3 million square

kilometers. Put another way: During that time period, the Earth lost an area of forest equivalent to 1,000 football fields every hour.

Response to her installation was enthusiastic, Huang Matheis said.

"The local Icelanders received it most positively. Since there are no forests in Iceland, the people loved to see images of it. The [overall] response was also very positive, as people liked the heart imagery, symbolizing love," she said. "The other artists stated that my work was powerful and inspiring. A Korean artist, for example, saw my work as an '...attempt to hold humans and nature together.'"

Huang Matheis said all artists in the "Fresh Winds" program leave their art permanently behind in the small coastal village of Suðurnesjabær, for the enjoyment of the local community.

"Everywhere you go, inside or outside, there are artworks on display from previous years," she said.

"Heart @ Our Forests" is part of Huang Matheis' series, "Heart@Heart," which she describes as "putting love in public spaces by visualizing the international symbol for heart, using natural or recycled materials found in that locality. In the past, I have installed numerous such pieces in New York City and the Hudson Valley."

Learn more about the artist at <http://www.bibiphoto.com/>. ❖



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