

Before Manhattan was colonized by Dutch imperialists in the early 1600s, it was home and companion to the Munsee, Lenape, and Wappinger nations. The island's name comes from the Munsee Lenape word *manaháhtaan*—which has been translated to mean “the place where we get bows” or “the place for gathering the wood to make bows”—so called because of the grove of hickory trees at the southern tip. Ideal for making bows, these trees act as the foundation for Manhattan's identity. Its very name implies humans working with each other and their environment to provide the resources everyone—human or otherwise—needed to thrive.

Today, New York City is home to nearly nine million people across the 300 square miles that include Manhattan, The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. As the most densely-populated urban metropolis in the country, it's no surprise that its residents live with only 146 square feet of greenspace per person (for comparison, residents in Chicago have 189 square feet, 224 in San Francisco, and 856 in Portland, OR).¹ So how do New Yorkers make the most of the five million trees around them? Brooklyn-based artist Sari Carel combines digital, interactive information with analog, cameraless photographic methods to explore the necessarily reciprocal relationship between a city and its non-human inhabitants.

Originally conceived as a part of KODA's Land and Environment residency in 2021, Carel's “City of Trees” series transforms municipal data into a collaborative, participatory, and multifaceted project that illustrates why trees are so important in a city. “Shade is a political issue,” Carel told me over the phone. Underserved communities have significantly fewer trees—as much as sixty-five percent less than wealthy neighborhoods—which leads to the development of heat islands: treeless urban areas that can be ten degrees hotter than shadier neighbors. For “City of Trees,” Carel used the Parks Department's New York City Street Trees online map to produce cyanotypes that act as poetic records of an urban forest.

Inspired by the nineteenth-century cyanotypes made by botanist and photographer Anna Atkins, Carel continues the lineage of documenting the natural world with curiosity and wonder. Though the works “City of Trees” read more like mid-twentieth-century modernist abstraction, each cyanotype maintains an indexical relationship to nature. Many of the shapes are familiar—city blocks, roads, highways—joined by an unusual percussion of white dots on the characteristic deep blue cyanotype. Each dot represents a tree in the urban forest. Carel embellished some of the dots with red paint to denote which specific trees she had either visited or researched, adding a layer of personal narrative to the minimalist compositions. In addition to the prints, Carel also organized a tree care and art making workshop, which engaged New Yorkers of all ages in acts of stewardship.

In *The Sun is a Mouth of Blue* at Melanie Flood Projects, Carel continues the underlying conceptual current of “City of Trees,” this time examining something New York and other cities have far too much of: trash. For decades, we have been fed a powerful myth that trash can cease to exist. But, in reality, human refuse only gets shipped to other states or countries (not to mention the escaped bits that pollute water, land, and air). “Trash has no destination,” Carel explained. “It just continually cycles around different locations. Art can help us engage with these marginal objects in a more intentional and continuous way.” The exhibition includes intimate ceramic and plastic waste sculptures, which reference the material composition of landfills: locations often situated on clay heavy soil to prevent seepage and contamination of soil and water. A new series of cyanotypes, printed outside Carel's studio in Brooklyn, offer a more direct visual reference to Atkins's meticulous records of plants; plant specimens join bits of garbage within the frame, all beautifully rendered in shades of blue. By presenting the natural and synthetic materials together, Carel gives a more truthful depiction of urban life—a world where biological and industrial objects exist in tandem, but not harmony. Whether it's a bit of plastic bag, a bottle cap, or a hickory leaf, Carel engages with her materials in a direct, open-ended, and intimate way. Despite the abstract aesthetic, these are not abstract concepts for her. Instead, they represent the very real stakes of learning to thrive in a city.

The exhibition's title is borrowed from the poem Twenty-First Century Ecology by Patrick Pritchett.

Based in Brooklyn, New York, much of multimedia artist Sari Carel's work focuses on translation from one modality to another. Her projects consider interspecies communication, relationships between people and place, and how the senses inform our perception. Also an environmental activist, Sari is a sharp observer of ecosystems, be they natural or human.

Carel's work has been exhibited and screened internationally in venues such as Artists Space, Dumbo Arts Festival, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, and Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York; LAX Art and Young Projects in Los Angeles; Genia Schreiber University Gallery in Tel Aviv, and Haifa Museum of Art in Israel and Locust Projects in Miami. She has been awarded numerous fellowships and residencies, including AIR at the Stundars Museum, Finland; AIR Vienna; the Socrates Sculpture Park Artist Fellowship and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Residency on Governors Island, New York; the Bundanon Residency, in Australia, KODA's Land and Environment Residency on Governors Island, New York. Recent exhibitions include *The Coyote After-School Program* at Melanie Flood Projects, Portland, OR and *The Shape Of Play*, a public art project in Boston's North End, commissioned by JARTS and curated and produced by Now & There.

¹ <https://www.geotab.com/urban-footprint/>



Before the Circle (1), 2022
cyanotype, tea, water color, pencil,
paper 13 3/4h x 19 1/4w x 1 1/2d in
SC_006



Before the Circle (2), 2022
cyanotype, tea, water color, pencil,
paper 13 3/4h x 19 1/4w x 1 1/2d in
SC_008



Before the Circle (3), 2022
cyanotype, tea, water color, pencil,
paper 13 3/4h x 19 1/4w x 1 1/2d in
SC_009



City of Trees, 2021
12 hand made cyanotype, gouache
14" x 8" each
SC_036



Gray Reverb, 2022
self drying clay, gravel, plastic,
metal, pennies dimensions variable
SC_022



Kin (Assembly), 2022
ceramics, variable plastic parts, self drying
clay, gouache dimensions variable
SC_037



The Sun is a Mouth of Blue, 2022
cyanotype, tea, plastic, acrylic glue, paper
13 3/4h x 10 3/4w in
SC_023



The Sun is a Mouth of Blue (Morse Code), 2022
felt, plastic, pennies, pretzels, twigs dimensions
variable
SC_027



Useful Circle 1, 2022
color pencil on paper
12h x 9w in
SC_025



Useful Circle 2, 2022
color pencil on paper
12h x 9w in
SC_026