

The Day

Michael Melford's remarkable photographs on display at Mystic Museum of Art through Dec. 19

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10/21/2021:: DAYBREAK :: KOSTER :: Cheryl Fuhr, left, and her husband Marshall, visiting from New Jersey, take a look at pieces from photographer Michael Melford's exhibit "A Passage between Earth and Sky" at the Mystic Museum of Art Thursday, October 21, 2021. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

Ours is a world in fractious overdrive. Drug companies, wellness coaches, holistic advocates, fitness and nutrition experts, peace activists, physicians and trainers, self-medicators and on and on are trying individually and comprehensively to keep any of myriad pressure cookers from atomizing at any moment.

Here in southeastern Connecticut, though, a soothing aesthetic balm has been with us since Oct. 1 and will continue to be available through Dec. 19 at the Mystic Museum of Art. It's a gorgeous and provocative photography exhibit called "A Passage Between Earth and Sky" comprised of 34 nature images from renowned former National Geographic photographer Michael Melford.

More specifically, the show's focus reflects Melford's lifelong passion for and fascination with trees. In his global travels for National Geographic, as well as his innate curiosity as a citizen who happens to have a camera always nearby and the eye and facility to use it really well, Melford has for two decades patiently trusted nature to provide striking and meaningful images of trees in their natural landscapes.

"It's not something I put a lot of thought into, to be honest," Melford says in a recent phone conversation from the home he shares with his wife, a physician, in Rochester, Minn. They also have a house on Mason's Island. "I react to the visual as well as the intellectual. Trees can communicate with each other on a scientific level, and that's fascinating to me. I feel the power of nature all around me all the time, and in my way try to communicate that power through my photographs."

Behold the glory

Walking into the main gallery at the museum, a visitor's attention is immediately drawn directly across the room to a massive installation — the centerpiece of "A Passage Between Earth and Sky." Twenty-eight large vertical panels — four across and seven high — show the exact same tree from the back porch of the Mason's Island property.

But the photographs have been taken at random times over the course of seasons and at contrasting moments — dawn, morning, afternoon, twilight, full dark To take in the colors and moods of the installation separately and then comprehensively is almost like spending several months in a mirror maze some naturalist/carnival entrepreneur set up in an idyllic glade.

Interestingly, the tree in the photos is one that Melford sees when he sits on the deck of their Mystic home. "It's weird, but I found a perfect tree in my own backyard," Melford laughs. "I didn't realize it at first. I'd just sit on the little deck in the backyard of our house in Mystic with a cup of coffee and my camera, which is never far away."

Melford credits his friend and former National Geographic editor Rob Fernandez with the idea of highlighting those images as the focal point of "Earth and Sky." "Rob told me to put those images of the tree front and center. And he was right," Melford says.

All four walls of the gallery are beautifully laid out with work from Melford's career and solo efforts. In addition to National Geographic, Melford's images have appeared in Time, Newsweek, Life, Look, the Smithsonian and Fortune. The contrast of color, mood, light, location and weather on display demonstrate not just the artist's skill and vision but also a personal travelogue and a sort of visual memoir. Some of the locations included in the show are Alaska, New Zealand, the Charlotte Islands, Joshua Tree National Park, Adirondack State Park, Acadia National Park, Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Yosemite National Park and, well, a lot of lovely places where there are trees.

Visitors to the exhibit will of course have their favorites. There's "Adirondack Dawn," with a sun-glow that summons images of live lava fields. "Red Oak Tree — Four Seasons," has a cool backstory. It was a pickup National Geographic gig after another photographer turned down the assignment because there were too many trees; Melford isolated on distinctive oak and returned every three months to capture its intensity over the course of a year.

There's "Geyser Snow," where Melford snatched a perfect moment when warm air from Yellowstone geysers crystallizes overnight on tree branches — and then are fractured by the spotlight of dawn. And "Cherry Tree From Above," a digital image taken from an airplane over Brandywine, Penn., in 2012, shows a solitary, brightly flowering tree in the upper left that offsets an expanse of rolling meadows that appear like a tapestry of gradating shades of green.

A celebration

In conversation, Melford, now 71, is calm and pleasant, and his passion for trees and nature are evident as he speaks about how the exhibit came about.

"When they asked if I wanted to do a show, it seemed like a lot of expense and a lot of work, so I said no. Then I thought some more. We were maybe coming out of a pandemic, and it's been very rough. Trees, my favorite things, are a symbol and I realized maybe a show could be a celebration of life." He laughs. "Though I didn't want to call it that because it sounds like a funeral."

Instead, the title of the exhibition is a quote from writer Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Overstory," a book about the power of nature. It resonates with Melford, a happily self-professed tree-hugger.

"I grew up in Hastings-On-Hudson north of New York City," Melford remembers, "and my father was very into outdoor activities. Thank God there were no video games in those days; I grew up in an area of great natural beauty and I was always in the woods or going to ponds and climbing trees."

Though he graduated with a degree in photography from Syracuse University, Melford says it wasn't until 1977, when he was living in a commune in upstate New York, that he came across a pair of trees flashing seemingly luminescent tones of red, yellow and orange. Impulsively, he snapped a few photos and, when the film was returned a few weeks later, the image was a revelation.

"I knew then what I wanted to do, what I needed to do," Melford says. That photograph, "Fall Maples," is included in the Mystic show and is not only breathtaking in color and the perfect simplicity of nature, it's indicative of the artist's instincts and innate connection with his subjects.

Old-school advice

Once he'd committed to doing the show, Melford says it was incredibly difficult to go through thousand of pictures and repeat a winnowing process over and over again until there was a manageable number from which an installation could be drawn. He credits Fernandez for huge help through the task.

"One of the most wonderful things about my time at National Geographic was that Rob and I would sit down and go through an assignment and discuss or even argue about one image or another until we had what was perfect for the story," Melford says.

"For Mystic, it was like old times at National Geographic, and that's what I wanted," Melford says. "He had some strong opinions and some I totally didn't agree with. And sometimes, I'd go back and look at something again and think, 'Maybe Rob's right. This does have merit.' It was Rob's idea to use the photos from my backyard tree as the centerpiece of the show."

In addition to Fernandez, Melford credits Mystic Museum of Art executive director V. Susan Fisher and exhibitions manager Amelia Onorato for "making happen what otherwise probably wouldn't have come together — at least not in such a way." He says seeing the show in the gallery has made him believe it might work as a traveling exhibition.

Ongoing sense of wonder

In that way, Melford hopes the exhibit can continue to perhaps provide the sense of wonder about nature and trees that has always inspired him and which he's been fortunate enough to explore.

To that extent, he calls his career and the work represented by "A Passage Between Earth and Sky" as, he says, "serendipity, really. The pictures are there. You've gotta be open to them. I learned to never pass up an image." He pauses and chuckles.

"I look at the photographs in this exhibit and all they are, are recordings of what was there. I'm not creating anything like a lot of talented artists do," Melford says. "For me, it's hard work and luck and then maybe a little talent. And when it happens? You say thank you."

If you go

Who: Michael Melford

What: "A Passage Between Earth and Sky" photo exhibition

Where: Mystic Museum of Art, 9 Water St., Mystic

When: Through Dec. 19, 2021

Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily

How much: Free

For more information: (860) 536-7601, mysticmuseumofart.org