

The Angel Oak

Estimated between 1400-1500 years old, the Angel Oak is one of the most haunting trees in the eastern and southeastern seaboard of the United States. A part of the low marshland landscape of Saint John's Island, South Carolina, only half an hour's drive from Charleston, this tree is a natural monument. African American slaves were brought to Saint Johns to work the cotton plantations and their descendants continued to work on the land as farmhands and servants. Named after a white slave-owning family that owned the land, the tree holds great symbolic and spiritual meaning for the African American community on the island. During slavery the tree became part of the community's spiritual life, and oral historians reported visions of angels who appeared in the form of ghosts representing the spirits of murdered slaves.

Charles Brindley came to Saint John's Island in 2010 and since then has completed a series of studies, drawings, and paintings completed on the spot and in his studio. According to the art historian Robert McGrath, Brindley's compositions compress the 65 foot giant tree and its surroundings (including a fence and a parking lot) into an “ageless symbol.” Nothing distracts the viewer from nature and the cultural history associated with it.

The Drawings

“Drawing has defined me as a person and an artist. It is my most fundamental and primordial interpretation of nature.”

Charles Brindley

In a world saturated with technology and virtual reality, an encounter with nature can be a very strange and unfamiliar thing. For Charles Brindley, the direct encounter with nature through drawing is essential to his identity as a person and as a creative being. The two are inseparable. Brindley has been drawing since he went to public school in Nashville where he received lessons from Barbara Shannon Cox. His process is meditative, slow, and focused on fidelity to the subject. Encounters with trees and the landscape are often the source of intensive periods of work which include hours spent outdoors drawing and then additional hours of work in the studio. During the course of a year, he only finishes about ten drawings at the size of 23 x 29 inches. Sometimes it takes him years to complete a drawing, so intense is the process of translating the original encounter into a satisfying composition. Brindley started the two drawings *Fragments of the Seen and Unseen* in 1985 and completed them only weeks before this exhibition opened. These drawings summarize the artist's approach to nature, a long personal journey into aspects of landscape, trees, birds, and the built environment that are both intimately known and forever mysterious.

Charles Brindley's Views of Cheekwood

Charles Brindley's career has been interwoven with Cheekwood for several decades. The current one is his third solo exhibition at Cheekwood following 1982 and 1996. For many years, he also taught drawing and painting classes here. His first sustained series of Cheekwood inspired views dates from 1999-2000 when he created composite drawings of the exterior front façade and boxwood paths and of the Wisteria Arbor. The latter is particularly dramatic with its foreshortening of perspective and interlacing of branches and trellis. Other drawings such as the metal gate at the Cheekwood entrance are detailed and delicate close up views. In recent weeks, Brindley completed a series of “studies” of the chinkapin (or chinquapin) oak at the edge of the Swan Lawn. These are atmospheric drawings that focus on different expressive elements of the oak's trunk and branches. That venerable chinkapin oak was on this property when the Cheeks bought it in the 1920s, and it has many stories to tell.