



from underneath: Gail Grinnell and Samuel Wildman

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In Seattle during WWII, fake trees, fake buildings, and fake neighborhoods were created by Hollywood set designers to camouflage wartime manufacturing from foreign adversaries. Our show at Oxbow takes as its starting point the faithful re-creation of a few of the fake trees, removed from their original context.

Our re-creation of these trees at Oxbow is meant to be seen from underneath, rather than above, where the materials we used can be most easily distinguished from the overall form intended. From up close, any real attempt at the illusion of a tree falls apart and what the viewer experiences instead are rough and provisional materials clinging to some recycled timbers— the sole representatives of a forest.

But our representation of a historical moment still maintains its resolution, whatever that might be. It sits in the same general neighborhood as the original and it is clearly cobbled together with the same materials the set designers used— feathers, chicken-wire, green flocking, burlap, and salvaged timbers. That these are somehow an appropriate set of materials for an historical recreation is conveniently ironic as they also seem to evoke the provisional methods available to us for depicting and agreeing upon the nature of historical events in general.

Recognizing the change in context, and in viewpoint, of this historical re-creation is important: how does a person experience something that is designed to be understood in one context and from one perspective, in a different context and from a different perspective? By positioning the viewer below the trees rather than above the trees, inside rather than outside, we hope to reveal something completely different and unintended, despite the fact that the objects themselves remain faithful to their historical roots.

Photographs make clear that from thousands of feet in the air these rough and provisional structures were virtually indistinguishable from real trees. From an aerial perspective alone, generally considered the most objective viewpoint, accuracy can be challenging to verify. When a singular perspective of any context is built into our experience of something— be it history, politics, social media or anything else —space for deception is created. Standing here underneath this object, the strange world that constantly demands interpretation remains, but we are momentarily free of deception, ushered in as participants in the construction of meaning and context rather than held at bay as audience members.

