



Megaflora and the Forest of Venice by Jacopo Galimberti

Alice Channer's work is often talked about in terms of process. Across her diverse oeuvre, a sense of tangible proximity to materiality, mechanical procedure, and physical transformation generates an awareness of the works' existence in time and coming into being. That is, one experiences time *vis-à-vis* fabrication, construction, casting, etc. There is a sort of empathy that allows the viewer to feel connected to, or at least to envision, what the materials have gone through to reach their current state, installed in a gallery or a museum, shaped into certain, often representative, forms, with an artist's name attached to them. The installation of *Megaflora* at the Fondaco dei Turchi/Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia is not an exception. Approaching the work, one gets a sense of curious involvement and gentle sensitivity in response to the vulnerability of a sculpture that lets one see how it was made. And yet, the scale and texture of the piece, which read initially as the trunk of a tree, go beyond these familiar aesthetics to reveal something of the social history of the ground the work stands upon.

Despite its tree-like presence, *Megaflora* began with a small bramble, a ten-centimeter-long twig with thorns, that has been three-dimensionally scanned and enlarged into a three-meter-high, sand-cast aluminum, freestanding sculptural form. The work is open at the back, as if the twig has been split along its length, so that the viewer

may walk around and see the thickness of the material that constitutes its form. Textures on the inner surface suggest contact with other materials and the mechanized procedures by which it was shaped from the inside. The outer surface of the work bears evidence of the digitization process and 3-D printing, and of the casting process. The bramble has been enlarged proportionally, in the evenly distributed and abstract way that only occurs digitally. So, although we see the natural origins of this work, both as bramble and as tree-trunk, it is, unambiguously, an object born in a digital world. The hollowness of the sculpture may even remind one of the absence of the original twig. This duality does not cause conflict, but is simply an expanded exercise in demonstrating and complicating the multivalent relationships between process and representation.

To viewers more local to Venice, the three-meter aluminum figure presenting as a tree trunk may immediately recall the millions of wooden piles upon which the city is built. Since the fifth century, these original piles have remained in place, supporting the islands' urban surface and pushing away from the mud below. Though Venice is not the only European city to use this technique, it is unique due to the extensiveness and the age of its wooden piles. It is not known exactly how many millions comprise the armature of the city. Trees were taken from Cadore, a mountain range near Venice, and pounded into

the ground by hand, upside down, one by one into the mud in spiraling patterns by thousands of workers called *battipali* (pile hitters). The piles measure from less than one meter to about three-and-a-half meters in length, a range that *Megaflora* sits neatly within. Typically, wooden piles would reach all the way to the bedrock, but this is not the case with Venice. Instead, the muddy, oxygen-free environment into which the piles are tightly packed generates a stabilizing friction that has rendered this structure self-sustaining for more than 1,600 years (modern pile systems that use concrete are generally expected to last about fifty years).¹



Through an element as simple as scale, Channer's *Megaflora* initiates a dynamic, parallel comparison with the piles of Venice in terms of process, materials, and time. Perhaps the most glaring contrast, having to do with the former, is that of authorship. Although some things are known about the *battipali* that constructed Venice's foundation, they are, thanks to their historical distance, unknown. We do not even know how many they were. The multiplicitous anonymity of these workers puts Channer's role as artist into stark relief. Though process and materials are the lenses through which her work is often considered, when looking at a single, aluminum, three-meter, 3-D-enlarged bramble sitting atop millions of upside-down trees pounded into the mud by generations of unknown workers, it becomes apparent that the artist's agency over these processes and materials is also an important element on display. Indeed, Venice's piles have been supporting the city and its civilizations for more than a millennium and a half, but what does *Megaflora* support? This is not a pejorative question, but rather an indication towards an art-historical discursive framework that is not often applied to Channer's work. As Rosanna McLaughlin argues in a catalogue essay related to the artist's survey exhibition, *Heavy Metals/Silk Cut*, Channer tends to leave traces of her multi-step, multi-technology processes on the surfaces of her sculptures that "invite the viewer to find relationships between materials and life forms across millennia."² In the case of *Megaflora*'s installation at Venice's natural history museum, these traces refer instead to Channer's ultimate control and agency—to her choices from the initial selection of a piece of bramble from nature, through the extraction of its image with a 3-D scanner, the manipulation of its form and the construction and aluminum casting of the sculpture, and its ultimate materialization as an artwork.

At the same time, the monumentalized bramble also suggests a fantastical narrative continuity with the piles below, as if it grew up from them, between the cracks of the city's stones. Its hollow, opened form, combined with its scale (a shift from one natural register to another—a twig one holds in their hand to a tree one approaches as another presence) refers to monumental, figurative sculptures that are also hollow because of the metal-casting process. Seen in this way, the visibility of materials and processes in *Megaflora* creates a continuous thread with the history of Venice's wooden armature, suggesting not only the fantasized new outgrowth of trees that have been dead for 1,600 years (seen this way, *Megaflora* would actually be a root, as the trees are pounded into the mud upside down), but also the continuity of an underlying physical world through technologies that emerge historically. Here, one begins to see the thematic link with the Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia, an institution designed to illustrate precisely this approach to history. The sculpture's construction as a monument may be read as a nod to the *battipali*, marking the ongoing and heroic utility of their labor.

Circling back to the wooden piles and their seemingly miraculous longevity, there is a final parallel to be drawn regarding time. The tree trunks below Venice are sustained by a combination of intentional engineering and a fortuitous, local ecosystem created by the tight proximity of the piles to one another and the combination of water and mud. Although bacteria are indeed damaging the wood below the surface, the oxygen-free environment slows this process exponentially. When holes are created by these bacteria, they fill in with water or mud, allowing the piles to maintain their structural integrity.³ So, they are undergoing change—things are moving and acting—but are more or less at homeostasis, able to endure in their role

holding up Venice, while changing within and as a part of the *laguna*. The notable contrast with *Megaflora* is that while, like the piles of Venice, the surface of the “wood” bears the marks of process, these marks and processes are ultimately manifestations of an artist’s hand. Even when they are machine-made, they embody above all else her agency and decisions. In sum, there are two different concepts of process at play here, below and about ground level, respectively: one in which the materials themselves are in a self-sustaining and ongoing transaction generated by their rendering for and existence within a specific environment, and one with a beginning and an end, determined by an artist selecting a twig to become the model of a multi-phase industrial fabrication of an art object. Within this contrast, one sees the distinction between the functional labor of many anonymous workers, producing a structure able to sustain its own maintenance in collaboration with its environment, and the authorship of a single artist who brought into being a three-meter, aluminum sculpture based upon the premise of a bramble. By incorporating these conundrums, this installation of *Megaflora* manages to extend the thematics and aesthetics of process and materials that Channer has explored across her career, furthering the work’s inquiry to involve the built, urban environment and the deep time of unseen processes undergone by trees selected for this role beginning 1,600 years ago.

1 Anna Bressanin, "Mud, water and wood: The system that kept a 1604-year-old city afloat," *BBC* (26 March, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20250324-the-ancient-forest-that-supports-venice>.

2 Rosanna McLaughlin, "The Stitch Unpicker/Die Nahttrennerin," ed. Gschwend, Stephanie (2023) *Alice Channer: Heavy Metals / Silk Cut* (Distanz Verlag, Berlin and Kunstmuseum / Kunsthalle Appenzell), p. 66.

3 Bressanin