



Research Impacts Project

Documenting, Evaluating, and Valuing Impactful Research

Trees Stir in Their Leaves

While academia and culture more broadly in the United States tends to segment the arts and the sciences into two distinct categories, a collaboration between the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) and the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research (LTRR) at the University of Arizona demonstrates the synergies and possibilities that emerge when we break down these artificial barriers. *Trees stir in their leaves*, was an immersive art installation and series of activities that emerged from a collaboration between the Center for Creative Photography and the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research to then grow to involve partners including the Living Streets Alliance, National Park Service, Campus Arboretum, and Loft Cinema. This project focuses on questions around how artistic practices, such as photography, are central to making different forms of scientific inquiry possible and how art can be used to compel and engage people to care about environmental issues.

Photography has been central to the study of tree rings (dendrochronology) for more than 100 years. For example, Andrew Ellicott Douglass, considered to be one of the disciplines founders, documented and demonstrated his scientific discoveries using photography and other visual technologies and collected photographs from other scientists around the world. When Meg Jackson Fox (Curator at the Center for Creative Photography) joined the University in 2019 she soon discovered that our own LTRR had a massive archive of images and visualization tools that were inaccessible due to limited staff capacity. Jackson Fox built a relationship with Peter Brewer, Curator of Collections at the LTRR, that provided the foundation for *Trees stir in their leaves*. Jackson Fox and Brewer worked together to explore and organize the LTRR images and instruments and Jackson Fox then curated an exhibit that put these materials into conversation with other pieces in the CCP's collection to explore how trees have figured as central subjects in artistic expression and the symbiotic relationship between art and science. As Jackson Fox [explains](#): "*Trees stir in their leaves* is a purposeful layering of the LTRR and CCP's image collections. Our intention with this unconventional approach to installation design was to fuse the human stories and the stories scientists tell through trees, and it led to new thinking about openness, interconnections and creativity in experiences with photographs."

The exhibit was one of the most well attended at the CCP in the last five years, rivaling high profile exhibitions featuring the work of well-known artists. Moreover, it attracted individuals who had not been to the CCP before due to the way in which it engaged campus and community members from across the arts and sciences, breeding a new sense of community and interdisciplinary collaboration in which art is not additive to science but critical to scientific practice.

Trees stir in their leaves was extended beyond the walls of the CCP through collaborations with the Campus Arboretum, Living Streets Alliance, and Loft Cinema. Jackson Fox and Brewer worked

with the Campus Arboretum to develop a self-guided tour of trees that extended between the CCP and LTRR. Bike-tour events and talks organized by Living Streets Alliance provided an opportunity for the public to engage with the exhibit and questions surrounding how art facilitates engagement with and support for environmental issues. And a screening of *The Hidden Life of Trees* and discussion at the Loft Cinema served as an additional way to engage the project and the interconnected relationship between the arts and sciences.

Trees stir in their leaves demonstrates the immense power of interdisciplinary collaborations that break down disciplinary silos and engage the community in varied ways. The widespread engagement with the exhibit and range of partners demonstrates the creative, intellectual, and emotional potential of working across disciplinary and campus/community boundaries.

The Research Impacts Project, funded by the Provost's Investment Fund, aims to help UArizona researchers, administrators, and leaders collect, document, and communicate the societal impacts of their research to community partners, funders, and others interested in the work we do.



Societal Impact