

Why Are So Many New York Gallery Shows This Winter About Saving the Trees?



BY **ALEX GREENBERGER** January 23, 2026 12:36pm



Matthew Krishanu, *Banyan Tree, Two Boys*, 2025.

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A rich tradition of tree art has sprouted in biennials across the world, with installations composed of saplings, snags, and perennials in various stages of development popping up at seemingly every big art event. (A recent case in point: the centerpiece of last year's inaugural edition of the Sky High Farm Biennial in Upstate New York was a 1972–73 Harrisons piece resembling an orchard featuring actual trees planted in a gallery.) In 2022, the trend spurred *Wallpaper* to **ask**: "Tree art is putting down roots: branching out or barking fad?"

It is now a question worth posing in New York, where more than a few galleries this season have turned over their spaces to arboreally themed shows. In these exhibitions, artists are painting living trees, reusing dead ones, and even using bark as canvas. Branches, leaves, forests, and groves are the true stars of the winter season.

None of this is exactly shocking, of course. Ecologically minded artists have been with us forever, and climate change dominates the headlines like never before, even as conservatives and corporations seek to make the rest of us forget its existence. But the arboreal turn is more than just a referendum on saving the trees. It's also about the value of listening to the earth at all when doing so can feel quietly radical.

Many of these shows went on view as the Trump administration continued to repeal measures intended to protect the environment. (Just this month, for example, the Environmental Protection Agency made the decision to stop tracking the health effects of air pollution.) These exhibitions feel like an implicit response to all that. But it is notable, too, that these exhibitions are not only by Americans—they are by artists from Asia, Latin America, and Europe as well. The call to save the trees is a cross-national one, then. It's also a call to save the world.

Below, a look at five current New York shows themed around trees.

Saodat Ismailova at Swiss Institute



Saodat Ismailova, *Amanat* (still), 2026.

Photo : Courtesy the artist

After **showing at both the Venice Biennale and Documenta** in 2022, Uzbek filmmaker Saodat Ismailova repeatedly returned to Arslanbob, a forest in Kyrgyzstan whose groves produce a large share of the world's walnuts. *Amanat* (2026), the film that resulted from those travels, is less a documentary about the forest than a surrealist evocation of its milieu, replete with many long takes of people who appear to be slumbering on Arslanbob's floor. At one point, a crew of reclining people dressed in white appear in a previously vacant wooded area. It's unclear if they are dead or dreaming, though the forest around them is certainly alive: Ismailova frequently soundtracks her film with the sounds of someone inhaling deeply and exhaling.

Working within a tradition that includes Andrei Tarkovsky, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and other slow cinema pioneers, Ismailova has crafted a film whose leisurely pace and repetitive rhythm demand prolonged viewing. Yet despite *Amanat's* sedateness, the film also proposes Arslanbob as an unsettled realm, a place that has acted as a repository for so much cultural memory while the national borders around it were drawn and redrawn across the centuries. Ismailova's trees bore witness to all that tumult, standing quietly but stoically while their valuable nuts were exported abroad.

Amanat is accompanied by another film installation, *Swan Lake* (2025), whose two channels play clips from films and TV productions produced in Central Asia during the Soviet era. Ismailova described *Swan Lake* to me as the nightmare had by someone who fell asleep beneath a walnut tree in Arslanbob; the installation feels fittingly haunted, and even includes footage of Anatoly Kashpirovsky, a psychotherapist whose hypnotisms were broadcast live from Russia during the late 1980s. *Swan Lake* encourages resistance to such forms of mind control—including by dreaming for oneself. To that end, cozy up in *Arslanbob Under Sun* (2025), a darkened gallery where a sounds installation made with Méliá Roger can be heard, and zone out to the noises of the squawking birds who call Arslanbob's trees home.

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