



JULY 23, 2022 – FEBRUARY 5, 2023

KRISTIN LEACHMAN

LONGLEAF LINES

GEORGIA MUSEUM OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

covers:

Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 3* (detail), 2021.

Oil on canvas on panel, 54 × 72 inches.

Courtesy of the artist.

The W. Newton Morris Charitable Foundation Fund and the Friends of the Georgia Museum of Art support exhibitions and programs at the Georgia Museum of Art. The Georgia Council for the Arts also provides support through the appropriations of the Georgia General Assembly. GCA receives support from its partner agency, the National Endowment for the Arts. Individuals, foundations and corporations provide additional museum support through their gifts to the University of Georgia Foundation.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN

LONGLEAF LINES

The story of longleaf is rife with disparity and contradiction. Vast wealth, built on the timbering of these trees in the 1800s, also brought intergenerational poverty and debilitating illness.

The turpentine industry, which sapped resin from these trees, operated much like plantations in the era of slavery, indenturing its laborers and wreaking environmental, social, and physiological havoc on its communities.

Paradoxically, these forests also flourish through fire—burned before rising phoenix-like from the scattered ashes. In the past, lightning sparked these blazes. Then Indigenous communities carried the practice forward until their removal from the region in the 1830s. Now foresters have revived that ancient process. Charred in places with brown and blackened pigments, the paintings inspired by longleaf pine in this exhibition are similarly singed with fire, reflecting a controlled burn that occurred in a southwest Georgia forest shortly before the artist Kristin Leachman (American, b. 1966) arrived there in 2020.

Our reaction to her paintings should be nothing less than visceral. After all, these abstractions evoke the viscera of trees and, in their seeping bark-like surfaces, their skin. If leaves are how trees breathe, bark is logically the place of feeling and touch—the membrane that simultaneously separates the trees from the outside world and connects us to them. Trees have long served as surrogate bodies onto which humans have projected their own bodily trauma, like the wounded trees and tree-shaped stone monuments that cover Civil War battlefields like Gettysburg. Their skin is ours. Their wounds conjure our wounds.

Ultimately, Leachman's paintings articulate the relationships between painting and nature, even in the artistic materials she employs. She is pioneering the use of reclaimed earth pigments, produced from minerals like iron oxide pulled from US riverways historically polluted by mining. The paints' purple and brown hues anchor the palette of her pictures, visually depicting and materially supporting efforts in environmental conservation. They also align the viewer within a wider ecosystem, conjuring what philosopher Timothy Morton has called "the mesh": a radically open form of interconnection without a center, which links things living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. With these paintings, we ought not miss the forest for the trees. By immersing us in the longleaf through monumentally scaled abstractions and by seeking ecological remediation through their very materials, Leachman's paintings bring hope that balanced coexistence with nature may one day be possible.

JEFFREY RICHMOND-MOLL, CURATOR OF AMERICAN ART

FIFTY FORESTS

GEORGIA

IN MY YEARS OF WORK ON THE FIFTY FORESTS PROJECT, no other forest has captured my imagination quite like the longleaf pine. Growing up in Virginia near the Blue Ridge Mountains and Civil War battlefield sites, I had little awareness of the ecological history of the southern landscape. My love of nature and concern about climate change led me to learn more about North American ecosystems and the role of trees within them. The paintings in this exhibition emerge from my research in and about the captivating longleaf pine and its importance to the southern United States. I am honored to share what I have learned about longleaf in this exhibition.

The longleaf pine ecosystem is one of the most biologically rich systems in the world and, until the twentieth century, it dominated the landscape from Virginia through Georgia to East Texas. By that time the trees had been over-resourced due to their suitability for shipbuilding and railroad ties and clearcut for agricultural purposes. The longleaf pine itself is not currently an endangered species but the system in which we find the longleaf is urgently threatened, with thousands of other species that the longleaf pines protect currently at risk. The Bachman Sparrow is one of many endangered species living in what remains of the longleaf wiregrass ecosystem. Its clear whistle and trill, along with the songs of the bobwhite quail, the yellow-bellied sapsucker and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, provided the soundtrack during my visit to a longleaf forest in South Georgia at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 1791, naturalist William Bartram, the son of a botanist to King George III, published an account of his travels through these virgin longleaf forests, providing one of the earliest and most detailed descriptions of the trees. The forest I walked through likely looks and sounds scarcely different than it did to Bartram, thanks to private conservation efforts.



Robert Havell after John James Audubon, *Red-cockaded Woodpecker*, 1837. Hand-colored engraving and aquatint on Whatman wove paper. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mrs. Walter B. James, 1945.8.389.

Entering this sacred landscape, which is the unceded ancestral land of the Apalachee and Lower Creek Tribes, I felt transported back in time. The longleaf pine canopies are very high, offering magnificent uninterrupted vistas through the woods. A few weeks before my arrival in late spring, the forester who manages the tract I was visiting had conducted a controlled burn, a practice that stretches back thousands of years. The understory was filled with wildflowers and lush low vegetation. I walked the forest floor with ease conducting my research.



Old-growth longleaf pine forest, southwest Georgia. Photo by Kristin Leachman, 2020.

I took the data I collected in the woods back to my studio in California. It comprised my composition-al drawings from bark formations, photography for color reference, and field notes of my observations and conversations. I prepared each of the canvas-covered panels with a ground of red Georgia clay colored washes and created the oil paintings with reclaimed earth pigments, derived from iron oxide that ended up in the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers through acid mining drainage during the Industrial Revolution.

The essence of these old-growth trees, their interconnectedness with the landscape and its history, is what I wanted to evoke in my paintings. I was moved by the connections among the trees, the gopher tortoise, the birds, the butterflies, and the parallel historical realities of turpentine, colonialism, capitalism, the Civil War, railroad ties, ships' masts, naval stores, and quail. In keeping with the tangled history and contradictions of longleaf in the American South, bobwhite quail hunters are the ones who have ultimately saved the historic ecosystem from further destruction.

The Fifty Forests Project is a life's work in representation and abstraction with the twin commitments to painting and to climate change. I have attempted to transcribe the unspoken language of trees representing



Dorothea Lange, *Turpentine worker, Georgia*, July 1937. Photographic negative, 4 × 5 inches. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

their unique patterns and symbols for posterity. Each forest in the United States has a different history and its trees are survivors and witnesses to those events, absorbing and reflecting the multitude of changes to the landscape from long before the nation's founding to the present.

Much of the ownership of the remaining 3 percent of old-growth longleaf forests is in private hands, studied and tended, and a majority of these stands are in Georgia. The commitment of the caretakers of these woods, the landowners, the foresters, ornithologists, botanists, historians, and writers with whom I spoke during my visit and while making the paintings, is enormous and unceasing. These inspiring people are working on the front lines of climate change to preserve the longleaf pine trees and their ecosystem. I thank them for their guidance. I am also deeply grateful for the wonderful support of curator Jeffrey Richmond-Moll and the Georgia Museum of Art team, who worked tirelessly to help bring the project to fruition. I hope the exhibition will offer a space for contemplation and reflection upon Georgia's ever-evolving longleaf story.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN, 2022



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 1*, 2020. Oil on canvas on panel, 54 × 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 2*, 2021. Oil on canvas on panel, 54 × 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 3*, 2021. Oil on canvas on panel, 54 × 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 4*, 2022. Oil on canvas on panel, 21 × 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 5*, 2022. Oil on canvas on panel, 21 × 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Kristin Leachman, *Longleaf 6*, 2022. Oil on canvas on panel, 21 × 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



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