

Melford exhibit honors trees and nature

By Nancy Burns-Fusaro Sun staff writer Oct 16, 2021



Caely Melford admires her father's photography in "Michael Melford: A Passage Between Earth and Sky" at the Mystic Museum of Art on Thursday, October 14, 2021, in Mystic, Conn. | Tim Martin, The Westerly Sun

MYSTIC — Furniture designer Caely Melford stood next to her father, Michael Melford, one morning last week in the Charles H. Davis Gallery at the Mystic Museum of Art.

"I'm so proud of him," Caely, a 2006 Stonington High School graduate who for many years held the school record for most goals scored in a girls lacrosse season, said as she smiled at her dad then looked around the room at his extraordinary tree photographs currently on display in an exhibit titled "Michael Melford: A Passage between Earth and Sky." "It's amazing to see all this come together."

Towering behind the father-daughter pair hung an enormous — and striking — 28-panel arrangement featuring photographs of a single tree at different times of day, night and year.

"I call this my giving tree," said a smiling Michael Melford, a 71-year-old photographer and part-time Masons Island resident who has spent the last 50 years traveling around the world with his camera, taking photographs that have been featured in National Geographic, Time, Newsweek, Life, Look, Fortune, the Smithsonian, and Travel & Leisure among other publications. "It's in my backyard."

Every morning when he is at home and not traveling, he said, he can be found sitting on his back deck, sipping coffee, facing east and looking at the tree.

The tree, he said, gives great comfort not only to him, but to other creatures, too. It has "opened its arms to countless birds, mammals and insects," he said.

"I have watched a Baltimore oriole weave a nest and raise young on it," Melford writes in the notes posted beside the display. "Other frequent guests include red wing blackbirds as well as hawks and an occasional osprey."

"I've made a living from trees," he said thoughtfully, "and I thought, 'Why don't I give back?', so I went through all my pictures and this is what I came up with."

The show, Melford's first solo exhibition since the 1980s, "explores the development of his perception of trees as a life force in harmony with the elements, over time," said Susan Fisher, the museum's executive director in a statement.

The title of the exhibit, Melford said, comes from the book, "The Overstory," by Richard Powers, which not only won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in fiction but has been lauded as a "sweeping, impassioned work of activism and resistance that is also a stunning evocation of — and paean to — the natural world."

Melford, who considers himself an activist, spends part of the year in Rochester, Minn., with his new wife, Dr. Lynn Cornell, a physician at the Mayo Clinic. The pair are involved with an organization called Save the Rookery, a Minnesota-based nonprofit that works to "protect critical habitats by raising awareness that natural areas provide health benefits to all life connected via air, water, and land."

Melford chuckled when he recalled the story of once being described as an "old hippie tree-hugger."

"What's wrong with that?" he said with a laugh. "I am."

Most of his life, Melford said, he's been devoted to sharing the natural wonders of the world with others and helping them see "the beauty that surrounds us."

Back in the spacious gallery, photos of trees — or leaves from trees — taken from as nearby as Maine and New York and as far away as Namibia and New Zealand, are hung on the walls. There are photos of quaking aspens from Glacier National Park in Montana, red maples from Acadia National Park in Maine and a grandfather maple moss tree from the Hoh Rain Forest on Washington state's Olympic Peninsula.

Melford, noted Fisher, "is even more passionate about trees today than he was at 20."

"This exhibition explores the development of his perception of trees as a life force in harmony with the elements, over time," she said.

Whether in Cuba, Samoa, Australia, India, Jordan, Morocco, Mongolia, Greenland or Ecuador, Melford said, his focus has always been "on beauty, conservation and preservation of wilderness areas and national parks around the world." He said he has always been drawn to natural landscapes, "especially to trees in all their wealth of form and color."

"But this is the image that changed my life," said Melford, who was born in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., and studied engineering, business and art history at Syracuse University, before graduating with a bachelor's degree in photography.

Pointing to a photograph of two maple trees with leaves of orange, yellow and red, called "Fall Maples," Melford explained that he'd been living in a commune in upstate New York in 1977, working at a menial job in Oneonta, when he passed the trees "in full glory in early morning fog," and "stopped and took a few snaps." Then he waited for two weeks for his film to come back from Kodak, "in one of those yellow envelopes."

"When I saw this image, I knew I had to fulfill my dream of becoming a professional photographer," he said. "Now, 44 years later, I have fulfilled my wildest dreams, photographing for a multitude of top magazines."

"The ultimate moment came in 2001," he writes in his notes, "when National Geographic Magazine called me to shoot a story on Acadia National Park. What followed was the most rewarding relationship possible with the people of the National Geographic Society. My relationship with the magazine lasted for another 17 stories, all focused on preservation, conservation, and celebration of the natural world."

Melford, who has completed stories celebrating the marvels of Acadia, the Adirondacks, Glenn Canyon, the Great Smoky Mountains, Death Valley and Glacier National Park, wrote a 2006 National Geographic cover article, "Places We Must Save: Our National Parks in Peril," which was voted the most popular story of the year.

In 2013 he received the Daniel Houseberg Wilderness Image Award for Excellence in Still Photography, Film or Video from the Alaska Conservation Foundation, and his piece called "Alaska's Choice: Salmon or Gold," was featured in the December 2010 issue of National Geographic.

In 2012, a photo he took in Glacier National Park was chosen to become one of the stamps in the U.S. Postal Service's Scenic American Landscape Series.

As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into another year, Melford said he hopes the exhibition will "stimulate a new awareness of, and sensitivity to, the enduring beauty that surrounds us."

"We have all suffered loss," he said, "Each of us is likely to know someone who has been sick, who is sick, or who has died of this virus."

His hope, he said, is that his photos and the exhibition will serve as "a steppingstone in the healing process."

Back in the museum, the Melfords walked to a small gallery in the rear of the building where several large burls — unusual pieces of tree trunks — are on display. One, a redwood burl with a mother of pearl inlay, was fashioned by his son, Peter, a custom framer who lives in San Diego. The other three are "beautiful California oak burls," polished and finished by Caely, who carted them to Mystic from San Francisco when she moved back East last spring.

"I am thrilled that my love of nature, and specifically my love of trees, has been passed down to the next generation," said Michael Melford, smiling broadly. "It's my family tree."

"When I was a senior in high school, I did an AP project on trees," recalled Caely, who founded her business, Good Company Furniture, after completing an intensive program at the Center for Furniture Craftmanship in Rockport, Maine. "So, my subject was that trees matter."

"You might say I've come back to my roots," she said with a smile. "No pun intended."

"Michael Melford: A Passage between Earth and Sky," is on display at the Mystic Museum of Art, 9 Water St., Mystic, through Dec. 19.