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Performing Change: A Reflection on "How to Build a Forest" at the Contemporary Arts Center

BY BENJAMIN MORRIS (/ART-REVIEW/CONTRIBUTORS/BENJAMIN-MORRIS)

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Benjamin Morris visits PearlDamour + Shawn Hall's "How to Build a Forest" and questions the relationship between performance and activism.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF PEARLDAMOUR + SHAWN HALL'S HOW TO BUILD A FOREST IN 2015 AT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, NEW ORLEANS. PHOTO BY SHAWN HALL.

Forests are deceptive places. Contrary to their depiction as quiet, secluded spaces where very little happens, forests are, in truth, highly active environments. The changes of seasons, the life cycles of flora and fauna, and events in geologic and topographic development may all take place at differing scales and speeds, some outside the realm of human perception, but none can deny their happening. The trick, then, is to train our eyes and ears to attend to those changes, and to condition ourselves to spot them as they occur.

Unfortunately, for city dwellers, rare are the opportunities to do so, at least until the arrival of *How to Build a Forest* (http://cacno.org/howtobuildaforest) at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans. Conceived by the artists Shawn Hall, Katie Pearl, and Lisa D'Amour, this installation and performance offered visitors the chance to observe and explore the creation and dismantling of a forest-like environment over the course of eight hours. Though billed as a response to the ecological destruction following Hurricane Katrina—and influenced by the BP oil spill of 2010—the piece offers ecological reflections on material culture, on globalization, and on the modern consumer economy much broader than any one particular disaster.

All the organisms in this forest were formed entirely out of recycled or repurposed materials scavenged by the artists. After entering the space and receiving a visit from a "ranger" who explained the guidelines of exploration, allowing one's eyes to adjust revealed a variety of reimagined objects. A polyester live oak dominated a central plaza, and dozens of other fabrics resembled elms, birches, hackberries, and pines, all trees of coastal Louisiana (some even with split trunks due to imagined lightning—a nice touch). Strewn along the forest floor, blocks of florist's foam became jagged rocks; cut plastic bags became tiny blossoms; and scores of abandoned neckties became superb pitcher plants that could have sprung up from the pages of Dr. Seuss.

Seen at a distance from the viewer's platform, the forest as a whole was rich and dense enough, but as with any ecosystem, only full immersion allowed a deeper understanding. Entering the forest yielded a closer look at the artistry involved in such transformations, simultaneously collapsing the optical illusion and offering greater rewards for slow, patient observation. Ambient music mimicked the sound of water in streams or rain falling through branches, and the riot of color and texture of the fabrics became calmer, more intelligible. In a particularly lovely detail, blowing into carefully disguised hoses of air, performers created subtle currents of wind that both rustled the leaves of the trees and caused plastic flowers to open and close.



CLOSE-UP VIEW OF PEARLDAMOUR + SHAWN HALL'S HOW TO BUILD A FOREST IN 2011 AT THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK. PHOTO BY PAULA COURT.

Forests have structures, from the canopy to the roots, and part of learning how to read or build—much less inhabit—a forest involves learning where one stratum ends and another begins. Gravity-bound creatures that we are, the majority of the organisms here remained on the forest floor, but certain surprises occasionally took place overhead. What at first seemed to be curiously draped bushes garlanded in plastic coin-shaped leaves—like those of a quaking aspen—suddenly rose into the air to become the low-hanging branches of the understory. Artifice of the environment notwithstanding—the wires, pulleys, and ropes of the theater space—the effect was both intellectually and emotionally satisfying.

But satisfaction was hardly the point. One of the main lessons of the piece is that even as forest societies have structures, so do our own—primarily economic. A core aim of the installation is to explore the extent to which modern consumer society relies on the natural world—particularly fossil fuels—to create, store, ship, and even destroy the goods of our everyday lives. A powerful irony is at work, one that is not lost on the installation's creators: that insofar as they have transformed basic materials (petroleum, fabrics, metals) into organisms, many of those same materials were once themselves organisms populating the earth (dinosaurs, ancient flora, microbes), with only our modern callousness plundering our environment to fuel its machines. Awareness of that irony, and those processes, is the first step to curbing that disaster.

Can such a piece achieve any concrete environmental goals? It's hard to say. To some extent, the piece seems to be preaching largely to the choir—many of the audience members were young, hip, hemp-and-linen-wearing thoughtful types—so it's a safe bet that environmental awareness, if not outright activism, was already well-established in that room. That said, the printed field guide, supplied upon entry, did offer fascinating insights into the roots of material culture, illuminating just how many of our products are made with petroleum bases—even those one might not expect, such as packing tape, yarn, and even zippers. Such a realization is jarring no matter whether you drive a Prius or a Hummer (or just use your own two feet), and this knowledge could well lead to more conscious economic choices.

Ultimately, *How to Build a Forest* succeeds most as a focused exercise in some of the simplest yet oft-neglected practices in our modern lives—observing, listening, and attending—practices that defy the demands of the digital age and its lust for distraction. Exercising those slower, more conscious forms of existing, and making concerted efforts towards mindfulness in all our interactions, may yet prove an antidote to many ills, not just rampant consumerism. Such an injunction arrives early on in this installation, in the rangers' first personal encounters with each audience member. "The forest is happening right there," they whisper, sitting down beside you and gesturing towards the stage. "The overlook is happening back there. And you," they say, in a strangely welcome reminder, "you are happening right here, in your chair." Indeed.

EDITOR'S NOTE

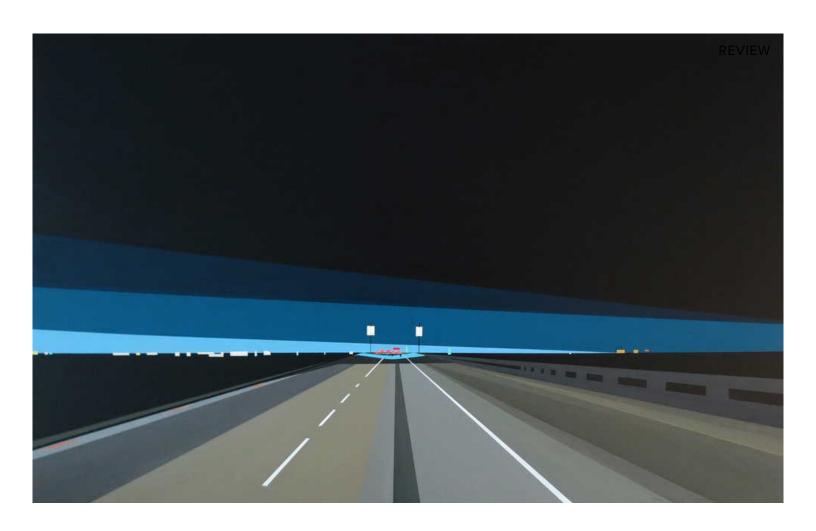
PearlDamour + Shawn Hall's *How to Build a Forest* was performed October 23 - 29, 2015 at the Contemporary Arts Center (900 Camp Street) in New Orleans.

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