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Venice, Your Roots Are Showing

CULTURE

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Uprooted trees are a common theme at this year's Venice Biennale, as seen in work by, clockwise from left, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot at the French pavilion; Joan Jonas at the United States pavilion; and Robert Smithson at the Central Pavilions. *Credit Clockwise from left: Laurent Lecat; Moira Ricci; Kevin McGarry*

It's no secret that curators have a penchant for trees. Whether standing tall or forced into unnatural postures, a tree is on its own a kind of figure and en masse a component of a landscape. And in our ecologically strained times, trees are also urgent reminders of what a mess we've gotten ourselves into — plus a symbol of hope for greener days ahead. Arboreal uprooting is by no means a rarity in the contemporary art world, and it seems to have reached a critical mass at this year's Venice Biennale, opening to the public May 9, where three of the most prominent pavilions in the Giardini are tree-centric.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

In the Central Pavilions, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Robert Smithson's "Dead Tree" features a horizontal species of the deciduous variety: gnarled, dusty, and dry, with sheets of mirror subtly woven into its roots and branches. (This is the fourth iteration of "Dead Tree" — the first, exhibited in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1969, was destroyed at the close of the exhibition, as were the subsequent two reconstructions.) Outside the United States pavilion, represented by the performance and video artist Joan Jonas, a formation of limbs has been bound together into a tree-like form unto itself — a monument to the ritualistic work inside the pavilion, "They Come to Us Without a Word." Finally, in France's pavilion, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot has emptied everything from the space, save for speakers and a pine whose root mass resembles an island. By tiny vibrations, the tree in fact moves around the room, ever so slowly; its movements are relayed through the sound system, as a kind of aural life force.