

*Tree of 40 Fruit: The Michigan Trees*

# SAM VAN AKEN



ELI AND EDYTHE **BROAD ART MUSEUM** AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY  
MSU FEDERAL CREDIT UNION **ARTIST STUDIO SERIES**





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***Tree of 40 Fruit: The Michigan Trees***

Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University  
MSU Federal Credit Union Artist Studio Series

Artists' studios take many forms. Sam Van Aken's studio stretches far beyond the confines of walls into the outdoors, to an orchard growing two-hundred-year-old trees bearing stone fruit.

What's a stone fruit, you ask? Perhaps the most cultivated and consumed stone fruits here in Michigan are cherries, but the list also includes peaches, plums, apricots, and nectarines. All are members of the *Prunus* genus and are commonly referred to as stone fruits because under their sweet (and sometimes tart), juicy flesh you will find a large, hard seed.

A quick Google search for "stone fruit" turns up any number of articles and blog posts that remind us how familiar we are with these fruits: "A Dozen Ways to Serve Stone Fruit," "How to Use the Pits of Stone Fruits," "Stone Fruit Wines," "Five Healthy Reasons to Eat Stone Fruit" . . . clearly we have quite an appetite for them. But you may be less aware of how they are produced and how their cultivation has changed over time. This is where Sam Van Aken's *Tree of 40 Fruit* comes in.

Both a sculptor and a cultivator, Van Aken works in his ever-changing outdoor studio grafting hybridized fruit trees to grow many different varieties of stone fruit on a single tree. These cultivated sculptures prompt us to consider the larger implications of contemporary industrialized fruit production, which favors orchards composed of a single variety. Diversity is virtually absent from these large farms. Heirloom and antique strains that have been nurtured for hundreds, even thousands of years are disappearing with the shift to large-scale monoculture farming methods.

Van Aken's research for *The Michigan Trees* began with old issues of the *Michigan Horticultural Society Bulletin* and the *Michigan State College Agricultural Report* from the 1860s through the 1920s, whose pages he scoured to identify stone fruit trees traditionally grown and developed in the state. He obtained many of those cultivars, then "sculpted" alongside community members in a series of grafting workshops. The grove thus represents a kind of agricultural history of Michigan.

This spring, Van Aken's young saplings will increase in size by a foot or more as they cycle through blooming, budding, and growing leaves. Once mature, each of these living sculptures will bear more than forty different stone fruit varieties, including peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, and cherries.

Art has the power to ask us to look beyond the surface of our daily lives and engage in meaningful conversations. After my many inspiring interactions with the artist as he planned and carried out this project, I realized that for me at least, a trip to the produce section of the grocery store or the farmer's market will never be as before. Van Aken hopes that the same will be true for every visitor: with *Tree of 40 Fruit*, he aspires to encourage dialogue about contemporary food production, the preservation of biodiversity in our food sources, and humankind's relationship to nature.

### Michelle Word

Director of Education



Artist's rendering of a mature, flourishing *Trees of 40 Fruit* in bloom

**Tree of 40 Fruit: The Michigan Trees, 2016**

Site-specific installation

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**Tree of 40 Fruit: The Michigan Trees** is part of the MSU Federal Credit Union Artist Studio Series, making it possible for working artists to visit, educate, and interact with the community.





Appearing as a normal tree for the majority of the year, a *Tree of 40 Fruit* causes a moment of rethinking and questioning when happened upon in spring, as it blossoms in variegated tones of pink, white, and crimson, and then again in summer, when it bears a multitude of fruits.

As the *Tree of 40 Fruit* project has evolved, it has led to new directions in my work and thoughts on everything from transubstantiation to hoaxes to four-dimensional theory. But perhaps most importantly, it has given me an understanding of the great losses in food diversity that have resulted from our shift to agricultural monocultures.

Due to numerous factors, including industrialization, disease, and decreased funding for agricultural research, over the past hundred years we have gone from having ready access to thousands upon thousands of different varieties of fruit to knowing only a few dozen. Heirloom and antique varieties of peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, and cherries are disappearing at a frightening rate, and with them their genetic material, and in many ways our history.

The aim of *The Michigan Trees* is to collect and preserve older varieties once grown and developed throughout the state of Michigan. Thanks to the ancient process of grafting, where a section of a branch from one tree is cut and inserted into the branch of another, each of the trees you see here bears numerous fruits that might otherwise be forgotten. *The Michigan Trees* collapse generations and geography by bringing multiple orchards onto just a few trees.

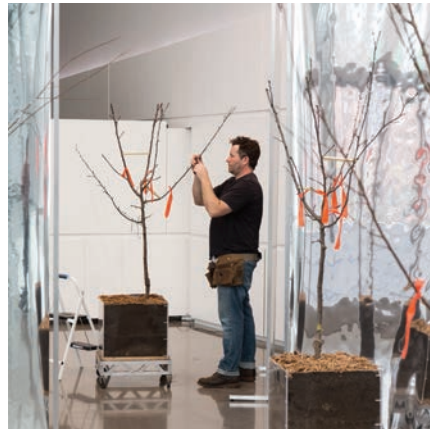
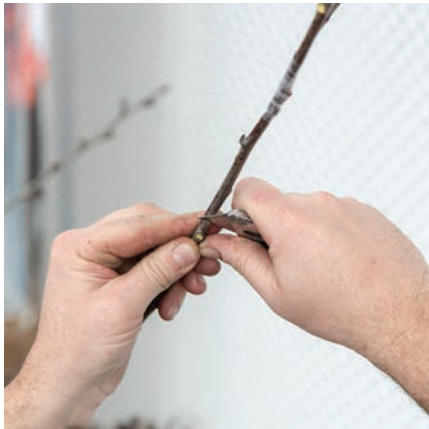
They are a kind of time machine, and an archive of Michigan's agricultural heritage.

### Sam Van Aken



The artist's studio, also a nursery, houses more than two hundred varieties of stone fruit. It is located in Geneva, New York, on the site of an heirloom stone fruit orchard at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station.





Here we see “scions” that have been collected from the different types of trees Van Aken chose to graft; these are short sections of the current season’s growth. Their small buds are cut out and inserted into equal-size chips removed from the branches of a plum tree. Each graft is wrapped in tape to create a miniature greenhouse and hold the join together. The buds then heal to the branches and emerge as new growth.





### TREE OF 40 FRUIT THE MICHIGAN TREES

With Patrick Chubb, 2008 and 2010 Study Series, from the artist

From 2008, the artist Patrick Chubb has worked on the Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, where he is currently working on the project 'The Michigan Tree of 40 Fruit'. The project is a series of 40 small trees, each representing a different fruit variety. The trees are planted in a series of black pots, which are arranged in a grid. The trees are grown in a greenhouse, and the artist has been documenting their growth and development over time. The project is a collaboration between the artist and the university, and it is intended to raise awareness of the importance of agriculture and food production.

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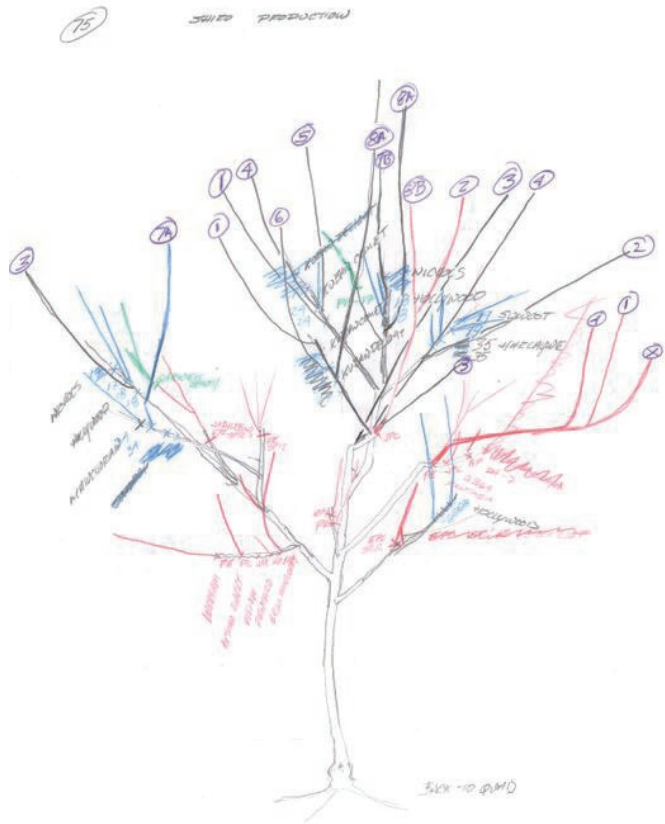
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Patrick Chubb  
Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

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Fifth-grade students enrolled at Mt. Hope STEAM in Lansing traveled to the museum to learn more about grafting from the artist. They will continue to closely observe the trees through virtual visits throughout the run of the exhibition.



**Tree 75 Diagram**  
2013



## About the Artist

Sam Van Aken (b. 1972) lives and works in New York. Following undergraduate studies in communication theory and art, he moved to Poland under the auspices of the Andy Warhol Foundation and the United States Information Agency. Returning to the United States after several years in Europe, he received his MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2001. Since then Van Aken has exhibited nationally and internationally, and he has received numerous honors, including a Joan Mitchell Award, an Association of International Curators of Art Award, and a Creative Capital Grant. He is currently an associate professor of sculpture and the coordinator of the Studio Arts Graduate Program at the School of Art at Syracuse University.

This book is published by the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at MSU on the occasion of the exhibition *Tree of 40 Fruit: The Michigan Trees*, on view March 18–June 5, 2016. The exhibition is part of the MSU Federal Credit Union Artist Studio Series, which invites artists to interact with the community through site-specific installations presented alongside educational encounters that offer insight into the artists' creative processes.

The Artist Studio Series is organized by Michelle Word, Director of Education at the Broad MSU, and generously supported by the MSU Federal Credit Union.

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