



Mary Hrbacek, *Light Search*, 2010. Acrylic on linen, 42 x 46 in. Courtesy of CREON Gallery.
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ENTWINED: INTO THE WOODS! IN SEARCH OF A METAPHOR FOR THE HUMAN CONDITION

Edward Rubin

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For the past decade or so, perhaps triggered by the tripling of anxiety-producing catastrophes around the world, trees of all kinds, sometimes even small forests, both realistic and obviously faux, have been making their appearance in the work of sculptors, painters, and video and installation artists. More and more, it seems that artists, in what appears to be an increasing back-to-nature “trendette,” are using trees in their work as a metaphor for examining the nature of mankind, as well as the fate of the world.

Working in this naturalist mode is artist Mary Hrbacek, whose anthropomorphic portraits of trees were exhibited at the CREON Gallery in New York this spring, curated by Richard Pasquarelli under the title “Entwined.” Hrbacek’s tree paintings are not only transcendent but speak directly to the heart, intimating to us, a bit surreptitiously, that we are all walking trees. Our spines are trunks, our legs and arms are branches, and sooner or later, with twisted limbs and weathered bones, we too shall be planted. Though *Entwined* covers only four years of her work, Hrbacek has been traveling the world, taking photographs and making charcoal drawings and painting of trees that have shed their leaves and exposed their so-called bones, in Asia, Europe, Brooklyn, and Central Park, for over ten years. Her repertoire also includes assemblages that use natural materials such as sticks, stones, pinecones and leaves, as

well as drawings from live models. Traces of these can be divined in the artist’s sculptural brushwork of finely executed lines that give form to her tree portraits.

Each tree that Hrbacek selects to document has a particular configuration, most of whose trunks and branches resemble a part of the human body—be it the full torso, an arm, leg, thigh, woman’s breast—or a combination of several parts. The background of each painting is an expansive sky, which adds drama by accentuating the tree’s silhouette; reminiscent of Monet’s works painted at various times of day, each sky is painted a different color. As for the color of the trees, we get a gradational mix of browns, tans, whites, and yellows that give each tree, an eye-popping, 3-dimensional effect.

In *Entwined* (2007), the tree’s two main branches, each circling the other like boxers looking for an in, are vividly framed by a blue sun-drenched sky. Thinking of human relations, Hrbacek explains her ideas behind each work: “[The branches] are interdependent; just as so many other living things are connected and dependent on each other.” In *Woman Astride* (2008), a feminine - looking figure, with arms akimbo, seems to be in the throes of ecstasy. Here the painter, perhaps waxing autobiographical, sees a woman expressing “a feeling of freedom, combined with a sense of risk-taking ... an evocation of

euphoria to the female-like form as it achieves a level of freedom and independence, while remaining anchored to its natural habitation.” In *Light Search* (2010) under a pale blue sky that could be dawn or dusk, two branches resembling hands reach for the sky. They could be praying, shouting “Halleluiah,” or throwing their hands up in surrender, or, as the artist suggests, “searching for answers”—anything to lessen the “anxiety and the tension that arises from life itself.” In *Last Dance* (2007) Hrbacek captures two trees in the backwoods of Vermont. With each tree’s swaying branches encircling the other, the trees seem to be enacting a ritual dance.

In *Hanging Suspended* (2008-2010) in a five hundred year old Sycamore that the painter discovered in Viareggio, Italy, we see what appears to be the torso of a male with his thighs still attached dangling upside down like a tortured body from one of Jake and Dinos Chapman’s installations. Like all of Hrbacek’s trees, this so-called torso, separated from its leafy origin, marks it especially, as the artist writes, “as a symbol of isolation in a topsy-turvy world.” Clearly all of Hrbacek’s eleven trees on view face the same trials and tribulations of civilization gone amuck—as we all are. No doubt, this is a message with which the artist wants us to walk away. □