



*about the trees*



## *about the trees*

I've been attracted to trees since I was a farm kid in Iowa (we didn't have many...). I've been drawing them and painting some version of them for many years, always trying to capture the essence of "tree."

I participated in a project, the 100-Day Project, that gave me a way to focus on trees a little differently. The Project was 12 weeks long and was titled SOLSTICE TO EQUINOX. I posted in my blog once a week, nearly to the end of the period, and then a couple of postscript pieces. This is a copy of my blog posts (<https://rebeccanolda.wordpress.com/>).

# 100 days...solstice to equinox

DECEMBER 28, 2018



ideas about trees from my sketchbook

Last year I tackled the **100-day project** of doing one drawing every day for 100 days. Amazingly, I made it through Day 65, but then got caught up in stuff and only managed to draw intermittently after that. This year, though, one

of the projects is WEEKLY!!!...a Solstice to Equinox project, which began on December 21st. I chose that because I want to focus on trees—a subject and image source that I really like. I think of the “long sleep” that trees (and, of course, other plants and animals) take in the stretch of winter. The project seems like a unique capture of a period of time we sink into and rise back out of.

Robert Drown and the “**Sleep Cycle of Trees**”:

*People go to sleep every night and wake up in the morning. Trees go to sleep every autumn and wake up every spring. This sleep, technically called dormancy enables trees to survive harsh winter periods. In tree species, dormancy and cold hardiness are closely linked. In general trees are most cold hardy when they are in deep dormancy.*



To dig into this, I'm reading ***The Hidden Life of Trees***, a narrative of interconnectedness and mutual support between trees. But I'm not sure the ecosystem described by the authors (mostly about Beech trees in Europe) translates to this desert landscape of mine in New Mexico—junipers and occasional piñon trees. How do they support each other, being spaced so incredibly far apart? They remind me of sheep grazing on a hillside when I look at them.

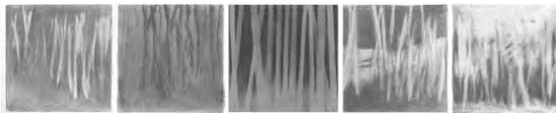
Also, junipers seem more “shrubbish” than “treeish,” often situated by themselves on the side of an arroyo, seemingly ready to slide in.

I took a little field trip to find a single juniper to sketch—I found this one. Interesting to me because about half of the branches are dead, without leaves. I wondered if it is mingling roots with another juniper to get some help. And of course, it's winter...so it may be just waiting for a tipping point (?). Sad thought.



# The time of trees

JANUARY 3, 2019



*trying to capture some sense of trees in my sketchbook*

From Richard Preston in ***The Wild Trees***:

*“Time has a different quality in a forest, a different kind of flow. Time moves in circles, and events are linked, even if it’s not obvious that they are linked. Events in a forest occur with precision in the flow of tree time, like the motions of an endless dance.”*

It’s difficult to think of the junipers here in New Mexico comprising a FOREST. Forest implies myth and magic, and although very few trees surround me anywhere here in the desert, it does seem that they are holding themselves in relationship to each other...and perhaps to me when I’m there among them. Maybe they have some secrets, but they are not protective of them—they share willingly if I can just tune in.



Teruko Wilde "Autumn Fields II" 2014 oil



Michelin Basso "Untitled 14" 2014 graphite on canvas

So I am wondering—what is it about trees that can be described as “tree-ness?” I’ve been looking at a couple of artists that I admire: **Teruko Wilde** and **Michelin Basso** (on the left).

I had to think about whether the elusiveness in these images was getting at what I wanted—they certainly appeal! But there is also something about the act of drawing or painting trees as I think of them that strikes a deeper chord for me.

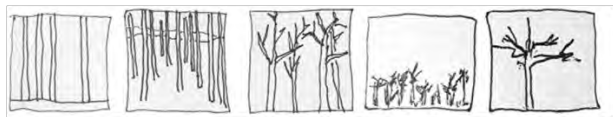
*This is mine (pencil, powdered graphite on paper, 12×12).*



# While they are sleeping

JANUARY 10, 2019

more quick tree doodles



From Peter Wohlleben in *The Hidden Life of Trees*:

*To protect its needles from freezing [in the winter], a conifer fills them with antifreeze. To ensure it doesn't lose water to transpiration over the winter, it covers the exterior of its needles with a thick layer of wax. As an extra precaution, the skin on its needles is tough and hard, and the small breathing holes on the underside are buried extra deep. All these precautions combine to prevent the tree from losing any significant amount of water. Such a loss would be tragic, because the tree wouldn't be able to replenish supplies from the frozen ground. It would dry out and could then die of thirst.*

So I'm wondering, since it's been raining and snowing and I'm out here in the desert where the ground doesn't stay frozen, "What are my junipers doing?" I imagine them awakening slightly from their winter nap to store water. It's hard to come by out here and they might want to take advantage. Where and how will they do that? They must be savoring it and planning to use it as a hedge against May. The hot month. Or June, even hotter and drier.

My interest is not just about water and dormancy, although the opportunity for storing moisture and the seasonal cycle are fascinating—it's how tree sleep adds to the mystery of FOREST. The voice of the trees. The group think.

Another drawing (**not** junipers because my mind is thinking about trees that look dormant...no leaves).

pencil, powdered graphite on  
paper, 12x12



# Observing the mystery of trees (in winter)

JANUARY 16, 2019



*graphite sketch of trees*

Trees together in a space create a permeable barrier—dividing us from whatever lies beyond their front ranks in a forest. We want to get in there, get past there, merge with that mysterious space. In winter, there is also that sense of silent waiting.

Here in the New Mexico desert the color of the junipers changed in the fall. Instead of their usual rich, dark green, they are now more of a sage brown color. Apparently, chlorophyll production has stopped and now they are holding their position until the season changes again. Since junipers are evergreens, they don't lose their leaves so their winter stance is less obvious.

The hardwood forests have a more secret feeling space—spare, cold, and seemingly vulnerable. Junipers, with their leafy jackets in place, appear placid and contented. I like that about them. But, mystery-wise, those naked hardwoods have my attention.

From **Qing Li on Forest Bathing**:

*"We feel comfortable in nature because that is where we have lived for most of our life on earth. We are genetically determined to love the natural world. It is in our DNA. And this affinity for the natural world is fundamental to our health. Contact with nature is as vital to our well-being as regular exercise and a healthy diet. 'Our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents,' wrote [Edward O.] Wilson. We are 'hard-wired' to affiliate with the natural world – and just as our health improves when we are in it, so our health suffers when we are divorced from it."*

I'm still trying to capture some of the feeling I have about trees.

Here's a painting I recently finished.

*acrylic on canvas, 36x36*

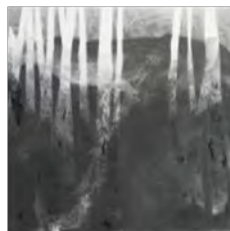




# An education in tree language

JANUARY 26, 2019

*Deep roots*  
powdered graphite and charcoal on paper, 6.5x6.5



When I signed up for the **Solstice to Equinox 100-day Project**, I thought of trees and what goes on with them in winter. I have since been knee-deep in tree books: **Wild Foresting**, **Forest Bathing**, **The Hidden Life of Trees**, and many

more. So much I didn't know! But the truth is that knowing more about trees has elevated them to the level of some kind of mythical portal for me.

It's not that I want to interpret tree-ness so literally in my painting and drawing, but that I want to somehow capture how they make me feel. A tough goal. They are mysterious creatures.

From Alan Drenghson and Duncan Taylor in **Wild Foresting: Practicing Nature's Wisdom**:

*It is through contact with the natural world that we connect with other beings, the plants and animals with whom we share our lives on a daily basis. They are in our dreams, they are our inner animals and plants that guide and tell us where we are, who we are, how to be whole and how to know ourselves in authentic ways.*

My artist buddy, **P. K. Williams**, and I are doing a collaborative show of our work in February. One of our focal points has been trees. We call our exhibition *One + One = One—Different at the surface, but connected at the roots*. One of our ideas was to create paintings entirely separately and then bring them together to pair them up. For that part of the exhibition, we worked on canvases that are 36x12. Here's one of my "halves" (on the right).

We just finished matching up paintings today. In this portion of our collaboration we have six pairs. We had a great time finding what goes with what! Our trees are prominent as a theme—a shared interest for us. And, for me, a perfect fit with my 100-day project. This "quiet" time of trees in winter is an opportunity to observe them and think about them without the excitement of spring. And to make some paintings about that. That stillness.



*untitled, acrylic on canvas*  
36x12

# The time in between

FEBRUARY 2, 2019



We're right at the halfway mark between **winter solstice and spring equinox** in the 100-Day Project—the perfect vantage point for looking back and looking ahead. Trees are turning towards spring, even though we can't yet see evidence of that. More than any other time of year, this is a time of contemplation and preparation, and maybe even some rest. Not so much DOING going on.

I've been focusing on trees and how they express this change of seasons, but there is another aspect to the period of time between the autumn solstice and the spring equinox, and a wealth of information about celebrating it.

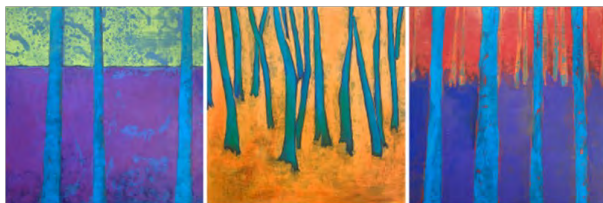
**Jon Alswinn and Jenny Belikov** say this:

*The sun—the source of life and light to every living physical thing—is a unifying force, a blazing fire, and the giver and destroyer of life....a true celebration of the cosmic meaning of the solstices and equinoxes is not mere worship or an enactment of old rituals lacking life; rather, it commemorates the divine plan of life, displayed in the heavens so that it can be enacted in our own lives on earth. It recognizes the divine and creative powers latent in the cosmos, nature and within the individual, waiting to be kindled.*



I've always felt trees in particular had something special going on, but expanding that to include "the divine and creative powers latent in the cosmos, nature...waiting to be kindled"? Hmm. I've always been a little uncomfortable with the idea of nature rituals. They weren't part of my Iowa farm mentality growing up. But if I can include my trees in that mystical expression...well, that works for me.

Back to my focus—I am still wrapped up with trees. Here are three little panels that I just finished:



acrylic on cradled panels with epoxy resin, each 6x6



# My “aha” moment

FEBRUARY 15, 2019



*a sketch of trees in the Sandia Mountains*

I’m coming back from being sick with the flu for a couple of weeks. Not a fun time, but in the midst of it I had a realization that I was looking at a crossover between making art and observing trees in my 100-day project. And that both are part of a bigger process—the *unlearning* that connects life experiences and allows new perceptions.

I just finished a book by **Kyna Leski: *The Storm of Creativity***. One of the things she observed in her study of creativity is how important it is to *unlearn* what we know about something so that we can formulate a new problem statement. I love that idea—a problem statement! That means finding a new way to look at something that interests us or draws our attention. So, when I started the 100-day project, Solstice to Equinox, I immediately gathered details about my lovely trees. Fascinating. I wanted to focus on the period between the winter solstice and the spring equinox and see how that was reflected in the desert trees near me.

Now, however, I’m seeing that my focus on the trees is spilling over into my artmaking process and into how I see the rest of the natural and unnatural world. Hmm. *Unlearning* means losing the constraints of how we normally look at everything...all the way from trees to a blank canvas. I think it means *resting* from interpretation and allowing different influences to surface. Let those muddle around together for awhile and you just might get a different way to do things. Something more creative perhaps by paying attention in a different way.

More little tree panels:



*acrylic on cradled panels with epoxy resin, each 6x6*

# Tree grammar

FEBRUARY 23, 2019

A segue into tree grammar  
(I promise it's connected):



*"Much as human artists have to know about the things they are depicting, so each of Cohen's [computer] programs needs an internal model of its subject matter [referring to computer-generated drawings of acrobatic figures that artist **Harold Cohen** created—on the left]. This model is not a physical object, like the articulated wooden dolls found in artists' studios, but a **generative system** [my emphasis]: what one might call a "body grammar." It is a set of abstract rules that specify, for instance, not only the anatomy of the human body (two arms, two legs), but also how the various body parts appear from various points of view."*



**Margaret Boden, "What Is Creativity?"**

Okay, that's a lot of verbiage...but that concept sparked a question for me—how do artists create and rely upon "generative spaces" as a source library? Each art work I create stems from some stimulus, some base of information—a collection of ideas and images that I can develop as a piece of art. And there are some implied rules that direct my efforts.

Take trees: I'm thinking about trees in this space of time because of my focus for the **100DayProject, Solstice to Equinox**, and I wondered what might be the characteristics of a tree generative space and how "body grammar" might translate to "tree grammar," supposing of course that trees do have a language and a model that I can identify. Trees bring to mind a lot of descriptive words: boundary, linear, solidarity, comfort, elusive, community, indifferent, etc.

All of these words come into play when I create a tree piece. What I do know is that I get a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from my endless stick drawings of trees. It's like repeating a code that links me directly to tree-ness. That's got to be a kind of tree grammar, no?



A perfect ending from **"The Life of Trees" by Dorianne Laux**:

*"I want to sleep  
and dream the life of trees, beings  
from the muted world who care  
nothing for Money, Politics, Power,  
Will or Right, who want little from the night  
but a few dead stars going dim, a white owl  
lifting from their limbs, who want only  
to sink their roots into the wet ground  
and terrify the worms or shake*

*their bleary heads like fashion models  
or old hippies. If trees could speak,  
they wouldn't, only hum some low  
green note, roll their pine cones  
down the empty streets and blame it,  
with a shrug, on the cold wind."*



# The middle of the funnel

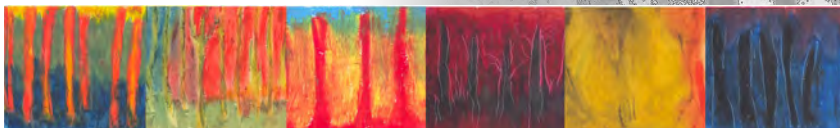
APRIL 23, 2019



The spring equinox has come and gone...and now we're headed for the summer solstice. The longest day of the year. Cycling through the seasons begins to look something like the center of the storm—the middle of the funnel for quiet observation—and a hint that there is no end, that everything keeps folding back in on itself. A continuum. (See my **"My aha moment"** for more about **The Storm of Creativity** by Kyna Leski.)

When I think of this continuum in making art, I think of the flat planes of a picture that are juxtaposed; that they are simply one front, one surface, of a deeper space—and behind that cross-section of spaces, whole worlds are gliding, coalescing, dividing, redefining. At least that's how I imagine it. So painting a 2D surface means defining the front edge of what's happening, leaving opportunity to picture a whole experience happening right behind that plane. There are possibilities and potential stories right below the visible surface.

And when I'm thinking about trees, I'm capturing the "front"...but imagining the deeper experience. Walking through a forest, being surrounded by trees, feeling the quiet (or sometimes how the wind is moving branches, leaves, even the trunks). I think, for me, trees are a magical gateway. How cool is it that I can have access to that right outside my door? When I draw or paint, I can tap into that feeling.



*small oil pastels from my sketchbook...about trees*

# Witness trees

APRIL 28, 2018



*"Garden and lanterns"  
tiny drawing (6x2.5)  
graphite on paper*

I was specifically focused on trees for awhile as part of the **100-Day Project—Solstice to Equinox**, which ended in March on the spring equinox. Then I stumbled on another project that completely captivated me: the **Witness Tree Project**. What, I wondered, is this about?

From their **website**:

*Since 2009, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the National Park Service (NPS) have worked to develop a collaborative model for teaching and learning centered on witness trees, long-standing trees that were present for key moments in American history. The Witness Tree Project arranges for fallen witness trees to be shipped from NPS sites to RISD, where, in a joint history seminar and furniture studio, students interpret the history of a given tree's site and make relevant objects from the tree's wood.*

I'll keep working with trees—painting and drawing my idea of them, spending my time in and amongst them—but this is an amazing, and new to me, way to recognize a tree's way of anchoring us in time. Imagine the strength of a whole forest witnessing!

I just finished two small paintings of trees (on the right). I'm sure they are witness trees in their storybook land.



Side note. Here's a **witness tree story**—the 200 yr. old Olmsted elm, growing next to the office of Frederick Law Olmsted (often called the father of American landscape architecture, d. 1903) eventually succumbed to Dutch Elm disease and was cut down on my birthday in 2011. The area is now a national park. The tree went to RISD.

