

Mary Hrbacek's Wounded Forests Touch the Human Heart

Written by [Edward Rubin](#) April 13, 2011



For the past decade or so – perhaps triggered by the accelerating environmental degradations of so many global catastrophes – sculptors, painters and video artists have been putting trees and sometimes even small forests into their work. Whether their representation is natural or highly artificial, this plethora of trees appears to be a resurgent art metaphor for examining the nature of mankind, as well as the fate of the world.

Working in the naturalist mode is artist [Mary Hrbacek](#). Her anthropomorphic portraits of trees are currently on exhibit at the [Creon Gallery](#) in New York City through April 30. Curated by Richard Pasquarelli, Hrbacek's tree paintings (the show's title is "Entwined") speak directly to the heart, reminding us 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.

(All photos courtesy of Creon Gallery)



Entwined (2007)



Woman Astride (2008)



Hanging Suspended (2008-2010)



Light Search (2010)



Last Dance (2007)

Though *Entwined* covers a scant four years of her painting, 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 for more than a decade. She has been to Asia and Europe, as well as Brooklyn and New York's Central Park, for her botanical expeditions.

Each tree that Hrbacek selects to document has a particular configuration and resemblance to a human body— be it the full torso, an arm, leg, or breast. The tree is that figural gesture that is also the figure dominating the picture plane; accentuating

its silhouette is an expansive sky. Coloring each sky – reminiscent of Monet's haystacks under graduated light conditions of the day – is a different color, in each one of 11 paintings shown here.

Hrbacek, explaining her ideas, writes "They (the branches) are interdependent; just as so many other living things are connected and dependent on each other." In *Woman Astride*, a feminine figure, arms akimbo, seems to be in ecstasy. The painter, perhaps waxing autobiographical, sees a woman expressing "a feeling of freedom, combined with a sense of risk-taking."

In *Light Search* – under a pale blue sky that could be morning or dusk – two branches resembling hands, reach for the sky. They could be praying, exulting or chucking it all by 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."

Sometimes the entwining of limbs even appears to suggest that, yes, we are in a limbo worse than purgatory. *Hanging Suspended* titles the portrait of a 500-year-old sycamore from Viareggio, Italy, holding what appears to be a dangling male torso like one of the flayed figures from a Jake and Dinos Chapman installation. Like in all of Hrbacek's trees, this so-called tree torso, leafless and denuded, marks it as isolated, exposed. At the mercy – as we humans are – of civilization run amok.

"I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines."

Henry David Thoreau