

ZIEHERSMITH

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Casting New York City's Oldest Tree in Luminous Glass

Artist Rachel Owens made casts of the Alley Pond Giant, the oldest living thing in New York City, and fused them with a rainbow of glass shards.

Allison Meier - April 6, 2017



Installation view of *Rachel Owens: Mother* at ZieherSmith in Chelsea (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

A ring of glass monoliths stands in the center of the ZieherSmith gallery, each formed from a cast of the oldest known living thing in New York City. The Alley Pond Giant is a tulip poplar tree in Queens, towering over 130 feet and believed to be around 400 years old. According to NYC Parks, it “may be the tallest and the oldest living organism in the city.”



It grows in a heavily forested ravine in Alley Pond Park, which is pocked with kettle ponds left by a glacier that once covered the area, adding to its ancient feel. The setting also means it’s quite a journey to visit the historic arbor. The sculptures by Rachel Owens, on view in her solo show *Mother*, were made by hiking in with gallons of rubber, plaster, and jugs of water over the course of two months.

“It literally was like sculpture boot camp,” Owens told Hyperallergic. Working with a part-time assistant and a group of interns, the artist completed a series of rubber casts, each measuring as wide as she could stretch her arms around the tree’s massive trunk (which was not harmed in the process). After the on-site molding, Owens used heaps of cheap glass from China to fuse impressions of the tree in her studio. One side of every piece maintains the rough bark texture of the giant; the other is ragged, with exposed shards in rainbows of color. The fragility of the glass vessels contrasts with the longevity of

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the tree, and in the exhibition (the last to be held in ZieherSmith's current Chelsea space), glass cairns of bottles and shoes add to the environmentalist undertones. "While in the woods with the tree for those couple of months, I found all kinds smashed cans, bottles, lost shoes, and so forth," Owens said. "That stuff was the visible evidence of humans in the ravine, which was formed by glaciers thousands of years ago. It seemed important to include these things on the periphery."



On the wall by the gallery's entrance is a warped sign that was formerly installed at the tree. Now rusted and vandalized, it poetically reads: "Treat this oldest sylvan citizen of our City with the respect it deserves." The project grew out of Owens's research into New York's landscapes, through which she discovered the elder giant. "I couldn't believe there was actually a tree still alive in the metropolitan area that just about predates the settlement of Europeans in North America," she said. "The tree's life has seen the entire span of the city as we know it, from the native Matinecock people to the present, where the LIE [Long Island Expressway] whirs past less than a quarter mile away."

After getting permission from NYC Parks to work on-site, she started to consider the tree as a weathered "mother," a role that suddenly shifted following Trump's election. At ZieherSmith, the tree casts are joined by burned text banners of signs that Owens saw at the January Women's March ("We Are the Granddaughters of All the Witches You Were Never

Able to Burn" and the singular, titular "Mother"). Chants from the march further haunt a soundscape based on research by Dr. Peter Wohlleben and slowed-down recordings by Dr. Alexandre Ponomarenko of the communication of trees when they're in need of water.

"Although I have made burnt text pieces before, the process took on new meaning in this particular installation," Owens explained. "Sometime in the last few years, vandals came down and actually burned the inside of the Queens Giant." Some of the soot from this fire is still present on a pink cast with an oval void, which represents the opening to the tree's cauterized trunk. Combined with the sound piece and the allusion to witches, *Mother* gives you the feeling of entering a magic circle, where the time Owens spent in contact with the tree, the luminous material, and the accumulation of the mass-produced glass creates a strange symbiosis of migration and connection.



Rachel Owens: *Mother continues at ZieherSmith (516 W 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 15.*