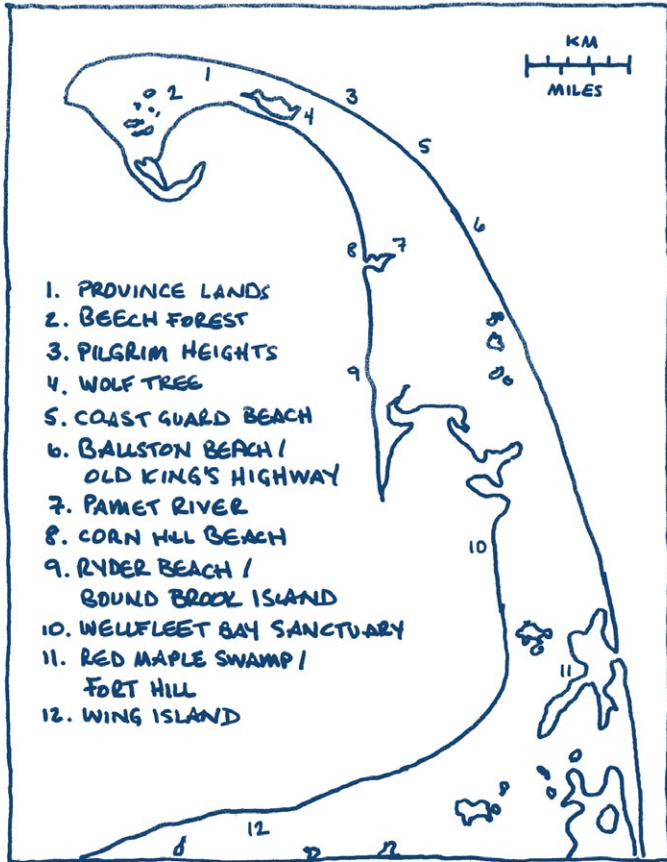




Branches  
of the  
**Wolf Tree**

*Carlotta Luke*



I see the branches of the wolf tree as a metaphor for the distinct and interconnected ecosystems of Cape Cod: beaches, dunes, moorland, grassland, woodland, salt water and fresh water.

Wolf tree is a term for a tree that is much older than those around it (often hundreds of years older), their characteristically low, wide-spreading branches the result of having space to grow outward after the surrounding forest was cleared. They are an important support to their local ecology and stand as witness to the changes in land use over time.

For this project I went seeking details of the Cape Cod landscape as the seasons turned. The resulting photographs became images of reverence for these fragile ecosystems.

The artworks reproduced here are hand-printed cyanotypes derived from original digital photographs that were taken on Cape Cod over the course of a year, from May 2023 to the following spring.

Exhibit – August 30-October 1, 2024  
The Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA

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October 22, 2023

Pilgrim Heights, Truro  
woodland

Sparkling autumn light, blue sky, peaceful paths through woods strewn with soft pine needles. Colour everywhere: reds, yellows, browns, purples, greens. It is a different pallet than in summer. The sea is a blue green, sparkling, but so *dark* in the sunlight. It looks wintry, white horses everywhere, tide going out. There is something about the light and the colour and the leaves, all of it, that feels precious and fleeting. This is not an autumn day that I would ever see in England, which makes it feel even more dear to me, with memories and associations flooding back from my past. I want to hold on to this precise moment, the point when the year turns.



October 23, 2023

**The wolf oak tree, Truro  
woodland**

Morning visit to the High Head Conservation Area. No one around. Rainy. Very quiet. The path meanders through pine forest, into open heathland of beach plums and blueberries and back again into scrub pines. I am looking for the wolf oak tree, and finally I find it. Although not very tall, it is much larger than all of its neighbors, limbs low and spread wide. It looks as if two trees have grown from one trunk, like conjoined twins. I am overcome by awe and almost fear as I approach it. I also feel ashamed and like I need to apologise. (Shame at being human, at the destruction we have wrought? I am unclear.) The tree's presence is huge, overwhelming, deeper, and bigger, than is in any way familiar to me. I circle around slowly, trying to photograph. Finally, I lean my forehead on a branch and ask forgiveness.





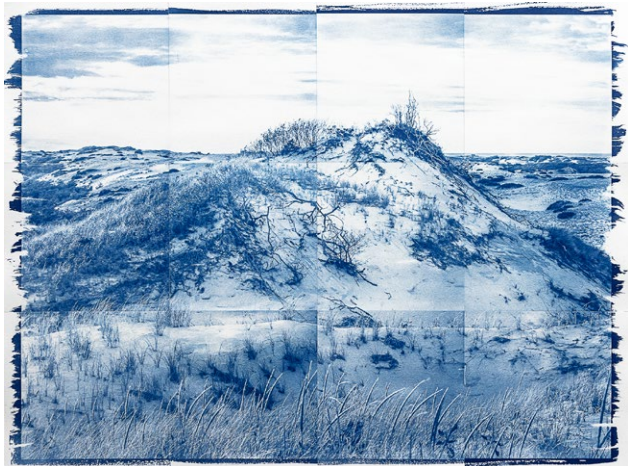
October 24, 2023

Province Lands, Provincetown  
dunes

Sunset. It is exhilarating to be so far from the cars and crowds of town. I am surrounded on all sides by undulating dunes, a view of the Atlantic off in the distance. The expanse of sand is rounded, smooth, bright, the grasses sparkly in the setting sun and waving like crazy in the wind. I stand on the crest of a dune and turn round and round, soaking it all in.

Bog in the low spaces between the dunes. Loads of cranberries, and grasses, and bog cotton, and bay berries, and dwarf pine trees. And poison ivy.

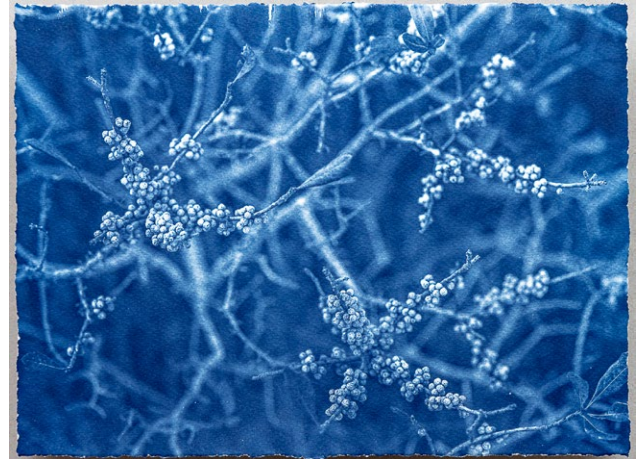
There is a very strange contrast where the woodland abuts the dunes, branches growing up from below the surface, sand swamping the forest. I find it haunting and disturbing.



October 25, 2023

**The wolf oak tree, Truro  
woodland**

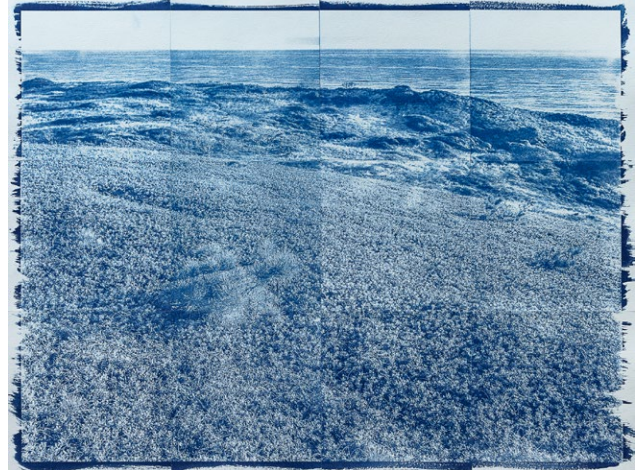
For some reason, on today's visit the tree is a benevolent presence. As soon as I spot her through the woods, I'm no longer afraid. I'm able to be with her, touch her with my hands. Benevolence is the best word I can think of to describe this. There is a circle of sisters, or more probably daughters, who surround her, and that feels peaceful and enclosed.



October 26, 2023

Old King's Highway, Truro  
moorland

Sunrise shoot, the sound of crashing waves out of view on Ballston Beach, the rounded spread of heathland, smooth and open on the curved hillside. I work quickly to get what I am after while the sun is still low over the sea. I need the raking light of sunrise, not the harsh flat brightness of midday. Taking my eyes from the expansive view, I look down to find a spider's web that still holds drops of morning dew suspended above tiny bearberry leaves.





October 27, 2023

**Beech Forest, Provincetown  
fresh water**

I head into Provincetown for the early morning light. The sun is dodging clouds. Blackwater Pond is entirely filled with lily pads. This creates a texture on the surface that has substance to it, changing how the landscape reflects on the still water.

One section of the walk has a slight rise where the trees lean in towards the water, the low sun casting long shadows on the pine needles covering the ground. The light is so clear it highlights every detail. I must work quickly to capture this moment that distills the landscape in front of me. Then the clouds move, and it all shifts, changes, and is gone.





October 27, 2023

Red Maple Swamp, Eastham  
fresh water and salt marsh

Meandering board walk through the dry-ish swamp. Bright autumn afternoon. At one point, the wind stirs the dead leaves and the sound of them falling to the ground is like rain, momentarily confusing my senses.

Dry leaves on black silky water. That shot will work.

It is dusk as I walk down to the water's edge at Fort Hill. So many silky soft seed pods – milkweed and groundsel. They become white star bursts on a dark wet muddy sky.



**December 31, 2023**

**The wolf oak tree, Truro  
woodland**

I greet the wolf tree after having been away for a while. I'd been thinking that the landscape might not have changed enough since the autumn, and that this would make my job harder, but then I am just so pleased to see my old friend. I give her a hug, say hello, even a kiss. I am looking for new ways to photograph her when I spot a pile of glossy dead leaves on the ground by her trunk.



January 3, 2024

**Bound Brook Island, Wellfleet  
bay beach, dunes and moorland**

We head to Bound Brook Island along the path from Ryder Beach. The beach is beautiful and desolate and windy, with stormy afternoon light. We climb the path up the dunes into heathland and find ourselves in an enchanted forest of dwarf trees and long golden grass that sways like the sea.

On our way back to Ryder we come onto a ridge overlooking Bound Brook. It is shockingly beautiful. Dark storm clouds squeeze the last rays of the setting sun into long fingers that catch the shrubs in the foreground and reach far across the marsh to the encircling forest.





January 5, 2024

Wing Island, Brewster  
salt flats

Chris's birthday is very cold and very sunny. We go to explore Wing Island. The sand flats at the far side of the island feel like another world – remote, wide, wide, open spaces, ferocious wind, very bright sunlight. The beach grasses growing out on the flats are taller than me, the blades bent horizontal in the gale. There is huge surf out in the bay, making it look like there's a barrier reef out there.





January 8, 2024

Truro

ocean beach and woodland

Can't sleep because I am so excited about the snow. Head out just after dawn because sun is forecast later in the morning, which would make everything too bright. Coast Guard Beach is frigid, with wild, enormous surf. My hands get so cold that it's hard to use my camera. It is really hard to shoot, really hard to see, really hard to stand up! The wind has blown away a lot of the snow. The beach is ferocious, bleak, dangerous, gorgeous. There are coyote tracks.

I go to see the wolf tree. It is not so cold and feels more sheltered here. The tree looks majestic surrounded by white. There are no human footprints, only ones made by coyotes and rabbits.



January 14, 2024

Truro

ocean and bay beaches

Coast Guard Beach. We head to see the Atlantic after the storm. Bright sun. Fierce wind. Beautiful smooth waves, at least six feet high, breaking perfectly. The cresting waves cast shadows onto the water. The wind blows plumes of white spray high into the air. The beach is littered with broken wood and branches.

Then on to see Corn Hill Beach. Absolutely crazy waves breaking all the way up to the base of the dunes. The entire beach is a mass of white writhing water. I have never seen the tide this high here. The onshore wind is so strong that we can hardly stand up.



January 15, 2024

Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary

salt marsh

We finally get to the Audubon land in Wellfleet. Again, I am struck by the permeability of this landscape. When you stick to roads it's easy to miss how much water is a part of everything here, both salt and fresh. The boundary between land and water is in constant flux, not just along the beaches but far inland as well. It feels like everything is always both at the same time.



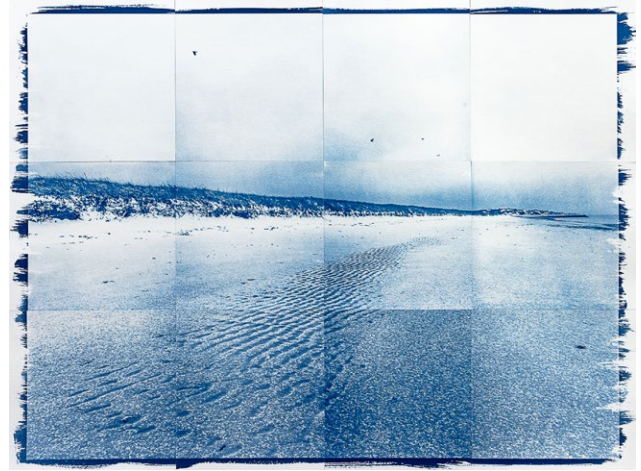
January 16, 2024

Truro

bay beach and woodland

Snow that turns to freezing rain as I head to Corn Hill Beach. It lies bright against the dark foreboding sky. Dead low tide and flat. Totally still. Very cold. It feels like a different place than on the storm day. Extraordinary and otherworldly. A light dusting of snow is visible up near the dunes and gradually disappears into the wet sand of low tide. It reminds me of the way powdered sugar disappears into the buttery surface of a cake. At the back of the dunes, the salt hay has been left in snowy swirls by the high storm tide.

I visit the wolf tree. Coyote tracks again, two side by side plus a lone set of rabbit tracks, all of them following along the human path. The low bush blueberries are so dark under the snow on either side of the path.





January 27, 2024  
Lewes, East Sussex

I have finished the cycle of winter votives. It leaves me with a strange feeling – agitated and frazzled. I have done nothing but print for a week of 10-hour days. I am exhausted. I have a vague sick feeling and fullness in my chest, like I want to cry. I need to put the prints away for a while. They are too close to me, to my physical body. This project feels too big. I have produced so many images and I'm finding it difficult to cut them back. What *is* the story I am trying to tell?

Maybe it is about connection to place, belonging somewhere, needing to prove this – to myself. For a long time, my adult life has been elsewhere, but this Cape Cod landscape is my childhood. Photography anchors me to this place. The landscape claims me. I claim the landscape.



I am about six here, in the Truro dunes, examining a sprig of dusty miller – still one of my favorite plants.

May 18, 2024

Truro

moorland

Grey rainy day. Very tired and jet lagged, though not as bad as the day before. Feeling out of it and disconnected from this project. We go for a walk to the bench and then alongside the Pamet to the beach. I begin to see things again. Springtime and little buds and blossoms, and I know I will be able to photograph again.

I drive out into the mizzle. I leave the car in the middle of the track and hop out to photograph the beach plum blossoms. As I get back in and close the door, a huge coyote appears suddenly, loping down the path right past me. It's so close I see raindrops on fur. Thin, agile body, purposeful.



May 25, 2024

Truro

woodland

I have been musing over my spring shoots. I have some good close-ups so far, details of unfurling, of fuzzy new leaves and tiny blossoms, but I have not felt the urgency to head out with my camera the way I did in the autumn and winter. We have set off several times, only to be driven back by swarms of mosquitoes. On other trips, I was fighting sun that was too harsh and bright, and missing the soft overcast light that creates sumptuous details in cyanotype. For now, I am enjoying just being here with the landscape, the peace, the water. I don't feel stressed about not photographing. I am aiming for acceptance and rhythm, trying to work with time instead of against it, trusting my instincts.



June 30, 2024

Lewes, East Sussex

I have been thinking about this project as a whole and why I have undertaken it. I realise that it is an exploration of place, but also of self and belonging. After living abroad for over 30 years, I find this project has developed into a way to ground myself, to affirm my connection to and love of this landscape. It is a way to know deeply that I belong here, and to dispel my sense of rootlessness. My plan of photographing through the seasons has evolved into an appreciation for this place that is about *all* the lives – plants and animals of the land, sea and air – that also call it home. I have become aware, as if for the first time, of individual plants and their cycles of life and season. I feel deep gratitude.





