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Michele Brody, Fragment from a Lost Marshland, 2023. Paper pulp from invasive phragmites reeds cast in the form of the native cattails, pigmented cotton pulp, fixed with rabbit skin glue. Photo: Mark Shaw.

August 16. The exhibition brought together new and earlier works, all unified through the material poetics of paper. Brody plans to travel the show across the country. In two large paper reliefs, *Fragments from a Lost Marshland*, Brody cast impressions from native cattail reeds she collected during her expeditions in New York and Vermont. Across much of North America, cattails have been outcompeted by phragmites, a Eurasian species likely introduced unintentionally in the ballast of ships arriving from Europe in the late 1700s or early 1800s. Brody's delicate casts—refined with pigmentation and encaustic paint, and steeped in a quiet mourning for ecological loss—carry their own contradiction: the artist makes them from phragmites, the very reed that are displacing cattails, thus forcing a dialogue—and even collaboration—between what is native and what is categorized as nonnative. "Over time, nature recalibrates itself, returning to greater richness and variety," Brody reflects. Her understanding of the entropy of nature, referenced in the title of the show, is more hopeful than that of Robert Smithson who decried decomposing suburban environments along the Passaic River, choked by industrial production. When I walked along Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic" a couple of years ago, I was struck by the lush greenery of the riverbanks. Even though the industrial damage to the river remains beyond repair, nature seems to find every way to restore vitality.

Casting vanishing species has become one of Brody's signatures. Objects from the *Ghosted* series inhabited the gallery with paper casts of tree trunks found across New York and Maine. Segmented and clipped together with rare-earth magnets over aluminum armatures, the milky, translucent trunks stood alone or leaned against deep green walls—half forest, half apparition. Their anthropomorphic bodies—at times lit from within—slid between uncanny companion, design object, and fragile effigy of what is vanishing. Among the trees cast are a few American chestnuts. Once the towering monarch of Eastern US forests, the species

PAPER EXHIBITION REVIEW

Arboreal Ethereal:

Capturing the Entropy of Nature

In this feature, Olga Zaikina reviews Michele Brody's most recent exhibition, Arboreal Ethereal: Capturing the Entropy of Nature, which was on view from July 10 through August 16 at the Bronx River Art Center.

Paper has long preserved memory through writing and illustration. In Michele Brody's art, paper itself becomes the storyteller, memorializing what is being lost—ecologically, in her case. Trained in fibers and material studies, Brody works through a laborious process of papermaking with site-specific vegetal matter to create delicate sculptures and installations shaped after vanishing plants and trees. While reflecting on biodiversity changes, Brody's projects also weave in themes of cultural diversity, migration, history, and identity.

Her most recent exhibition, *Arboreal Ethereal: Capturing the Entropy of Nature*, the culmination of her participation in the Artist Studio Program at the Bronx River Art Center, was on view at the Center from July 10 to



Michele Brody, Blue & Red 2024, 2025, from the Blue & Red series, 2019–ongoing. Dyed cotton pulp, recycled blue jeans, sprouted wheat grass seeds. Photo: Michele Brody.

was decimated by a blight fungus inadvertently introduced a century ago with imported Japanese chestnuts. In Brody's casts, this history surfaces through the blight stains naturally imprinted on the paper. The lesion-like patterns, ranging in burnt-sienna hues, attest to the individuality of each tree while registering the very disease that is ending the tree's life. Think death masks, but for trees: imprints pressed at the brink of disappearance, caught between presence and absence, authenticity and shell.

Standing amid nine silver birch casts—thin, tall, pale, and infinitely fragile—I could not help, as someone raised in Russia, but think of a birch grove: that iconic, if somewhat kitschy, emblem of the Russian forest. Since the invasion of Ukraine, however, that image—like other once-familiar icons—has curdled into a symbol of aggression. My own identity, too, has hollowed out; I have felt like a death mask, a ghost of myself, present through absence.

Brody's birches, of course, have nothing to do with Russia. Instead, they point to the species common in North America—though not truly native here either. What they stage is relation itself. Their sheer verticality and their play with authenticity and individuality push them beyond ecology into questions of identity and mortality. Standing among them recalls the charge of Barnett Newman's vertical "zips"—those pulsating stripes that split and unify vast fields of color into the space of the sublime. Yet here the sublime takes on a contemporary cast. Where Newman sought transcendence in pure color, Brody summons the ecological sublime—beauty and fragility as one—reminding us that the vanishing world is not a matter of spirit alone but of interdependence.

At the gallery's center, Brody's *Monarch Migrations* flares up: a cloud of origami butterflies made from handmade milkweed paper conjures the collapse of Monarch migrations as their only host plant—milkweed—disappears under ecological and human assault. Each butterfly carries a handwritten story of displacement from Brody's community workshops—folded, partly hidden, they balance privacy

and publicity, individual and collective. Projected footage from Mexico's Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve further extends their fragile flight into human histories of migration, pressing particularly against today's reinforced US immigration policies—mostly chaotic and often terrifying. By weaving local flora, community voices, and ecological knowledge, Brody collapses the divide between invasive and indigenous, spotlighting biodiversity and cultural diversity alike. Migration here is framed not through exclusion but through an ethic of care, relationality, and survival.

In the *Blue & Red* series, begun in 2019, Brody transforms presidential electoral maps into living paper works made of cotton pulp, recycled blue jeans, and sprouting wheatgrass seeds. With each election, she "planted" seeds along state borders, interstate highways, or party lines, creating maps in which fragile growth attempts to stitch together a nation divided by politics. Nature becomes both metaphor and medium: roots binding social fractures, politics woven back into the earth. In a striking and bitter twist, the seeds in red states failed to sprout in her most recent map of the 2024 election—an ironic visualization of collapse. If Wendell Berry—American novelist and longtime ecological activist—warned of the ecological and communal wreckage wrought by industrial agriculture, Brody restages that warning in miniature. Her quadrennial agricultural mini-labs reveal politics itself as an exhausted soil, where growth either falters or takes hold. In present-day America, where politics works to tear apart social, cultural, and ecological threads, Brody's art resonates deeply—the delicate ecosystems she cultivates remind us that witnessing fragility is also an invitation to plant the seeds of care and connection.

— Olga Zaikina

Olga Zaikina is a curator, researcher, and archivist with a PhD in art history. She specializes in modern and contemporary art, exploring intersections of materiality, performativity, and everyday life. She has published in peer-reviewed journals as well as leading art platforms. Her curatorial experience includes conceptual art exhibitions and performative art re-enactments.