

Tree Fall: Andy Goldsworthy's Newest Installation at the Presidio

By Christian Frock
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Andy Goldsworthy, *Tree Fall* (2013), installation view; photo: Jan Stürmann/FOR-SITE Foundation

Over the last five years a series of sculptures by British artist Andy Goldsworthy have appeared in various sites around the Presidio, the expansive former military base adjacent to the Golden Gate Bridge. *Spire* (2008) makes use of thirty-seven felled Monterey Cypress trees in an architectural formation reminiscent of great church spires. *Wood Line* (2008) repurposes eucalyptus branch trimmings sourced from various projects that required tree removal, including the recent reconstruction of the Golden Gate Bridge's southern approach, to create a winding sculpture on the Presidio's oldest foot path, known to many as Lover's Lane.

Each project follows in the long tradition of Goldsworthy's work, which primarily repurposes natural elements to engender a greater consideration of both the natural and the built environment. His latest installation *Tree Fall* (2013) debuted last month. While it is an obvious continuation on earlier themes, its placement in the former Civil War-era Powder Magazine on the Main Post offers provocative new possibilities in considering how man-made conditions collide with nature.

It must first be said that this work is both very much in keeping with the artist's larger body of work and simultaneously radically different from past approaches. The Powder Magazine is a small, discreet building positioned on the far end of a large green belt surrounded by intersecting streets and parking lots, east of the Main Parade Ground. Its original function was to house gunpowder and munitions -- the walls are four-feet thick stone slabs, while the doomed ceiling was built to channel accidental explosions upwards to protect people and neighboring buildings. *Tree Fall* occupies this domed ceiling and the viewer is immediately positioned beneath the work upon entry, a literal allusion to the artist's ongoing inquiry about what goes on beneath the surface of things.



Andy Goldsworthy, *Tree Fall* (2013), installation view; photo: Jan Stürmann/FOR-SITE Foundation

An enormous tree trunk, sourced after removal during the Presidio Parkway project, is suspended across the width of the ceiling. Both the ceiling and the root are encased in dense layers of clay sourced from the Presidio. As it air-dried, a wide crackling pattern formed over the surface of the several thousand pounds of clay used to cover the bough and ceiling, creating a subtly beautiful surface evocative of both destruction and renewal.

The white walls of the spare room are otherwise pristine, save for remnants of spattered clay on the iron door. Whether this residue was intentional or not is unclear, but given the exacting details of the work in general it seems like an unlikely oversight. Without the spatters, the work would appear surreal, as if a giant growth had taken over the space, whereas the presence of the spatters quietly addresses the hand of an artist in this intervention, giving the work a human quality that might otherwise be lost to perceived perfection. This also speaks to Goldsworthy's larger agenda, as noted in the brochure, "to make connections between what we call nature and what we call man-made."



While Goldsworthy's other works at the Presidio engender mild trail hikes through wooded spaces, *Tree Fall* is uniquely positioned amidst paved roads and ample parking. One can drive up, park, and walk in -- no hiking boots needed -- provided one knows one's way around the Presidio's proliferation of white-washed buildings. Discovering the work in this way offers breath-taking views of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay and charming Mission-style buildings. It is easy to forget the original intentions of this place, or the long militant history that precedes it, first as a Spanish Imperial Outpost (1776-1871) and later as the seat of the Mexican Frontier (1822-1846) before it came to function as a U.S. Army Post (1846-1994). Goldsworthy's work at the Presidio calls attention to the unusual artificial-slash-natural dynamics of the Presidio Forest -- it was planted by the U.S. Army in the late 18th and early 19th century -- while perhaps posing larger questions about our present-day relationship to the military industrial complex, and, by extension, gun violence.

It is not accidental that Goldsworthy's title *Tree Fall* summons the old philosophical question, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" Here the artist amplifies this challenge with literal cracks in the surface of things. Situated as it is, *Tree Fall* uniquely provokes questions about sustainability in a declining environment and in an environment of escalating violence. With *Tree Fall*, Goldsworthy challenges the tendency to think "out of sight, out of mind" by complicating our relationship to what we see and where we see it. Though the work employs the familiar tropes of the artist's larger body of work, this time the work presents pointedly new challenges, set in a modest framework designed to explode.

Goldsworthy in the Presidio is organized by the FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the Presidio Trust; *Tree Fall* is on view by appointment Saturdays and Sundays 10am - 4pm. To [plan a visit](#) visit for-site.org or contact the Presidio Trust at 415-561-5300.