

Laura Moore: Memory Bathing

It was sometime in 2004 that artist Laura Moore first laid eyes on a USB device. Her father thought it might be of use and he was certainly right, although not for the reasons one would expect. Moore's artistic practice is deeply rooted in the formal aspects of object and image making. She is interested in how material, shape, texture and scale can communicate meaning. The human scale is also an important focus in her work, thinking through the way an object functions in relation to the human body and human experience. To this day, Moore has never used that particular USB to hold or transfer digital data but considered it only as a form. She liked the way it was made to be hand held and that it was a device made to hold memory. This seemingly simple digital device struck a perfect combination of form and content for the artist, providing a means to explore memory, nostalgia and human-made technology through her hand-carved stone sculptures. Moore taps into the way new technologies are rapidly produced and quick to be replaced, forcing us to sever the personal relationships that can develop with objects and also creating a cycle of physical waste. Her use of the stone material bestows a permanency to these objects, commemorating the memories and nostalgia for the everyday items and reminds us of the long-term environmental impact this cycle of waste has over time.

For her solo exhibition, *Memory Bathing*, Moore continues to explore an on-going interest in the USB form and extends her work in stone to include carved wood, silicone, fabricated metal, re-purposed tree logs, drawings and audio poems. By fusing together USB technology with natural forms, such as trees and their fruits (acorns, walnuts, and maple tree keys), Moore invents hybrid objects where human-made and organic technologies related to memory and the passing of information are joined, further examining how nature and technology are inextricably linked.

As you enter the exhibition space, you see a series of re-assembled tree logs, collected over time by the artist and transformed into a new version of its old tree self. Standing at different heights, each log is anchored to a piece of stone and crowned with a custom-made stainless-steel USB component, up-scaled to the size of an average human face. These USB memory trees have an anthropomorphic quality, with the two square USB holes assuming the role of eyes, peering around their newly created forest environment. The scene, while not your typical forest, still evokes the notion of a place to engage with nature, complete with autumnal leaves and a picnic bench with carvings left behind from those who came before. Like the USB functionality to store and share data, trees also have the capacity to preserve memory. Their inner rings indicate the exact time they were formed and also contain data about the climate and atmospheric conditions during different periods.¹

Moore's tree sculptures call attention to the shared function of memory storage between the USB and trees, but also to the reality that "with the acceleration of climate change, tree rings have become an important source of knowledge in tracking the human-made changes to the planet – changes caused in large part by our ever-increasing reliance and consumption of digital technologies".² These works both celebrate and caution the complex relationship we have with technology, creating new forms that are at once playful and quirky, but also strange and uncanny.

The exhibition's title, Memory Bathing, is a play on the term for forest bathing – a practice of immersing oneself in nature and reaping the medicinal benefits produced from the trees and the forest ecosystem. Moore explains: “We all feel better when we're around trees and we all have memories linked to trees; planting them with a family member, climbing them as a child, sitting in their shadows or carving initials into their trunks. Trees attract and house the birds, clean the air and soften our concrete experience.”³

The fruits born from trees also play a critical role in this newly imagined memory forest. Acorns, walnuts and maple tree keys all carry data on a cellular level required to sprout new trees, linking the natural and digital realms through the shared functionality to pass on information. There is a formal connection too. Moore's interest in the human figure evolves beyond the anthropomorphic presence of the USB memory trees and introduces the form of the female breast. When Moore first considered the form of an acorn, making a sketch in graphite, she

I quickly recognized how similar the shape of the nut was to the breast. Merging the two forms, adding the nipple and combining them with the USB component provided a way for the artist to represent both the male and female. If the USB memory trees can be read as a more masculine figure, the large acorn sculptures present the gender binary: the USB key referencing male and the soft silicone breast referencing female. Moore teases out the many threads of connectivity, fertility, memory and nature that reveal themselves in these newly imagined entities. The 1:1 scale that is a hallmark in Moore's practice is found in the drawings and USB audio poem sculptures that coexist around the USB memory trees. The USB walnuts and USB acorn boobs offer an activation of the hybrid devices, seeded with six short audio poems that capture the multi-faceted connections between the natural and digital forms. The poems, created in collaboration with Shannon Partridge, describe and reflect on the interconnectedness that Memory Bathing urges us to consider.

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¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dendrochronology>

^{2 3} Laura Moore, exhibition statement