

# ***STREUOBSTWIESE***

***Sam Van Aken***







*Streuobstwiese* (pronounced strī-o:pst-vēzə) is an expansive work by contemporary artist Sam Van Aken, consisting of an orchard of several hundred heirloom and antique fruit trees, a series of workshops on growing and harvesting these rare varieties, as well as a series of publications. Acting as a research station similar to the role filled by Agricultural Experiment Stations of the Land Grant Universities of the nineteenth century, the *Streuobstwiese* is public art as a form of re-placemaking, a collection of uncontemporary practices addressing very contemporary concerns while generating metaphorical potentials. Borrowing its name from a sixteenth-century German term used to describe a community-owned orchard — a field or meadow with scattered fruit trees — the installation of this concept in this issue of *PAD* seeks to reintroduce forgotten processes and methodologies in an attempt to enlarge the reader's imagination: fueling insights into a deeper and broader awareness of place and the importance of public art as well as its integral role in the life of the community.

Merging the fields of study that include public art, social practice, history and botany (specifically pomology that focuses on development and promotion of the cultivation and study of fruits), Van Aken's *Streuobstwiese* is an innovative hybrid of traditional academic disciplines and practices. Building on the *Tree of 40 Fruit Project* that preserved hundreds of heirloom fruit trees, the *Streuobstwiese* attempts to reintroduce these cultivars by establishing an archival orchard of individual trees that were grown in the area in the past, becoming a mnemonic site that preserves culture itself as well as agricultural history and legacy.

Moreover, the *Streuobstwiese* is an experiential and sensual site of visual, gustatory and olfactory pleasure. As a public commons — similar to its namesake as the predecessor to the modern park — it is a shared place and a site of collaborative and collective exchange. Through educational workshops on growing, grafting and harvesting, as well as fresh sampling tours, and including blossom and harvest festivals, the *Streuobstwiese* provides an enhanced conceptual awareness of place and public art in its integral role of community life.

Extending the aim of the *Streuobstwiese* as a resource for communities including artistic, academic, and agriculture, Van Aken transforms *PAD* into a field guide; with excerpts from a subsequent *Album of Pomology* (to accompany the orchard installation, based on Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau's 1768 *Treatise on Fruit Trees*), Van Aken includes descriptions of several fruit varieties to be cultivated, culled from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agricultural reports along with botanical drawings.









## Peach

Anson's Imperial.	Royal Peach.
Peché.	Abricot Peché. <i>N. Duh. Poit</i>
De Nancy. <i>O. Duh.</i>	Du Luxemburg.
Peché Grosse.	Wurtemberg.
Pfirsche.	

1. Coxe, *View Cult. Fr. Trees.* 241. 1817. 2. Kedrick, *New Am. Orch.* 251, 252. 1833. 3. Downing, *Fr. Trees Am.* 239-40 1857. 4. Cole, *Am. Fr. Book.* 261. 1858. 5. Fish, *Apricot.* 6. 1880. 6. Wickson, *Cal. Fr. Trees.* 177. 1909. 7. Hedrick, *Cycl. Of Hardy Fr.* 134. 1922. 8. Kennedy, Arboreum Co. 2014.

One of the oldest best known and finest apricots. Grown for at least four centuries. Originally from Piedmont Region in France and continues to be a standard of excellence in Europe for apricots. Peach is the Ancestor of Royal, Blenheim, Moorpark varieties. Resembles Moorpark but larger, finer, few days earlier in ripening.

Considered to be best of apricots in early 1800s. In the 19th century it was once a popular/favorite in Sacramento Valley for canning/drying but was discarded because crop ripens rapidly and appearance.

Tree is excellent grown in open ground. Requires 800 chill hours for full blossom and fruiting.

One of the largest of all apricots, as large as a peach. 18 lines to 2 ½ inches in diameter, round oval, rather flattened, compressed on its sides, well marked suture, deep at base diminishing toward apex.

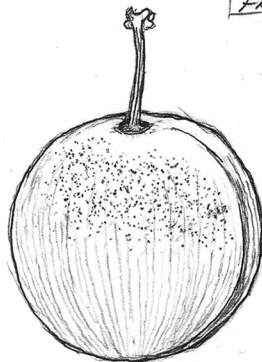
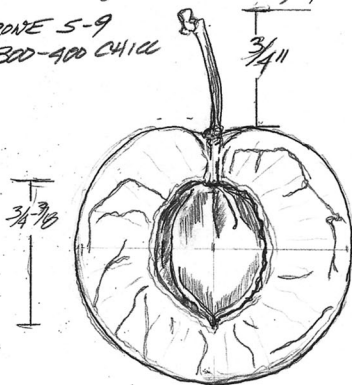
Skin yellow to pale yellow lacking pigment in shade, deep orange/red with mottled dark brown spots in sun. Flesh is yellow saffron color, very delicate, very juicy, melting, rich, sugary, highly flavored. Finest quality, excellent, delicious. Stone, large, flat, rugged, peculiarly perforated along back. Kernel bitter. Ripe early in August before Moorpark.



# REINE CLAUDE

REINE CLAUDE DOREE, GREEN GAGE OLD GREEN GAGE, BRUNN GAGE  
CLAUDIA (FRANCE & ITALY), VEDACCHIO (ANTIOCH), MAMMOLO, SUSINIA REGINA

ZONE 5-9  
300-400 CHILL



- FRUIT**
- MID SEASON
  - COLOR  
GREEN BECOMING YELLOW
  - MOTTLED ON SIDES  
RED OVERSPREAD  
WITH THIN BROWN  
NUMEROUS GRAY Hairs  
CLUSTERED ARE Hairs
  - SEAMERICH DROID
  - HALVES EQUAL
  - CAVITY MURDOW  
REGULAR  
ABSTRACT
  - SUTURE-KAWT,  
SHALLOW
  - FLESH  
GREEN-YELLOW

**FLESH**  
GREEN-YELLOW  
GOLD-YELLOW

- MELTING
- JUICY
- EXCEEDINGLY RICH
- EXCELLENT BEEF
- SEPARATES  
FROM STONE

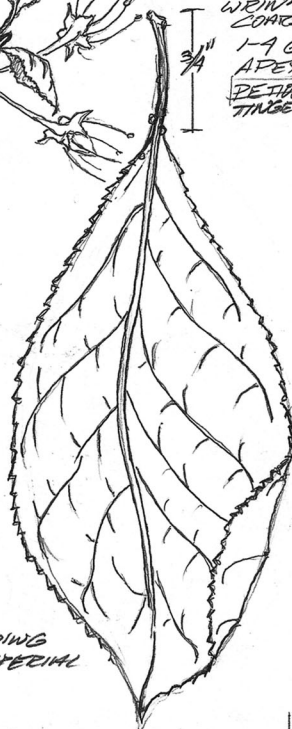
**STONE**

OVAL  
SEMI-CHANGING  
TAPERING AT BASE  
BLUNT AT APEX  
THICKLY PITTED



**LEAF**

4 1/2" LONG 2" WIDE  
DWARF, THICK, LEATHERY  
WRINKLED  
COARSELY SERATE  
1-4 GLANDS  
APEX ACUTE  
PETIOLE 3/4" 1/2  
TINGED RED



- TREE**
- SHORT, ROUNDED, SLOW GROWTH, LOW, SPREADING
  - DWARFISH HABIT DISTINCTLY FROM IMPERIAL
  - MEDIUM SIZE, ROUNDED TOP
  - PREFERS WARM SOIL
  - DOES NOT PREFER OPEN PLANTING
  - RAIN TO EXPOSE FRUIT

SVANAKEN 4/6-11/16









*Prunus Salicina* (Hollywood Plum)



## ***ARTIST STATEMENT***

Too often the discussion, dialogue, and exchange that has come to characterize today's college campus is not practiced or reflected in the art that adorns its campus. The trans-, cross-, and inter-disciplinary creative practices where innovation is most often born and emerges from are contained within brick and granite buildings, while abstract and forgotten ideals are left trapped inside embodied bronze or steel forms.

In academics as well as in public art, as attempts to characterize and define become style and discipline, what is forgotten is that by allowing — in actuality, promoting and freeing these ideas and disciplines sharply and abruptly alongside each other — new ways of looking and acting become new ways of seeing and being. The most critical aspect of these two realms, the processes of interaction and exchange, is in fact where the stayed, expected and defined are challenged. And if essential, becomes rearticulated and revitalized: in this, the once ubiquitous forms of an orchard or journal become a site of scientific, historical, anthropological/social and aesthetic practice and study.

Front Cover Image. Sam Van Aken. *Tree of 40 Fruit Plum Harvest*. 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art.

Page 45. Klaus Göhring. *Streuobstwiese in Autumn*. 2015. Digital Photograph.

Page 47. Sam Van Aken. *Tree of 40 Fruit, Tree 75 Diagram*. 2016. Drawing. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art.

Page 48. Sam Van Aken. *Tree of 40 Fruit, Tree 75*. Syracuse University, Syracuse New York. 2011–2016. Multi-grafted fruit tree. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art.

Page 49. Sam Van Aken. *Peach Apricot Description from the Album of Pomology*. 2016. Text Description. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Page 50. Sam Van Aken. *Notes on Green Gage*. 2016. Drawing. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Page 51 and Back Cover Image. Sam Van Aken. *Reine Claude Doree*. 2016. Pomological Illustration. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art.

Page 52. Sam Van Aken. *Pêche De Nancy*. 2016. Pomological Illustration. Courtesy of the Artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Page 53. Ashley Corbin-Teich. *Hollywood Plum*. 2017. Photograph. Courtesy of the Artist.



## ***BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE***

Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, **Sam Van Aken** received his undergraduate education in communication theory and art. Immediately following his studies he lived and worked in Poland under the auspices of the Andy Warhol Foundation and the United States Information Agency. Van Aken received his MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2001. As his work has continued to reach beyond traditional gallery and museum settings to take place in public/lived spaces his projects have been sited and staged throughout the United States and Europe, receiving numerous honors including a Joan Mitchell Award, International Association of Art Critics Award, and a 2009 Creative Capital grant. He is currently Graduate Program Coordinator for the School of Art at Syracuse University. He is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. [www.samvanaken.com](http://www.samvanaken.com), [www.treeof4ofruit.com](http://www.treeof4ofruit.com)

# Syracuse artist known for Tree of 40 fruits makes magic and miracles using science



By **Marnie Eisenstadt** | [meisenstadt@syracuse.com](mailto:meisenstadt@syracuse.com)

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

on March 20, 2016 at 9:00 AM, updated March 21, 2016 at 2:11 PM

Syracuse, N.Y. -- Sam Van Aken made up his mind early. He wanted nothing to do with science. He watched his dad's career in chemical engineering and decided it wasn't for him: too straightforward, black and white, devoid of introspection.

So he became an artist. But at the heart of his art is often a scientific question; his palette is an experiment.

Van Aken's best-known works are in his Tree of 40 Fruit series. Some of the trees are on the Syracuse University campus, where Van Aken is a professor of sculpture.

Each tree is a living sculpture that bears 40 different fruits. Van Aken created the trees by slicing branches from other fruit trees and re-attaching them to his trees, a technique called grafting. When the tree blooms, it is a breathtaking array of colors and flowers. When it bears fruit, it is an entire produce section spread on the branches of one tree.

Van Aken's point is often to make his audience question what they know to be true, to create things that seem both natural and miraculous. "When you stumble upon a tree that's growing all these kinds of fruits on it; when you see a perfect circle cut out of a cloud, it's that questioning," he said.

Van Aken, 43, has a past that is nothing you might expect. He grew up on a dairy farm in Reading, Pa. His family lived with his mother's family; his grandfather ran the farm.

"Growing up on a farm, you don't buy things. You make everything," Van Aken said, sitting in his basement studio at Syracuse University with his dog, a large mutt named Country Western Legend Hiram King "Hank" Williams Sr. (The Sr. is quite important, as neither dog nor owner are fans of Hank Jr.) During the conversation, Hank Sr. often wandered off after female students.

The milk, meat, eggs and bread Van Aken ate as a kid came from his family's farm. His mother, Elaine, sewed all their clothes. She began as a seamstress at Sears and later rose to the rank of vice president. They still laugh about the swimsuits she made whose elastic didn't work when it got wet at a public pool.

As a child, Van Aken didn't make much art. When he wasn't at school, he was milking cows. But he was fascinated by welding. On the farm, someone was always under the tractor with the arc of hot fire, fixing this or that. Now, welding is often part of Van Aken's sculpture installations.

Van Aken's family left the farm when he was a teen and moved to the suburbs of Philadelphia.

He watched as farms throughout the region turned into suburban subdivisions. A new highway from Reading to Philadelphia unlocked the development potential of thousands of acres of farmland.

That is woven into Van Aken's tree projects. Like a reverse Johnny Appleseed, instead of spreading seeds, Van Aken collects branches of rare fruit trees that are no longer grown by fruit farmers. New York is all about apples now, but it used to be the second-leading producer of plums, Van Aken said.

Van Aken's trees are stone fruit (the kind with pits in the middle). His New York trees are heavy with plums and peaches. Trees he's been working on for an installation in Michigan are loaded with antique varieties of cherries because of that state's heavy cherry production. Traverse City is the unofficial cherry capital of the country.

Van Aken's ideas are endless stray threads that he keeps pulling. The trees require him to pay almost obsessive attention to the weather. Which led him to weather balloons. Which led him to Acadia in Maine. Which used to be called "Eden."

What if ... he filled giant weather balloons with the air from Acadia, aka Eden? Van Aken did just that. He filled tanks with compressed air from Acadia, Maine. Then he blew up 60 weather balloons with that air for an exhibit at Munson Williams Proctor Art Institute in Utica. The balloons, each 10 feet tall, filled the sculpture court at the museum. As they deflated, or were popped with a giant "BANG" by school children, the air smelled of rich pine and salty sea air. It smelled like Eden.

It was a three-month exhibit that drifted away. By the end, there was nothing left but deflated balloons.

Then Van Aken pulled the weather thread a little more. He was thinking of light as a metaphor when he happened across the idea for "A Hole in the Sky." There are circular openings in clouds that appear to be miraculous, but Van Aken wondered if he could create one.

It turns out he needed silver iodide and an airplane. To hear him describe the process is to get lost in scientific jargon that sounds more chemical engineer than artist. But it involved seeding the clouds with silver iodide and then flying a plane through the clouds to trigger the chain reaction that makes a hole appear in the clouds.

Van Aken and a pilot made a hole over Utica. That, he said, is the proof that it will work on a bigger scale. He wants to do it with a larger plane, which would cost \$5,000 for each attempt. So far, he's still working on a pitch to get funding for the piece.

But it's performance art for an accidental audience. The hole in the sky is hard to plan because it's so weather dependent. At first, Van Aken thought this made the concept fatally flawed. "But then I thought, 'This is a romantic thought. An artwork for one person,'" he said. If you look in the sky at the right time, you see the art. It is your hole through the clouds to heaven. When Van Aken has an idea, it consumes him. Sometimes, completely: For his piece "Becoming Roy Neary," the main character in the sci-fi movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," Van Aken, well, became Roy Neary.

He bought an old station wagon for \$300 and filmed while following the route of Neary's pilgrimage in the movie, which went from Muncie, Ind., to Devil's Tower, Wyo. Van Aken made sets from scenes in Neary's fictional life, which were installed in galleries and museums. Then Van Aken acted on them, re-enacting scenes from the movie.

It seems just a shade crazy.

His mother, Elaine Van Aken, laughs as she talks about how her son's ideas got bigger and bigger. Like any proud mom, she put his work on the walls at home. But what do you do when the artwork is a larger-than-life man sculpted of wire? "Every place we've moved, wire sculpture man travels with us, on top of the car," Elaine Van Aken said. The current house is the first that didn't have a vast foyer where the wire man would fit, so he's attached to the outside of Van Aken's parents' house, instead. He has vines growing through him. Van Aken's mother turned his man into a topiary.

One of the family's favorite pieces is an Irish pub that Van Aken built in a little trailer. Four people can sit in it and there's a fully-functioning beer tap. "My husband keeps trying to get him to give us that," Elaine Van Aken said. The couple's other child, Sam's older sister Sarah Van Aken, is also an artist. She had a clothing line and the first textile factory in Philadelphia in recent history. She got out of the clothing business, though, and is now the president and COO of Kathy's Cards.

As a kid, Sam Van Aken did well in school without trying that hard. But he almost didn't graduate because he had more detention than he could serve before graduation. He did his time by being part of a pilot program for teaching kids transcendental meditation, he said.

At first, Van Aken thought it was ridiculous. But he ended up learning the calming, mind-clearing technique. He still meditates. And he is fascinated by the idea of art that can clear the mind, like an eraser.

A few years ago, Van Aken began suffering migraines. And he noticed the aura he experienced before it: a halo of flashing lights.

What would happen if you could have the halo of lights without the blistering headache, he wondered. He built an exhibit that did just that, with lights blinking at the same speed as the synapses in the human brain.

People who looked at it said they saw rabbits, Van Aken said, wandering to the story of Alice in Wonderland. People say Lewis Carroll suffered terrible migraines. Perhaps they were his genius, Van Aken wondered.

Those lights are in storage now and Van Aken is working on this:

"The idea is to take a silver candlestick and turn it into a glass of water," Van Aken said. The artist's eyes grew big and his hands waved in the air as he described how it would work, using silver iodide and a weather balloon.

It sounded like a miracle. Made of science and art.

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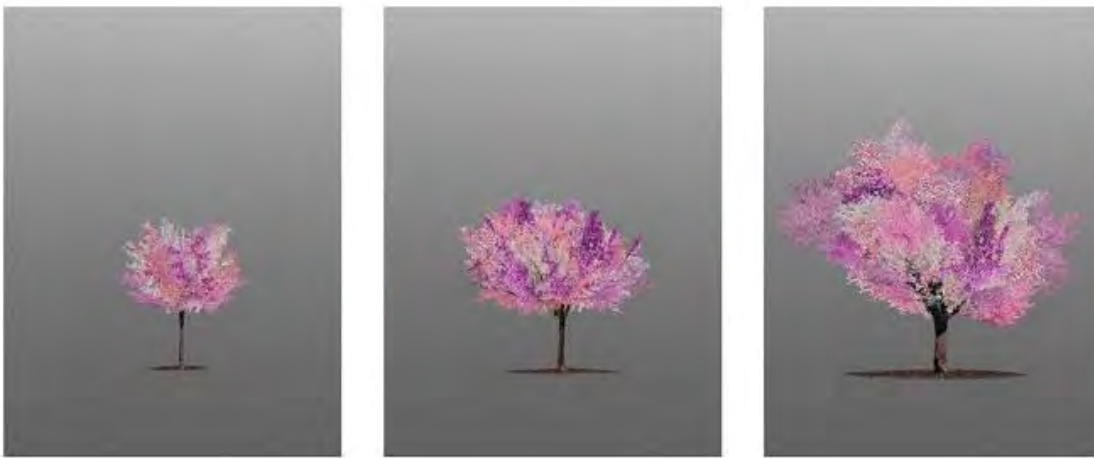
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# Tree produces 40 types of fruit itself

This sculptural tree has the ability to grow different kinds of fruit from the same tree



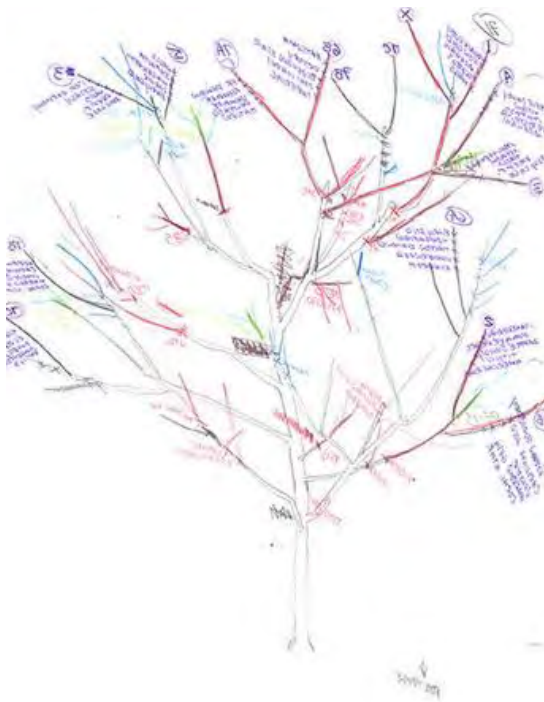
**By Yesenia Gallegos for Telemundo Chicago August 4, 2015**

"The 40 Fruit Tree", known in English as "The Tree of 40 Fruit" is a piece of art made by contemporary artist Sam Van Aken. It has created a number of "magic" based on hybrid trees of fruit and plants.

Through a seeding technique called "chip grafting", the artist transplanted grafts of different types and varieties of fruit plants, with the capacity to produce more kinds of futas DE40 at the root of a tree.

Peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, cherries and even almonds are among the fruits that the tree produces branch after branch after transplantation adheres to the main trunk of the tree.

During the year, the artist plans that type of graft will reap fruit in each tree, after establishing a pattern of growing time between species and the season in which they flourish in relation to the others.



"When sculpting the different varieties of tree roots in a certain order, can essentially know how will flower and bear fruit," says Van Aken.



During the spring "40 fruit trees" flower with different shades of white, pink and pastels and summer the tree begins to bear fruit in the sequence in which they were grafted.



Following this process, the artist has created more than a dozen of this type of trees found in museums across the United States.





This sculptural tree, Van Aken explores the theme of genetic engineering, monoculture, and the relationship of humanity with nature around you.



Here is the artist's rendition of what a Tree of 40 Fruit will look like at 10 years. (Image courtesy of Sam Van Aken)

# A Tree Grows 40 Different Types of Fruit

**What started as an art project has become a mission to reintroduce Americans to native fruits that have faded from popularity**

By [Randy Rieland](#)  
smithsonian.com  
January 14, 2015

A tree that [Sam Van Aken](#) grows might look like any other—until it blooms. First, its branches blossom in different shades of pink, white and crimson, and then, quite magically, the tree displays a mix of fruit.

Van Aken's [Tree of 40 Fruit](#), an invention that's just what it sounds like, is capable of producing 40 different varieties of fruit—plums, peaches, apricots, nectarines, cherries and others. The 42-year-old sculptor and art professor at Syracuse University created his first multi-fruit tree back in 2008, by grafting together branches from different trees. He intended to produce a piece of natural art that would transform itself. He thought of the tree as a sculpture, because he could, based on what he grafted where, determine how it morphed.

Today, there are 18 of these wondrous trees across the country, with three more being planted this spring in Illinois, Michigan and California. Seven are located in New York—including the very first Tree of 40 Fruit that's still on the Syracuse campus—and six more are in a small grove in Portland, Maine. Other individual trees, reportedly costing up to \$30,000, have been purchased for private homes and museums, such as the [21C Museum/Hotel](#) in Bentonville, Arkansas. That one, says Van Aken, may be the “most beloved” of his trees. “From the day it was planted,” he says, “it seemed to have some draw for people.”

### The kindest cut

While it takes precision, the grafting required to create these multi-fruit trees is not that complicated a process. Van Aken, who grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, takes a slice of a fruit tree that includes buds and inserts it into a matching incision in a host tree, one that's been growing for at least three years. He then wraps electrical tape around the spot to hold the pieces together. When all goes well, the “veins,” he says, of the different trees flow into each other so that they share a vascular system.

Other times, Van Aken uses a type of grafting involving just the buds. He removes healthy buds from a tree in February and stores them in a freezer until August. Then, he trims buds off a host tree's branches and replaces them with the ones that have been in cold storage. He wraps the new buds in plastic, creating a greenhouse effect, and the following spring cuts off any of the remaining old buds near the graft. The idea, says Van Aken, is to trick the host tree into believing the new pieces are part of itself. He explained how the Tree of 40 Fruit came to be at a [TED talk](#) in Manhattan last year.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9EuJ9QlikY>

For three years after one of his trees is sited, the artist visits it twice a year, once in the spring to prune the branches and again in the summer to add more grafts. Van Aken estimates that it takes at least nine years for a Tree of 40 Fruit to reach its peak—that is five years for the grafts to develop and another four for the different fruit to appear.

## Going native

Van Aken uses only trees that produce stone fruits, or those that have pits, because these species tend to be compatible with each other. He was able to gain access to almost 250 different varieties, but to the general public, most of these types of peaches, plums and apricots are unfamiliar, because they aren't the preferred size or color and don't have a shelf-life long enough to allow them to be sold in stores. But that means people are missing out on a wide variety of taste sensations. Some of the fruits, Van Aken says, are so sweet, “they’ll hurt your teeth,” and others are sour.

The art project, in this sense, gradually became a means of conservation. Van Aken is doing his part to keep these fruit species from disappearing.

In fact, his work with lesser known types of fruit attracted the attention of DARPA, the research arm of the Department of Defense. This past fall he met with people from the agency’s Biological Technologies Office to share what he has learned about preserving heirloom and native varieties of fruit.

While he continues to create Trees of 40 Fruit, Van Aken’s agricultural focus is broadening. His latest project, based on the German concept of *streuobstweise*, or community orchards, is a step toward not only educating communities about the fruits native to their region, but also in engaging a younger generation in the fading tradition of growing food. Van Aken, art historian and entrepreneur Chris Thompson and some local businesses and community groups hope to start their first *streuobstweise* in Freeport, Maine. Some multi-fruit trees will be planted in the orchard, but most of the trees will provide only one type of fruit—the goal being to bring back local varieties that most people have never tasted.

“The Trees of 40 Fruit were a way for me to collapse an entire orchard into one tree to preserve varieties and diversity,” says Van Aken. “But if the Tree of 40 Fruit is collapse, the *streuobstweise* is explosion, returning these varieties to individual trees.”



# Artist Made a Frankentree That Bears 40 Different Fruits

By Ryan Steadman | 07/23/15 4:20pm



A rendering of the Tree of 40 Fruit. (Photo: Courtesy of Sam Van Aken)

Syracuse University professor and artist Sam Van Aken grew up on a farm, but he never thought he'd become the agricultural equivalent of Dr. Frankenstein.

"I hadn't really thought about farming for twenty years," said Mr. Van Aken in his Tedx Talk from last year. That is until he picked up the lease on a 200-year-old stone fruit orchard in Geneva, N.Y. The orchard was one of the last growers of stone fruit trees in New York State, and it became a great opportunity for Mr. Van Aken to preserve a wide variety of ancient and lesser known species of fruit trees.

By using an ancient technique called "chip grafting," Mr. Van Aken began to transform a hearty native plum-tree into a hybrid tree that could bear over 40 different types of stone fruits, including peaches, nectarines, apricots, cherries and almonds.

This wondrous tree looks like any old tree, until spring, when it blossoms with multiple colors of flowers that range from white to fuchsia. Once summer rolls around, the tree starts to bear a plethora of different fruits.

All of the stone fruit tree varieties come from Mr. Van Aken's orchard, where he keeps hard to find varieties of stone fruit trees. One of his favorites is the Greengage plum-tree, which came to the U.S. from France and bears plums that look like Granny Smith apples.



A Tree of 40 Fruit in Newton, Massachusetts. (Photo: Courtesy of Sam Van Aken)

Mr. Van Aken, who is represented in New York by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, plans to use proceeds from the trees (which sell for around \$30,000 each) to create an orchard that will serve as an archive of native and antique stone fruit tree varieties.

As for his Tree of 40 Fruit, as its known, dozens have been planted around the U.S.

"Part of the idea behind the Tree of 40 Fruit was to plant them in locations that people would stumble upon them," Mr. Van Aken told National Geographic.

## Free-for-All Spirit Breezes Into a Vast Art Fair

By ROBERTA SMITH



Art fairs are for art lovers. There's really no way around it. You can say that they demean art, that they're all about commerce. You can complain about the crowds, the bad food, the poor ventilation. I hear you.

And yet if art is something you must have — or think you want to have — in your life, you stand to gain from perusing one or more of the several art fairs that have set down stakes across Manhattan this weekend. Open yourself to the best in them and they become pools of information that can humble, broaden and energize you in significant ways.

Art fairs occur because hundreds of art dealers have decided that these temporary confabs help them raise their profiles and make it easier to find one buyer each for a certain number of artworks. While the dealers seek those individual matches of art and buyer, the rest of us are free, in a sense, to watch: to absorb the art and learn from it, which is another kind of possession.

Which brings us to this year's bracing Armory Show, with booths outfitted by more than 270 galleries and private dealers spread between two piers jutting into the Hudson. It is a behemoth of a fair, the biggest by far of the

weekend's offerings.

Recent Armory buzz has not been good. Despite its size, or maybe because of, the Armory Show has been hemorrhaging important dealers for several seasons. It now has competition from the hip, new Independent art fair in Chelsea and the resurgent Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory uptown. And there's also the increasingly impressive list of dealers here and abroad who simply abstain from all New York fairs. (Others include Volta, Scope, Pulse, Pool, Verge Art Brooklyn, Red Dot, Fountain and this year's newbie, the Dependent.)

All things considered, I had expected to find a dying art fair at river's edge. Instead, the show seems fresher than it has in several years. It has clearly been more revived than diminished by the loss of big-name, blue-chip or white-hot galleries, and has a younger, more egalitarian, free-for-all spirit. Lack of familiarity helps. New York dealers are sparsely represented in the show's contemporary section, and there is a host of first-timers, including 18 galleries from Latin America in this year's Focus section. An unexpected benefit: the vigorous call and response between the contemporary section, on Pier 94, and the modern section created two years ago, on Pier 92, for dealers in more historical material.

The contemporary section has few knock-down-drag-out installations or chest-beating statements. Among the more prominent sights near the entrance, at the booth of Victoria Miro, is a big bright flower sculpture by Yayoi Kusama, the 81-year-old Japanese artist and veteran of Happenings, proceeding as if neither Jeff Koons nor Takashi Murakami ever existed. At White Cube, Damián Ortega contributes "Ulysses Way," a towering assemblage sculpture of a bicycle with a household's worth of objects and appliances tied above its back fender. The German painter Katharina Grosse has

wedged an enormous lyrical abstraction, which seems literally hacked from a wall, into the booth of Galerie Nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder from Vienna.

Toward the center of the pier, Iván Navarro has fenced off a large chunk of empty space with a tall, white neon imitation of wrought iron, courtesy of the Paul Kasmin Gallery, which has set up shop on a nearby bench instead of a booth. And beyond, Sam Van Aken has filled the Ronald Feldman booth with a startling number of young trees, each grafted with several varieties of stone fruits and currently in bloom, part of his “Tree of 40 Fruits” project.

One of the quieter departures from the norm has been orchestrated by Ben Kaufmann, a young Berlin dealer who is presenting a slide show of exhibitions by the 15 artists he represents. Mr. Kaufmann is further working against the dominant model at the Independent, where he is presenting a more conventional display of works by one artist.

Solo shows tend, with some exceptions, to be the high points of a fair, but they are also risky as business ventures, so their frequency and strength here can be taken as a sign of optimism. The Galerie Parisa Kind from Frankfurt is making its Armory debut with small, winsome figurative paintings and drawings by Isabelle Fein. Khastoo, a newcomer gallery from Los Angeles, has a wonderful show of gemlike abstract paintings by Zach Harris, who extends his suggestive motifs into fancifully carved and painted frames.

At Simon Lee, Toby Ziegler is showing luminous pastel updates of selected Bruegel paintings. Stuart Shave/Modern Art has dedicated its space to the visually punchy, mildly ironic modernist abstractions of Ansel Krut, an artist in his early 50s who has never had a solo show in New York.

At Kavi Gupta from Chicago is the latest from Theaster Gates, a latter-day Conceptualist who contributed a collaborative-performance-installation work to the last Whitney Biennial, while the booth of Greengrassi, a London gallery, has been lined with a whirlwind of embossed and gold-patterned paper by Pae White.

But there are also wonderful group selections, one of the most alluring being that of Canada, the stalwart of the Lower East Side, where paintings by Michael Williams, Xylor Jane, Carrie Moyer, Katherine Bernhardt and others establish a rewarding pictorial dialogue with the floor, which is thick with Moroccan rugs (also for sale). At Kerlin disparate paintings by Norbert Schwontkowski, Callum Innes and Mark Francis are elegantly rallied by the oddly appealing sculptures of Isabel Nolan, whose spiraling linear forms elaborate on and domesticate a familiar modernist motif by being carefully stitched in silk. Historical consciousness is blunter at Praz-Delavallade, where Nathan Mabry is showing large terra-cotta heads redolent of Pre-Columbian culture on aluminum pedestals that knock off Donald Judd wall sculptures.

At the booth shared by Franco Noero and Esther Schipper the conversation among works by Lara Favaretto, Henrik Olesen and Gabriel Kuri is fittingly tuned to recycled materials, including paper, the Minimalist cube and money. (Mr. Kuri designed all the Armory’s printed matter and its official canvas bag.)

The distinction at the Armory Show between contemporary and modern — or “New Work by Living Artists” and “Historically Significant Work of the 20th and 21st Centuries” — is even more porous than these phrases from the Armory brochure attest.

Also on Pier 92 the Jonathan O’Hara Gallery has a fabulous display of transfer drawings by Robert Rauschenberg, while downstairs on Pier 94 — the adjoining piers, on different levels, are connected by stairs — I-20 has two striking paintings by Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010), including a little-known portrait from 1955. Upstairs, Frey Norris is giving its all for Wolfgang Paalen (1905-59), the Surrealist-Abstract Expressionist; downstairs, Galerie Crone has a show of hard-edge abstractions from the 1960s by the little-known German artist Georg Karl Pfahler (1926 -2002).

Downstairs too, among the latest efforts of Mindy Shapero, Scott Myles and Jannis Varelas at the Breeder, from Athens, is a small obstreperous collage (paint-soaked cloth on newsprint) from 1966-67 by Vlassis Caniaris, a Greek Arte Povera artist (born in 1928) who deserves a higher American profile. (You can also find two early Caniaris sculptures nearby at Giti Nourbakhsch.)

But upstairs, where the balance tips decisively toward New York dealers — quite a few of whom work privately — overlooked artists and underexposed material definitely dominate. Keep an eye out for the early works of André Masson at Die Galerie and its neighbor, Oriol; the uncharacteristically sinuous Léger-like abstraction from 1939 by Charles Biederman at Meredith Ward; the clutch of juicy interiors by Robert de Niro Sr. at D C Moore; Dan Christensen's jubilant abstractions at Spanierman Modern and the face-off among hard-edge, Op and Color Field abstraction at D. Wigmore.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the modern wing of the Armory Show can sometimes seem as fresh and mind expanding as its contemporary counterpart. Together they seem to say: Beware of your assumptions, historical and otherwise. The present is wild and messy, and the past is not exactly neat.

*The Armory Show runs through Sunday at Piers 92 and 94, at 12th Avenue at West 55th Street, Manhattan; (212) 645-6440, [thearmoryshow.com](http://thearmoryshow.com).*



## Dealers at Armory Look for Independent Identities

Stephanie Cash

Theaster Gates "has a crazy following," said Peter Skvara, of Chicago's Kavi Gupta gallery. Even before the Armory Show's official opening yesterday, all but one of the artist's 11 pieces in the compact booth had sold, along with two in the back room. The pieces include "thrones" made from old shoeshine chairs, and sculptures comprising materials Gates has gutted from buildings and cast in cement blocks. They range in price from \$18,000–30,000. The Brooklyn Museum got in on the action, acquiring *In the Event of Race Riot II* (2011), a fire hose coiled inside a glass case.



**VIEW SLIDESHOW** Sam Van Aken, "Selected works from 'New Edens': Trees of 40 Fruit, 2009 - 2011." Photo: Bill Orcutt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.; Erik Benson, *Brownfield*, 2010. Courtesy Edward Tyler Nahem.;

The Armory seems poised to do well this year, following the recently buoyant London auctions and an art market that, at some levels, defies broader negative economic trends. Last year the fair reported 60,000 visitors, 56 percent of whom came from outside New York City, and over one-third from other countries. Located again on Piers 92 and 94, the Armory runs through Sunday. Between the original contemporary fair and its Modern offspring, there are 275 exhibitors, including a special section devoted to Latin American galleries that adds nice variety to the mix.

But a lot of people, speaking off the record, have been down on the Armory since last year. The once scrappy downtown fair that started in the once scrappy Gramercy Park Hotel has become the fair that everyone loves to hate. Depending on who you ask, that might have something to do with its godforsaken location, its lack of identity or its endless disorienting rows of booths-or the fact that it was bought, in 2007, by Merchandise Mart Properties, which mounts 300 trade shows per year, ranging from gift and furniture shows to the lackluster Art Chicago.

Then there's the fair fatigue and visual overload, which isn't helped by the fact that there is so much to see in so short a time. As dealer Alexander Grey puts it, "My dream fair would have 30 galleries." And that's exactly what some of the newer fairs are offering. In fact, the buzz at the Armory was the Independent, launched last year by dealer Elizabeth Dee and Darren Flook of London's Hotel gallery. It kicks off tonight in the former Dia building in Chelsea.

Instead of gossip about who didn't make it in to the prestigious Armory, the talk this year is about who opted out. Some major names have decamped for other fairs (David Zwirner, Pace, Emmanuel Perrotin), leaving room for smaller, younger galleries-which, after all, is what the fair was originally about.

Art advisor and former dealer Stefano Basilico, admiring an acid green gouache by Sigmar Polke at Galleri Bo Bjerggaard of Copenhagen, described the fair as "cacophonous." Art Basel is just as large, he observed, but the booths are typically larger, the aisles wider and the exhibitors pack less in.

One exhibitor that cut down on the visual clutter was Paul Kasmin. Both alluring and repelling, the gallery's booth was a

non-booth. Kasmin turned its space over to Chilean artist Iván Navarro, who surrounded the unadorned area with a white neon fence. Inspired by Robert Barry's 1969 show at Sperone Westwater in Turin, which consisted solely of a "Closed" sign on the gallery's facade, Navarro's *The Armory Fence* can be bought in its entirety for \$360,000, or in 7-foot segments that go for \$40,000. "It's like an editioned work," says the gallery's Hayden Dunbar, who noted that in addition to the 25 meters of fence in the Armory piece, "there's another 75 meters that can be sold in varying quantities." Navarro's exhibition of neon-and-mirror works opens on Friday at Kasmin's Chelsea location.

Solo shows help stave off the glazing-over caused by too much looking. CRG is smartly displaying large-scale watercolor and pencil drawings by Cleveland native Steven Bindernagel. (Installation illustrated below.) The colorful compositions are a mash-up of references, ranging from architecture to crystals. During the preview, two had sold for \$12,000 each, two were on reserve and a handful of smaller pieces had sold for \$3,500 each. Small unframed works can still be had for a bargain \$1,000. In 2012, Bindernagel will have his first show with CRG, which recently relocated to a street-level space in the former Dia building.

Ronald Feldman devoted its booth to a veritable greenhouse by Sam Van Aken. The artist has grafted various trees and plants together to create strange hybrids: for instance, a tree that might be able to grow peaches, plums, cherries, nectarines and apricots. Thirteen of these creations are on view, priced \$5,000–12,000. So far one buyer had enough confidence in his green thumb to take a chance.

Over (or up, if you take the rickety-looking temporary stairs) at the Modern section of the Armory—which arguably increases the Armory's lack of identity—the atmosphere is decidedly mellower, even staid. It's definitely the place to go if you want to take a breather, as opposed to the jam-packed lounge for the seemingly countless VIPs. And take my advice: bring your own water and snacks.

But that's not to say that there isn't a lot of great work to be found there. The pier is nominally "modern." Many contemporary artists can be found here too. At DC Moore, a 54-piece work from 2006 by Whitfield Lovell, consisting of portrait drawings and playing cards, priced over \$275,000, had already been placed on reserve by an institution. Lovell will be included in "Never the Same Twice," a group show at the gallery of artists who work in multiples, opening Mar. 17.

Also on offer at DC Moore is a selection of paintings by visionary painter Charles Burchfield, whose market continues to grow, boosted by the traveling survey curated by Robert Gober and which originated at the Hammer. According to Bridget Moore, "there's a new group of collectors who have discovered him." Priced \$100,000 and up, one of six works had sold. The gallery now also represents the estate of Abstract Expressionist Robert de Niro, Sr., and has three colorful canvases ranging from \$40,000 to \$65,000.

Edward Tyler Nahem, which has been beefing up its contemporary program over the past few years, had sold a large "collage painting" by Erik Benson for \$30,000. Benson makes his painstakingly detailed scenes by pouring paint onto glass, letting it dry, and then cutting it into various elements, such as bricks or construction fencing, and collaging them onto the canvas. Smaller works in the back room are going for \$3,000–17,000. Benson, who, like Iván Navarro, used to show at the defunct Williamsburg gallery Roebling Hall, will have his first show with Nahem in September.

Benjamin Godsill, curatorial associate at the New Museum, enjoyed Gabriel Kuri's works at Esther Schipper (Berlin) and Franco Noeri (Turin), particularly the artist's "light touch that makes you focus on things you might otherwise miss." It's a quality he used to describe this year's fair in general: "There are more small works, not slight but intimate."

Overall, the consensus seems to be, as Godsill put it, "I haven't been hit over the head by anything or anyone."

Tuesday, January 21, 2014 By [Kathleen Haley](#)

# A Change in Weather



In the exhibition "Acadia," 20,000 cubic feet of air was compressed at Acadia National Park in Maine and moved to inflate more than 60, 10' meteorological balloons. As the balloons deflate or burst the atmosphere of the museum is changed.

Artist Sam Van Aken was curious about the effects of weather on body and mind.

So he is transforming the atmosphere inside the Munson–Williams–Proctor Arts Institute's (MWPAI) Museum of Art in Utica—at least for a little while.

The associate professor's exhibition, "[A Hole in the Sky](#)," explores altering matter and mood through his work that includes the installation of giant weather balloons filled with crisp Maine sea air inside the museum's Edward W. Root Sculpture Court. The exhibition, which was commissioned by the art museum specifically for the space, began in November and runs through Feb. 23.

"It's all air from another place that's been brought into the middle of the museum," says Van Aken, who teaches in the sculpture program in the [College of Visual and Performing Arts](#). "Then what's happening is, through the three months of the exhibition the balloons pop and deflate, and the goal is to 'change the weather or change the atmosphere' of the space."

The 60, 10-foot balloons are an impressive site.

“Most of it is a visual phenomenon seeing these enormous forms in this state. It’s more of a gesture that the atmosphere changes,” says Van Aken, who teaches intermediate and advance sculpture classes and co-teaches the graduate course “Practicing in Public.”

The MWPAI project is composed of two parts: “Acadia,” the sculpture of 10-foot weather balloons, and “Peanut Butter and Dead Fish,” an accompanying exhibition of visual pieces that change the atmosphere of the individual, their psychological state, by creating auras or a change in psychological state.



Suspended from the ceiling is a crescent-shaped aluminum armature that holds 60 25-watt lights. These lights flicker at random rates and produce the Purkinje effect. When one stands in front of it with eyes closed the photic driving of the light causes optical hallucinations.

The title piece is a suspended framework that holds 60, 25-watt lights, which flicker at random. When standing in front of the installation, with eyes closed, the flashing light causes optical hallucinations.

Van Aken also wanted the exhibition to change the atmosphere at times above the MWPAI. On opening night, a skywriter flew over the institute and created a “False Cloud.”

In December, a Twin-Prop plane flew through an altocumulus cloud to cause the super-cooled water droplets to fall as rain. The occurrence created a Hole in the Sky, which produces the distinctive rays of twilight breaking through the gray fall sky.

Van Aken’s fascination with the state of weather grew as part of another project, “Tree of 40 Fruit.” For this work he grows grafted fruit trees, each tree having the capacity to grow more than 40 different types of stone fruits, including peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, cherries and almonds.

With an opportunity to exhibit the work at the Armory Show in New York City, Van Aken needed the trees to blossom in March. By bringing them inside and providing enough heat and light, he forced the blossoms.

He then began thinking about the impact of the atmosphere change on the trees and the challenge of the harsh Syracuse winters.

"I kind of imagined myself as the tree and then taking it even further," Van Aken says. The idea of changing the weather has been central to every culture, from tribal rituals to weather modification such as cloud seeding. And a large concern is also about climate change.

"I was using the weather as a metaphor for something almost like a song, where weather becomes this metaphor for mood and emotion, but weather is also a condition, it is the state of things," Van Aken says.

For the Utica exhibition, Van Aken rented an industrial air condenser and traveled to Acadia National Park in Maine, where he taught at the University of Maine. "I wanted to get the smell of the air, and by condensing it, I was able to draw all the moisture and impurities out of it to capture the ocean, pine smell," he says.

At the museum, he used a compressor to infuse the air into the balloons, which are a type of meteorological balloon that is used, for example, in Buffalo where they are released to test the upper air atmosphere.



A skywriter was used to fly over the Munson Williams Proctor Art Institute and create a false cloud.



“The balloons are deflating, and by the time the exhibition closes, the exhibition will essentially disappear,” says Van Aken.

Van Aken’s project was perfectly suited to the art museum’s two-story skylit interior court, says Mary Murray, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art.

“There was something magical and also playful as the installation was taking place, with enormous balloons bouncing into their places and then glowing at different times of the day through the late-autumn and winter light,” Murray says.

Visitors are struck by the transformation of the space—and even smaller guests are captivated. “Little kids love this installation,” she says.

The changeable nature of the exhibition has made it especially dynamic. “The weather balloons are deflating as the weeks progress, so there is something poignant about it too,” Murray says.

The exhibition has been all that Van Aken imagined—very much comparable to the renderings he did to represent the project to Murray and the art museum’s director. “It looked pretty outrageous, and then actually to pull off the installation, they were surprised—but in a good way,” he says.

# This One Tree Grows 40 Different Types Of Fruit, Is Probably From The Future

By Katherine Brooks

07/24/2014

If you're wondering how our food will be grown eons from now, a good place to start your research might be -- not so surprisingly -- in the contemporary art world.

One need only visit the website of one Sam Van Aken, an American artist who's made it his mission to combine the aesthetic of sculpture with the agricultural wonder of planting trees. The literal fruits of his labor turn images of hybridization and metamorphosis, familiar themes in art, on their heads.



His project is called "Tree of 40 Fruit," an ongoing series in which Van Aken creates Frankenstein plants that have the capability of producing 40 different types of stone fruit. To do so, he grafts together different varieties of fruit-bearing trees, a method that might seem at home in the laboratory of a mad scientist.

At first, Van Aken combines a few types onto the root structure of a single tree, allowing his "working tree" to mature to at least two years old. Then he proceeds to add more varieties to the limbs in a sequence called "chip grafting." Van Aken inserts a budding branch into an incision in the working tree -- with a

piece of tape, no less -- and allows the limb to function as a normal appendage of the plant. The process takes about 5 years per tree, and has yielded 16 "Trees of 40 Fruit" thus far.



*Tree 31 – 21C Museum-Hotel Bentonville, Arkansas*

"I was able to see the grafting process while growing up on a farm and have always been fascinated by how one living thing cut could be cut inserted into another living thing and continue to grow," Van Aken explained to HuffPost. "As this fascination evolved I came to see grafting used as a metaphor for sexuality such as in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and the modern man such as *Frankenstein*. Like the forms in these books I wanted the tree to be the beginning of a narrative. A form that when seen causes one to create narrative."



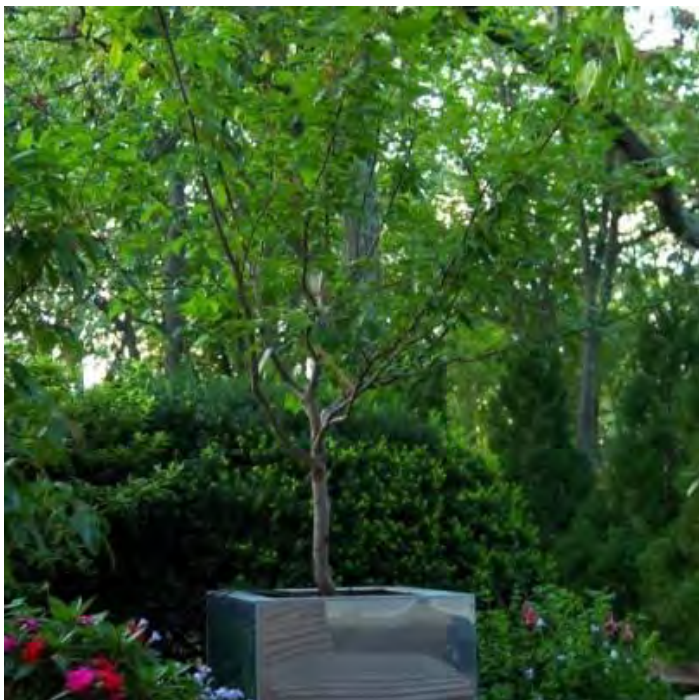
*Tree 69 – Louisville, Kentucky*

From peaches, plums and cherries to apricots, nectarines and almonds, Van Aken's blossoming artworks can be seen in cities across the United States, such as Santa Fe, New Mexico; Short Hills, New Jersey;

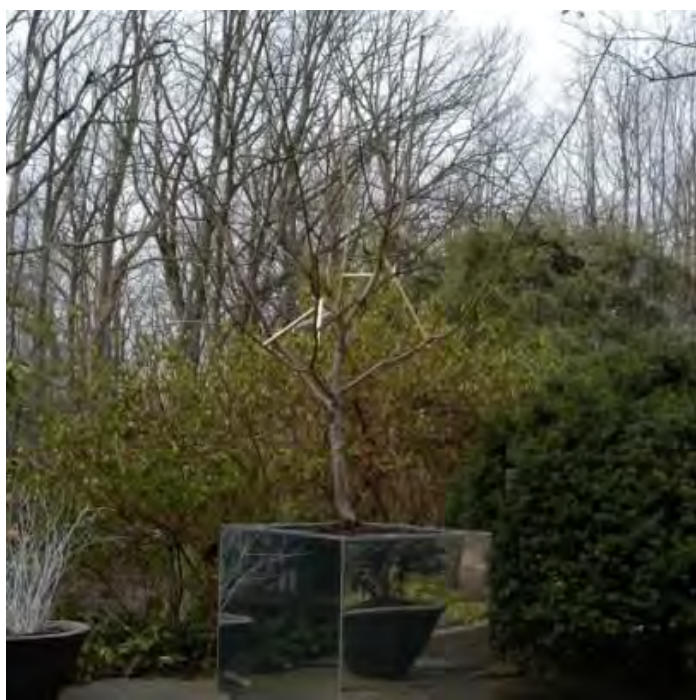


Louisville, Kentucky and Pound Ridge, New York. While the trees appear like any other tree for much of the year, their true beauty bursts forth in the spring, when hues of pink and purple take over. Once the summer months roll around, the 40 fruits arrive.

Take a look at some of the photos of Van Aken's trees here and let us know your thoughts on his art-meets-science endeavor in the comments. Head over to the artist's website for more of his work. As he mentioned in our exchange, his fascination with leaves and trunks runs deep: "I could probably go on for days about the trees."



*Tree 35 – Short Hills, New Jersey*



*Tree 71 – Pound Ridge, New York*







In *The Multiple Deaths of Willem Dafoe*, sculptor Sam van Aken compiles the death scenes of Willem Dafoe from 13 of his movies and takes the deathwatch to its “absurd but logical conclusion” — a funeral. On six black and white television sets surrounded by white floral arrangements, the death scenes from the Dafoe classics run simultaneously. Mozart’s *Requiem* melds with sights and sounds of violence; electrical cords ascend to the ceiling.



## Sculptor Sam van Aken explores the twilight zone between fact and fiction in our media-saturated culture



*Hybrids*, a 2005 sculptural installation at the University of Massachusetts and then at UMaine, featured a forest of 20 vertical structures affixed with small Plexiglass shelves arranged in the spiral pattern of a helix. On each shelf perched a piece of mutated plastic fruit — hybrids like peach-banana and apple-strawberry. *Hybrids* takes up the contradiction between genetic modification and natural reproduction. As an adult, Sam van Aken was surprised to learn that genetic modification is increasingly part of the production and processing of the foods we consume. As a child growing up on a Pennsylvania farm, the annual grafting of cherry trees in his grandfather’s orchard mystified him.



By Margaret Nagle  
Installation photos by Sam van Aken

# Altered States

**J**ust how many times can a man die? Thirteen, according to Sam van Aken. One man died in Los Angeles in 1985 and in Vietnam in '86. The same man was crucified near Jerusalem in 1988, was decapitated when he fell on his sawed-off shotgun in Big Tuna, Texas, two years later, and succumbed to hunger, cold and madness after 11 days subsisting on cheese crackers while ice fishing on Maine’s Moosehead Lake in '92.

He also died in St. Martin, Prague, Beijing and New York City.

So how many times can we watch a man die before becoming jaded to the macabre, trapped in the twilight between fiction and fact?

That’s the real question, says van Aken, an artist whose multimedia sculptural installations like *The Multiple Deaths of Willem Dafoe* are increasingly capturing the attention of art critics and audiences.

“I don’t like to be didactic; I’m not trying to teach anybody,” says van Aken, an assistant professor of art at the University of Maine. “But I do want to engage them in questioning. My works deal with historical themes — art, life, death, love. I’m trying to look at how technology and mass media change our perceptions about those themes. By involving viewers in questioning, I’m involving them in how popular culture and mass media are impacting them.”

Van Aken has a heightened awareness of the subtle, subversive

and sublime media-saturated cultural influences and life experiences that shape us. He is driven by inspiration and intuition. His work explores that increasingly indistinguishable gap between fiction and reality, and leaves us questioning not only what we know, but how we know it.

Take *The Multiple Deaths of Willem Dafoe*. In 13 movies, including *Platoon*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Spider-Man*, the actor dies one horrific cinematic death after another. Yet viewers unconsciously suspend reality to watch the actor rise from the dead to take on another role.

In his multimedia installation, Van Aken takes this deathwatch to

its “absurd but logical conclusion” — a funeral. On six black and white television sets surrounded by white floral arrangements, the death scenes from the Dafoe classics run simultaneously. Mozart’s *Requiem* melds with sights and sounds of violence; electrical cords ascend to the ceiling.

*The Multiple Deaths of Willem Dafoe*, which debuted in Boston in 2003, prompted an e-mail from the actor to van Aken in which he quipped that he hoped the streak of death scenes was not a career trend.

For van Aken, the career trend is Marshall McLuhan-ist — the medium is the message.



# Altered States

“Art is not necessarily an object or something contained; it’s something between the viewer and artwork itself,” he says. “I approach art as a situation, rather than creating an image and having people perceive it. Through this, the viewer becomes more involved in the act of questioning.”

**t**heoretical aspects of ’60s and ’70s Minimalism, as well as his working-class background, sculpted van Aken’s psyche and now echo in his work.

As a double major in communication and fine art at Slippery Rock University, van Aken learned about semiotics — the study of symbols — and the aesthetic model of communication. He dabbled in video production and learned graphic design, which ultimately landed him an opportunity to study and work in London in 1994.

In those early days, van Aken admits, the works of American Minimalist sculptors like Donald Judd appeared to him to be “just geometric forms.” Yet he knew there had to be something more to the movement. Like Alice determined to get through the tiny door to Wonderland, van Aken spent afternoons in London’s Tate Modern galleries. Ironically, the paintings of the Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko were van Aken’s bottles labeled “DRINK ME,” giving him access to a world where he now speaks the language fluently through his art.

“The Mark Rothko paintings were big colored fields with nothing representational. All these large blocks. I sat there an hour before I finally realized I was lost in them. I was providing the imagery and the works, the meditative state. After that, it was easy to see how Minimalist art works. It’s based on the visual, but also on the physical perception.”

Van Aken’s Minimalist approach expanded in the mid-’90s when he traveled to Poland as part of an international artist

exchange. There, he met Poland’s radical, Modernist artists who had just emerged from under the thumb of communism. They had spent years subverting the government and flirting with imprisonment, making art without traditional materials and holding one-night exhibitions in friends’ living rooms.

“From them, I realized how important art is,” says van Aken, who worked and later studied at the State Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan, Poland. “For years, they provided an alternative perspective of what the government was feeding everyone. I borrow a lot of that philosophy in what I do.”

By 1996, Van Aken had moved to New York City to take up his career in graphic design. But he was restless, increasingly questioning his life, until one day he stashed \$500 in his pocket, threw two suitcases and his fly-fishing gear into his car and drove west. He

was headed for adventure and open spaces in the tradition of the Zane Grey novels he read as a kid.

He stayed in Oregon for three years. It’s there that his education, travel and life experiences coalesced, and his art began to take shape.

For van Aken, the many facets of minimalism that some critics initially deprecated are the very characteristics he champions. “Minimalism was initially criticized as being too theatrical because it required a viewer to perform with the work in order to get anything out of it,” he says. “Yet that’s the magic — the strongest element — of it. I get caught in the performative aspect, the interactivity that’s close to what we have going on in a technologically driven culture.”

**V**an Aken is a young artist with the sense to tap life experiences that leave indelible impressions and the sensibility to articulate the unspoken. Mostly, he knows that art has the power to “change the way people see.”



The importance of images in mass culture prompted Sam Van Aken to look back at the first movie he saw in a theater, Steven Spielberg’s 1977 classic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Van Aken saw it when he was 5. For his most recent installation project, *Becoming*, van Aken spent more than two years taking on the persona of Roy Neary, the Richard Dreyfuss character in *Close Encounters*. Van Aken gained 30 pounds, grew out his sideburns and retraced the protagonist’s pilgrimage from Muncie, Ind., to Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming. For the reenactment, van Aken even bought an ’86 Buick station wagon. *Becoming*, features a living room movie set, complete with the sculpted mountain, stills in which van Aken takes on Dreyfuss’ poses, video of the artist’s journey and film footage — even the \$300 Buick. In this process of *Becoming*, van Aken noticed that he wasn’t so much recreating the movie as he was creating something new — constructing an identity, a life, a world with its own props, sets and supports. But in these recreations, he could never quite get it right, and from the humor and absurdity in his failure, he began to draw a comparison with Don Quixote, whom van Aken sees as not so much delusional as much as “purposely taking up a fiction to make up for the inadequacies he perceived in the world around him. From that point on, the project focused on those gaps between fiction and reality.





# Altered States

“How does the media determine our different psychological states — shock, terror, grief — or our intellectual footing?” says van Aken. “To what extent is media shaping our reality?”

After 9-11, Van Aken heard eyewitness accounts describing the World Trade Center disasters as being “just like the movies.” That’s when he started looking even closer at derealization, the altered state in which reality feels unfamiliar.

“Movies become yardsticks by which we measure our lived experience,” van Aken says. “Trends in our culture, all disseminated through the media, often are adopted and not even considered. If our day-to-day lives aren’t equivalent to movie dramas, people feel inadequate. That gets to celebrity worshiping. That also places an importance on images — including images of ourselves as reflected in those throughout mass culture.”

For van Aken, those images started with the 1977 Steven Spielberg film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, on which the sculptor based his most recent and monumental work, *Becoming*. The piece, which debuted at UMaine and was installed at the Colby College, allowed people to “question their own identities as constructs,” says van Aken.

His next exhibition is June 7–July 30 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Portland. *From Baja to Bar Harbor: Transnational Contemporary Art* will feature large-scale video and installation works by three emerging artists from different corners of North American: Michele O’Marah of Los Angeles, Julio Morales of San Francisco and van Aken.

“I’m trying to convey a perception of the world,” van Aken says. “It may sound like an old-school artist, but it’s a form of communication on a level that transcends logic and rational thought, that touches people through sight, sound and three-dimensional form.

“Fluxus artist Robert Filliou once said, ‘art is what makes life better than art.’ Art does that for me,” says van Aken, “and a lot more. It’s hard to imagine not doing it.” ■



*Oh My God* is Sam van Aken’s response to Sept. 11. “Seeing the second plane fly into the tower over and over on television was numbing,” says van Aken. “What also stood out was a woman’s voice in the background, screaming ‘oh my God.’” Van Aken began collecting “oh my God” sound clips from the news, action movies, sitcoms and porno films. He also started buying used stereo speakers of all shapes and sizes. The first installation featured 180 speakers stacked like bricks, each eerily whispering those three little words. After nine minutes, the sound has built to a cacophony — a dissonant wailing wall of life’s emotion.



“I don’t necessarily approach art from a logical or a conceptual standpoint. If I do, there’s no transcendent quality for me or the viewer. Intuitively, I know what I want to say; logically, I may not have a grasp on it. There are a lot of surprises for me in the pieces. It’s a real introspective process, but I’m also researching the world around me to find a way to articulate it. I operate from states or a certain feel, looking around to find what something means, where it exists.”  
Sam van Aken

Photo by Michael Mardosa