

ARTS

'Moon Trees': Erica Botkin

The legacy of NASA's Moon Trees project is documented at Co-Lab's Downtown venue

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER, FRI., MARCH 28, 2014



Courtesy of Erica Botkin

All the way around our planet's natural satellite and into this familiar Earth: There are more than 50 moon trees still alive in this country, and Erica Botkin is determined to document them all.

Moon trees: trees grown from seeds taken into orbit around the moon during NASA's Apollo 14 mission in 1971. Erica Botkin: an artist whose work is currently displayed by [Co-Lab Projects](#) in two unrelated exhibitions in this city: "Just Me Doin' Me" at the Project Space (613 Allen) and "Moon Trees" at the N Space (905 Congress).

Moon tree saplings were distributed in 1975 and 1976 as part of the USA's bicentennial celebrations, placed mainly within cities of the southern and western states to which the chosen species were native. These astronomical specimens of loblolly pine, sycamore, sweet gum, redwood, and Douglas fir were ceremoniously installed and marked with plaques. And then they were pretty much forgotten.

Botkin, who graduated from UT's MFA program in 2012, remembers when she first learned about the trees.

"I was helping a friend move to New Jersey for grad school," says the artist, "and we stayed overnight at his friend's in Philadelphia. I was desperate to see the Liberty Bell, and the friend muttered something about seeing the 'moon tree' on the walk over. Of course, my response was, 'What's a moon tree?' I was hooked as soon as he gave me a brief explanation. Even better was that the tree in Philadelphia was dying or already dead – it was a pathetic trunk with a few scraggly branches. In front of it was a rock with a plaque that gave an overview of its story."

While there's been no journey around the moon and back for Botkin, the artist has invested much mileage of her own.

"Though I've recently relocated back to my hometown in California, much of my travels to photograph the moon trees began from Texas – and the trees are sometimes in remote locations. Last March, I drove from Austin to Chicago and photographed two Arkansas trees along the way. After attending the photo conference in Chicago, I made my way toward Florida and had about four moon tree stops a day (four in Indiana, two unsuccessful stops in Tennessee, two in North Carolina, four in Alabama, and five in Florida). I was completely exhausted by the time I got to Florida and cut my travels one stop short: Cape Canaveral. To be clear (and perhaps justify my exhaustion), I am shooting 4-by-5 sheet film, both color and black-and-white, on a **large-format camera**.

"For how many trees I've visited," says Botkin, "this exhibition represents a small portion of the images and collected ephemera in my possession."

Bonus: right here in the heart of Austin, a bit of extraterrestrial foliage of our very own: a second-generation moon tree, a tree *grown from the seed of an original Apollo 14 moon tree*, at the [Nature & Science Center](#) near Zilker Park.

"Moon Trees" is on view through April 30, Wednesdays, 5:30-8pm, at N Space, 905 Congress. For more information, visit www.co-labprojects.org.

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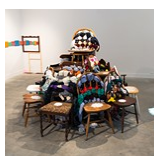
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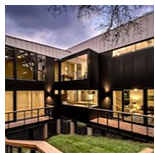


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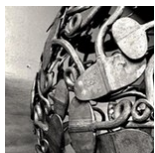
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Moon Trees: Erica Botkin, Austin visual art, Co-Lab Projects, NASA

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