

ARTSEENMAY 2026

Katie DeGroot: *The Arboreal Life* By Dan Cameron

The Arboreal Life

Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

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New York

You don't have to squint to get a glimpse of the subtextual human figure lurking throughout Katie DeGroot's tree paintings in her current exhibition, *The Arboreal Life*. The two narrow trunks in *Chit Chat* (2026) lean toward each other with familiar intimacy, their slender branches touching like the casual embrace of a long-married couple. The solo specimens in *Opinionated* and *Opinionated II* (both 2025) appear to be engaged in a heated disagreement, replete with finger-pointing and postures associated with righteous indignation. Things get even more animated in *Family Matters* (2025), where a tangle of branches from different species brings to mind the tenderly complex overlap between parents, offspring, and their assorted kindred arrangements.



DeGroot spent her adolescence and early adulthood in the Chicago area, and much of the art that she produced in her formative years was heavily informed by the figurative tradition loosely associated with the acclaimed Hairy Who generation. In fact, it wasn't until she left New York City to live on her great-grandparents' farm in upstate Fort Edward, when the sudden

shortage of live human models in the deeply rural region made a change in direction necessary. On regular walks in the wooded areas adjacent to her home, DeGroot began noticing that certain tree limbs had such striking forms that it was as if they had personalities. With the artist's help, branches were soon finding their way back to her studio, where she began developing compositions based on the way they seemed to intermingle, leading to the striking *Cocktail Party Vlll (couples)* (2023) arrangement in her last exhibition in 2024.

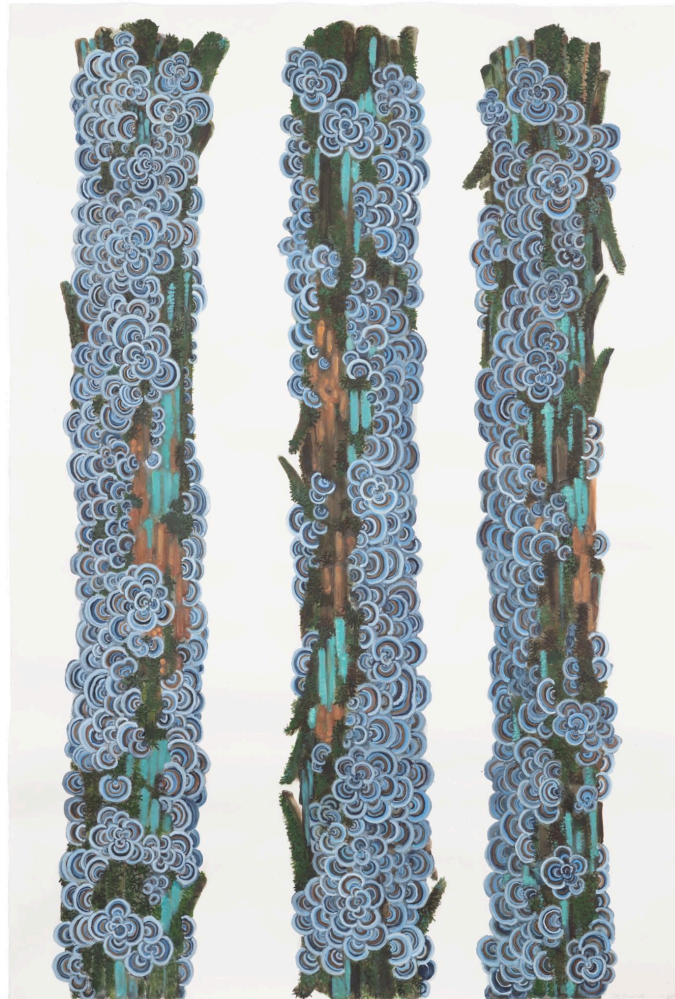


Installation view: *Katie DeGroot: The Arboreal Life*, Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, New York, 2026. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

DeGroot's eye is invariably drawn to the linear twists and abrupt angles of the boughs she assembles, but she is still more besotted by their colors and textures. Dead insofar as they are no longer attached to living trees, the branches are richly adorned with fungi, mosses and lichen, whose subdued palette gives the artist plenty of room to luxuriate over the details of all that fluorescence. Her preference for using opaque watercolors, which she deftly combines with the translucent variety, enables DeGroot to achieve a difficult balance between close observation of nature and the sort of poetic license that can transform each stick into a distinct individual, whose unique features the artist might return to over and over again.

There is another element in DeGroot's art that often goes unremarked, which is a quality of self-imposed discipline by way of solitude. Her small village of Fort Edward, two hundred miles due north of Manhattan and located directly on the Hudson River, is a bit too remote and deep into the boondocks to fully partake in the recent Hudson Valley renaissance, which also means that there are few social distractions from the artist's daily life of focused endeavor. This might explain why, underneath their considerable

aesthetic appeal, the paintings possess a starker dimension connected to survival, isolation and the ongoing vicissitudes of life along a riverbank. Things are still dying out there, and the implicit meditation on human mortality within DeGroot's paintings can, in the breakdown of the decaying plant material into usable food for other organisms, remain a metaphor about cycles of life and the continuity of nature.



Katie Degroot, *The Royal We*, 2025. Watercolor and opaque watercolor on paper, 72 × 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

In one of the most resonant works, *The Royal We* (2025), DeGroot approaches her subject from a slightly different direction that may portend what lies ahead in her work. Here, any previous effort at staying within a framework of botanical accuracy gives way to a species of natural mysticism, in which the thick, colored outlines describing the clusters of oyster-shaped fungi that cover four-fifths of the branches' surface are transformed into concentric ornamental rings composed of dozens of distinct shades and tones. Of those fragments of wood still visible, some

parts appear charred while others are still brown, and several patches emanate a light cerulean blue, indicating that the oxidation process has begun taking up where the fungi left off. But it's actually from a middle distance that the narrative being told in this work becomes one of totemic severity. Three regal figures stand side by side without touching, despite their appearance making it clear that the solidity which was once their defining feature is quickly being supplanted by the desiccated bundle of fuel and chemicals that they're in the process of becoming. For us, paying witness to the decaying remains of something that was recently alive and fertile seems as apt a metaphor as any for what it feels like to be attentive to the moment in world history that we're living in today.