

ELIZABETH CHAPIN

TREESPELL



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 27 - MARCH 7, 2024

AUSTIN, TEXAS

THESE WILDS

To enter *Treespell*, with its darkness infused with ever-changing growing vegetal light, is to be inside a kaleidoscopic sacred grove, a mashup of forest, church and mythic stage. A space in which Chapin tries to touch the world's white-hot engine. Outdoor wilderness is now inside, held precariously in the domesticated gallery space. The use of outdoor space for cathartic rituals, religious or otherwise, has been marked historically by a rejection of the traditional church space, with its entrenched doctrines and a move toward the unstructured, the unknown and a closeness to divinity, not patriarchal or abstract, but encoded in leaves, branches, roots, flesh and water.

"We make a sacred grove holy," writes the Greek scholar Martin Nilson, "by putting a sanctuary there, but in antiquity the holiness belonged to the place itself and a sanctuary was erected because the spot was holy." This paradox lights up *Treespell* with Chapin's morphing effervescent trees and the mythic figures of the hunter goddess Artemis and her nemesis



Ghost of Birch Entanglement, 2022-2024
Canvas, steel, polyfill, animated painted projection,
84 x 33 x 8"

Actaeon. In Chapin's retelling, Artemis is a creature moving from girl to woman, not peacefully but with all the blood and gut intensity of birth. Working from snapshots of her daughter's friend, aged 6 to 24, Chapin photographed each portrait before painting over to create the next one. In the video projection, just as the trees around her mutate and glow, Chapin's goddess melts and radiates. Artemis, who at the height of her popularity was worshiped in dozens of Greek temples, was a multi-faceted deity. She went by many names: Lady of the Beasts, Deer Shooter, Revered Virgin. She is associated with both water and the moon, particularly the phase of the moon closest to the new moon, when the silver sliver looks like a bow. Artemis was fiercely protective of female bodies; she punished men who killed pregnant deer and was known to change her nymphs into reeds, rocks, and springs in order to protect them from rape. Her grateful nymphs created a gushing fountain to please her and stocked it with huge sacred fish and a giant tame eel.

For Chapin, Artemis is a "gaze destroyer." When Actaeon is discovered hiding in the bushes, spying on the goddess and her nymphs bathing in a stream, she turns him into a stag and then kills him with her bow. The *Stag*, a soft fabric sculpture, is projected with fur from Chapin's own dogs. Its eyes, another projection, move through colorful paintings of eyes of real men, the artist's father, husband, and son as well as both icons like Mr. Rogers and Nick Cave and controversial figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk. It's in these labor-intensive particulars that Chapin's art awes; the wounds inflicted by Artemis' arrows are tiny lips sewn with red thread and the animal's testicles, crocheted with pink yarn and lit, like embers, from within, are a sign that while deactivated for now, male sexual insistence, like the villain at the end of a horror movie, is still very much alive.

The myth unfolds within the sacred grove; mirrored pools, fronted by two nymphs, mermaid/alien hybrids, are encircled with trees



The Shape of a Girl, 2021-2024
Canvas, steel, polyfill, animated painted projection,
60 x 32 x 20"

that move and expand like amoebas stained with all the colors of the galaxy. Chapin photographed the branches at different stages as they were painted, so the tree is part of a central creative flow, an accelerated version of both Chapin's practice and nature's. The trees' stop-action movement in the darkened room reminded me of that most enigmatic part of plant life, roots. Roots have always haunted me. Recently I dumped out a small pot that held a dead narcissus, though the stem and flower were brown, the roots remained almost creepily alive, forming a sort of pot-shaped sculpture of wormy white plant flesh and dirt.

"Is it the unseen face (of God)" writes Emanuele Coccia in his book *The Life of Plants*, "that plants allow us to contemplate." The root takes us closer than a perfect leaf or a flower to an elemental energy. "The root is like a second body," Coccia continues, "secret, erotic, hidden: an anti-body, an anatomical anti-matter that reverses in a mirror, point by point, everything



Stag, 2022-2024

Acrylic on canvas, polyfill, cedar branches, steel, video monitors, pink LED light bulbs, paint rags, bone buttons, whittled sticks, string from decades of painting badminton court lines for the artist's children, gold leaf, silk velvet, yarn, wire, crochet, projections of artist's dogs' fur, 63 x 30 x 60'

Cover Panel:

Treespell, 2024, installation view

the other body does..." Roots are one manifestation of The Other. They move in the Upside Down, a shadow world, their blind and urgent seeking depends on rot, decay and death.

Monsters, Timothy Beal writes in his book *Religion and its Monsters*, "represent the outside that has gotten inside, the beyond the pale that much to our horror has gotten into that pale." *Treespell* emits an uncanny energy. The thrust of nature, like God, does not fit into rigid ideas of good and bad, the confines of our limited human subjectivity. Chapin's particular genius is, while respecting multiplicity, pulling the wild into the woman-made. "Monstrosity," writes Bayo Akomolafe in his book *These Wilds Beyond our Fences*, "is our entanglement with everything, a story of borders and bodies that are open and fluid, a maddening insistence that we are always affected by the terroir of place."

Is monstrosity always negative? It's worth noting that when angels appear to humans in the bible, the first thing they say is Be Not Afraid. Could wonder and beauty be components of the monstrous? *Redbud* makes me think so; projected onto a soft tree sculpture, the artist's hands tinted red, flutter and wave, like flowers or flames, and are reminiscent of the disembodied and floating



Fish Gyr, 2022-2024

Acrylic on canvas, polyfill, zippers, video monitors, steel, blown glass, birch ply, wire, mohair, beads, 36 x 84 x 44"

hands in 19th century spirit photographs. They beckon us toward a fenestral opening, the one I tried to find relentlessly as a child, by pulling myself inside our giant lilac bush and running down the hill as fast as I could in my mother's old prom dresses. Chapin is interested in "ocular portals" like *Redbud's* wound-like hands

and the mirrored pools that glow at *Treespell's* center. A tear, an opening that leads not to another dimension, but the wildness inside ourselves. "All life forms," writes Merlin Sheldrake in his book *Entangled Life*, "are in fact processes." Efforts have been made to name the force that drives the green stem or what Chapin calls "sacredness composting humanity." The 13th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen called it viriditas, ever-greening, the vegetal being and the mystery of elemental expansion—not limited to plants and a key component of human spiritual growth. "One grows forth," writes the philosopher Michael Marder in his book *Green Mass*, "as the other, the viriditas, freshness, or greenening—of the othering of life." Or as Chapin explains visually in this ambitious show that attempts the impossible: to harness the life force itself, we can't be young but we can always be new.



Puddle Tables, 2022-2024

Drawings of puddles or pond portals cut into green, copper and blue color mirror, with Baltic birch ply and polyurethane and aluminum ball bearing wheels, dimensions variable

Darcey Steinke is an author based in Brooklyn, NY

Elizabeth Chapin CV

EDUCATION

- 1993 BFA, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
1992 Studio Art Centers International, Cleveland Institute of Art, Florence, Italy
1990 Université d'Aix en Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France
1990 Parsons School of Design, Paris & Dordogne, France

SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Banishment of Solitude*, Martine Chaisson Gallery, New Orleans, LA
2019 *Deconstructing Nostalgia*, Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX
2016 *Careful/Uncareful*, Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX
2014 *Diversity of Affection*, Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX
2007 *Two Person Show*, 4 Walls Fine Art, Austin, TX
1996 *Friends & Saints*, The Gallery Upstairs, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *The Femme Abstract*, Dimension Gallery, Austin, TX, curated by Moya McIntyre
Howdy, Stranger, concept animals, Austin, TX, curated by Hayley Morrison
2020 *Feast Day of St. Elmo: Saints and Intermediaries*, Vault Stone Shop, Austin, TX
2018 *Landscapes, Portraits and Still Lives*, DORF, Austin, TX
2004 *Get Real Art*, Group Exhibition, New York, NY
1998 *Inaugural Show*, Hidell Brooks Gallery, Charlotte, NC
Salon International, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS
1993 *Thesis Show*, Fayerweather Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
1991 *Women in Art*, Fayerweather Gallery, Charlottesville, VA

PRESS | PUBLICATION

- 2021 Purcell, Barbara. "Art in the Absence of Touch: 'The Femme Abstract'". *Sightlines*, January 6, 2021.
Papathanasiou, Katerina. "Banishment of Solitude: An Interview with Elizabeth Chapin". *The Vale Magazine*, March 5, 2021.
Walsh, Brienne. "In Sculptural Paintings, Elizabeth Chapin Unravels the Path to Original Sin". *Forbes Magazine*, April 26, 2021.
Pearson, Paulette. "Up the Fun Factor with this Austin Artist's Far-Out Portraits". *Luxe Interiors + Design*, June 4, 2021.
"The Line-up; Women Artists to See on Austin Studio Tour". *Sightlines*, November 12, 2021.
Beall, Kelly. "F5: Artist Elizabeth Chapin Shares a Kitchen Staple, Favorite Podcasts + More". *Design Milk*, November 19, 2021.
2020 Kilpatrick, Suzanne. "A Day in the Life of the People Defining Spring Style in Austin". *Tribeza*, April 1, 2020.
Donoghue, Katy. "How Painting is Taking Care of Artist Elizabeth Chapin". *Whitewall*, April 21, 2020.
Phillips, Holly. "Artist Spotlight Series: Elizabeth Chapin". *The English Room*, December 1, 2020.
2019 Brenner, Wayne Alan. "Elizabeth Chapin: 'Deconstructing Nostalgia' at Wally Workman Gallery". *The Austin Chronicle*, March 8, 2019.

- 2018 "New Artist-Run Space Will Open in Austin with Stellar Group Show". *Glasstire*, April 26, 2018.
"Our West Austin Studio Tour Picks". *Sightlines*, May 5, 2018.
Manche, Eric. "Artist Run Experimental Project Space DORF Opens its Doors with Inaugural Exhibition". *ArtDaily*, May 11, 2018.
van Ryzin, Jeanne Claire. "As High Costs Drive Austin Artists Away from the Eastside, New Spaces Pop Up Elsewhere". *Sightlines*, May 28, 2018.
Cawley, Shalavé. "Midterms Matter Wants to Get Young People Voting: How A Group of Austin Creatives are Trying to Make a Difference". *The Austin Chronicle*, September 29, 2018.
2016 Anderson-Ramos, Sam. "'Elizabeth Chapin: Careful/Uncareful' at Wally Workman Gallery". *The Austin Chronicle*, December 16, 2016.
2014 Dunn, M. "Elizabeth Chapin: Diversity of Affection". *Tribeza*, October 1, 2014.
Tigar, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth Chapin: Gravity and Splendor". *Aether*, October 15, 2014.
2012 Crawford, Kaitlyn. "Home is Where the Art Is". *Tribeza*, April 1, 2012.



Stag, 2022-2024

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Treespell, 2024, installation view

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inform audiences of all ages. We have actively developed the careers of more than 2,000 women artists, presenting 339 visual art exhibitions, 165 music, dance and theater events, 30 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals, and 853 education programs with the goal of ensuring that diverse women artists are equitably represented in all forms of art. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in the United

States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the 42-year archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity.



1311 E. Cesar Chavez St.
 Austin, Texas 78702
 [512] 477-1064
 info@womenandtheirwork.org
 womenandtheirwork.org

