

**ARTIST'S STATEMENT:** "RIVER CORRIDORS INITIATIVE"  
EXHIBITION & LECTURE SERIES

**"WITNESS TREES"**

Installation

**TREES** are the Silent Sentinels of the Woods and Streams. They stand, Unspeaking **WITNESSES**, to sunlit mornings, lashing storms, nocturnal secrets, birth, death and historic occasions of celebration and despair.

Trees, sometimes, pass on messages whose meanings are known only to those who've cut deeply into the skin and being of these mute ones.

When the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the people who had always lived along the Southeast's rivers and streams were faced with: "pack what you can carry, gotta' leave all the rest". In some cases, this notice was only a few days or hours. During that era, a great many Indian families owned large homesteads, outfitted with the same household trappings and treasured possessions as their new European neighbors.

**ARBORGLYPHS** were hastily carved into Beech trees, mostly along creeks, to mark the spot where possessions were buried, to indicate escape routes and other vital information. Today, timbering and natural lifespans have destroyed nearly all these markings. The locations of the remaining few are kept private until documentation can be done. The Pyramid of Lights Project/Creekwalker Films is producing a film about Arborglyphs in Alabama, Georgia & North Carolina.

Hopefully, this installation will bring an awareness of the past and the present life along our waterways, continuing dramas witnessed by many and few, and the symbols and signs that remember the past and predict the future for the life of the waterways and the entire planet. I have made five **"Witness Trees"** to speak to you:

Boys and girls of my childhood were required to assist with night fishing, setting out trotlines and frog-gigging for summer food on the river systems of Georgia and Florida. Cottonmouths and imagined alligators kept me ever vigilant; but the main terror, forever imprinted in my memory, was the giant webs that spanned the rivers with spiders that seemed as big as birds. Even the men, who generally teased us, cringed when we silently slipped into one of these.

**Spiderwoman** is the central figure of many of the world's creation stories. "She weaves the web that holds it all together"; therefore her **"WEB SHIELD"** hangs between two "Witness Trees". It has arborglyphs and three symbols drawn by two **Saami** (Lapp) women artists. They did a Lapp ceremony to heal the Chattahoochee, during a five-week cultural exchange, where I was a guest this summer. The Saami are very similar in traditions, music, housing, indigenous land and religious struggles, clothing and past community systems to American Indians. They live throughout Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia's Kola Islands. Several

of the connector pieces used to create the "Witness Trees" came from the Arctic Circle, as did the Birch bark and most of the feathers.

Instead of driftwood, bones and other beautiful treasures, **"TODAY'S TREES"** bear Witness to what washes up along the shores of our river systems and resides in the water we drink. I always use "magic stones" in my work. This **STONE MILAGRO** found me in Fatmomakke, Lappland, the cult center of the Lapp since times unknown. It is the exact shape of a pre-columbian symbol that I have used in works since 1991! The symbol comes from a shell mask gorget found in Acquia Creek, Virginia, possibly a mourning mask used in a burial ceremony. The **"NEST"** of glass eggs/bubbles/crystal balls (formerly, washed up light bulbs) allude to the fragility of new life in an abused ecosystem...our illusion of a never ending supply of good water...and the future of the river systems if we continue to take them for granted....

The **"STORY TREE"** bears the fruit of summer camp attendees who learned about the value of the river systems and were fascinated with American Indian history in a time when life was solely dependant on the woods and waterways.

My work is always made possible by the efforts of many friends and a mysterious phenomenon that takes over and turns work sessions into a party, every time we bring my visions to tangible form. This installation was made possible by: Scott, Sunnee, Seth and Scottie Glenn for help acquiring the saplings which grew on their property on Murder Creek, Putnam County, Georgia; Howard Deutsch for engineering/carpentry expertise, photography & print layout; the reliable, ever-changing team of Pyramid volunteers; Kelly Thames for Arborglyph research & volunteer coordination; Upper Chattahoochee River Keepers and Russell Peters for taking me in a boat, still in a leg cast, to acquire theTrash; Artists: Candice Bennett, Anastasia Fink & Linda Mitchell for help with Arborglyph reproductions, Dick Bass for slide rig; Ken Woodyard, glassblower/cutter, Lisa Deutsch, translator extraordinaire & sewing machine owner; Supporters: R.E.M., Joey & Cynthia Good Reiman, The Lubo Fund, The Schultze Foundation & many generous friends.....and the Saami people for their blessings.

Sandy Corley  
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