

# NANCY HOFFMAN GALLERY

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**TIFFANY SHLAIN**

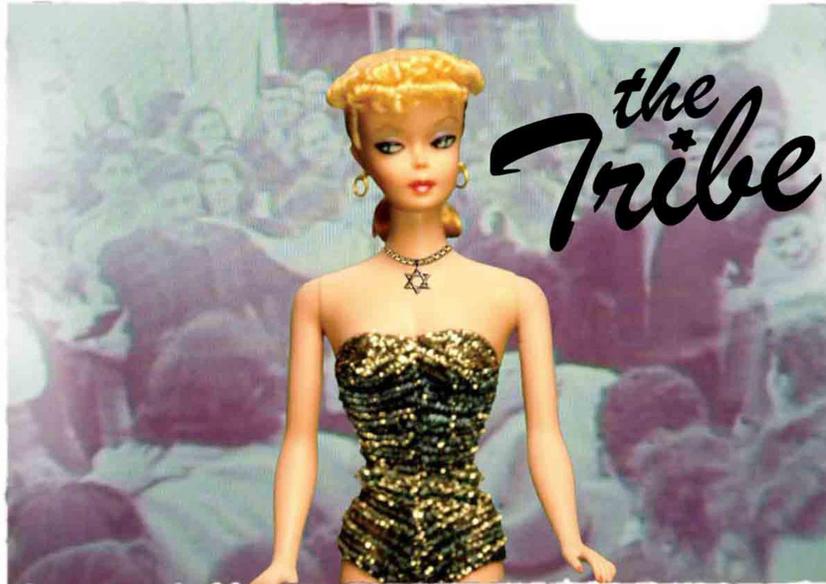
**Q & A**

**How did you begin your work as a visual and not film artist?**

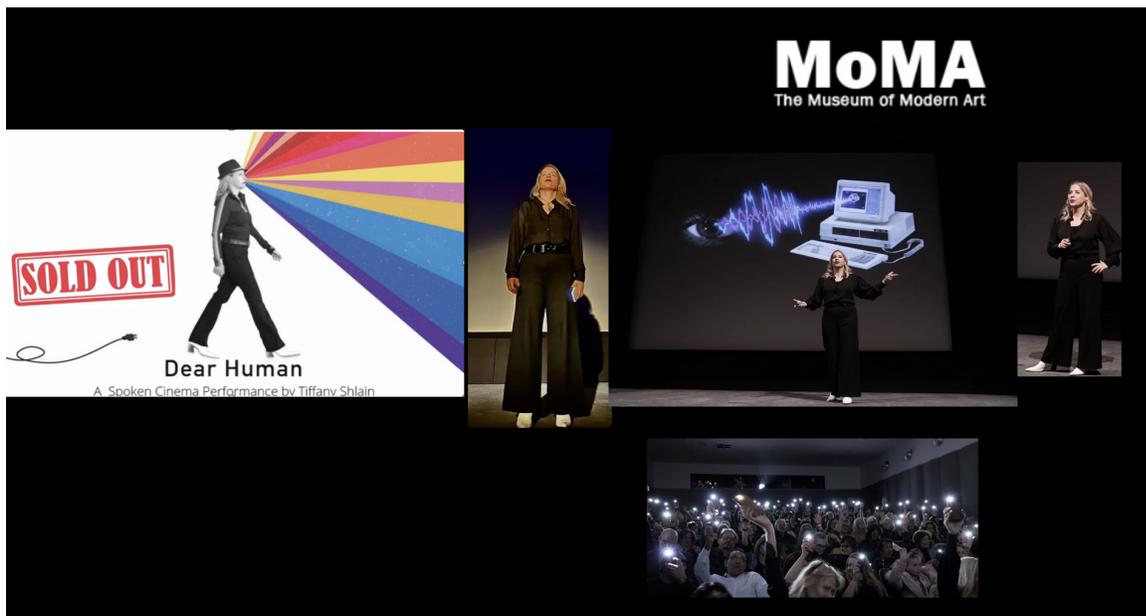
I used to sculpt with clay when I was younger and have always loved working with my hands. When I began making films, it was much more a hands-on physical craft than the digital world we live in now. While an undergraduate at UC Berkeley in Interdisciplinary Studies, I studied filmmaking at NYU in a summer program in the days of splicing and taping celluloid images together on large steampunk-like machines. When I went back to Berkeley for my senior year, they didn't have any film production equipment there, so I often cut together old movies to make my films using equipment from the anthropology and city planning departments. That constraint led to my collage style of filmmaking. My filmmaking has always been strongly experimental and visual. In addition to editing together many old movies and images, I love creating animated images to convey larger ideas visually. Here is an image created for my feature documentary *CONNECTED* that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011:



Another image, for my film *The Tribe*, which premiered at Sundance in 2006 and explores the history of Jewish identity and the Barbie doll:



I've also tried to experiment with film's form, merging it with a live interactive theater experience. Right before Covid, the Museum of Modern Art premiered one of my live documentary experiences that I call "spoken cinema." This show, *Dear Human*, explored humanity's relationship with technology, in a live cinematic theater experience that had interactive moments with the audience.



That show premiered Feb 15, 2020. The response to the spoken cinema was exhilarating. The plan was to take *Dear Human* on tour. Then Covid came and shut

the world down. In those early months when it really seemed like the world might be ending, being in nature and walking among the old redwood trees near my home was the only thing that brought me

solace...and perspective. On those many walks, I thought a lot about the trees and how much they have lived through and witnessed. I also started bringing objects back with me: pinecones and branches to create with. I wanted to try to convey the incredible sense of realignment I felt on the mountain, amongst the redwood trees, in nature and its inspiring vistas. I took one of the large pinecones I had gathered and placed miniature people on it to suggest this shift of scale and perspective. Then I photographed the sculpture and made it larger, playing with scale and form.

This work is about PERSPECTIVE.



### **How did you decide to use tree rings?**

My sculptures like PERSPECTIVE were about spatial perspective, and the tree rings are about perspective in time. I grew up right near Muir Woods. Although I have lived in many other places, I now live again near these majestic trees. I was always struck with the tree ring at the entrance of Muir Woods or at any National Park or Natural History museum. What a fascinating way to think about time. Trees are this physical manifestation of time.

But the words on the tree ring timelines never spoke to me. They all felt very male and colonist. It felt like I was being mansplained history.

But I loved the idea of telling a story within the rings of a tree. During those long walks on the mountain among the trees during Covid, I started imagining the different stories they could tell. The one I wanted to create was a feminist history tree ring. That was the first large-scale tree ring sculpture I made. I titled it DENDROFEMONOLOGY. Dendrochronology is the science of tree ring dating, dendro meaning "tree" and chronology meaning "time." For DENDROFEMONOLOGY, the feminist history tree ring, I go back 50,000 years, starting when women were worshiped as goddesses. That's a much better place to start the story than where we usually start it, with women as secondary characters. The creative challenge of then distilling moments on that 50,000 years down to 30 points, was a great constraint.

A lot of the research for DENDROFEMONOLOGY came from a film I directed and co-wrote called *50/50: The Past, Present & Future of Women + Power*. After spending over 25 years making films, in many ways the tree rings are like films in three dimensions. When I work on a script I spend months and sometimes years trying to distill ideas into words. I do the same on the tree rings.

I also had that same challenge with THE BIG PICTURE timeline on the evolution of human perspective. I wanted it to explore the idea that the more we know, the more we don't know. It marks moments when humans have been "decentered" by a radical new discovery or technological invention, and our perspective changes. It starts 315,000 years ago, "We are here: Homo sapiens evolve into existence." From there it marks us thinking we are the center of the solar system, then realizing we are not, then thinking we are at the center of the universe, and then realizing there is no center of the universe and it's rapidly expanding. I recently added an entry for 2022, "We question our relationship with intelligence: Generative AI is released." The very last line asks, "Today: Where are we?" As with all of my work, there is a mix of philosophical questions, humor and perspective shifting.

For some tree rings, I wrote many lines of text, only to realize that I needed to reduce them to almost nothing, like my climate change tree ring, CAUSE AND EFFECT. It used to be 30 lines charting the Earth and human's influence on it. Now it just has two lines, one from the center dot, noting the Earth's formation 4.6 billion years ago and another, at the very edge, marking the arrival of humans, next to an indentation of the wood to show how much we have shaped the earth through our actions. But I also had the indent at a place where you can see the earth shape come back...perhaps aspirationally wanting to believe that we can right our ways. New inventions and technology have damaged it; maybe they can also fix it.



*CAUSE AND EFFECT* / 2022 / Salvaged Elm 38 inches wide sculpture.  
Center dot: 4.6 billion years ago, the Earth forms  
Outer edge ring: Humans arrive

For the FLOWERS & HUMANS tree ring, the tree ring itself told me what it needed to be. When I first came upon this salvaged olive tree (all my tree rings are from fallen trees), I was struck by how it looked like the slice of brain (my father was a surgeon who operated and wrote about the brain and I have made many films on neuroscience). It looked like a flower.



Reclaimed Olive Wood Sculpture  
28" x 33" x 2" | Edition of 4 + 2APs | \$15K

This was an a-ha moment for me. This one tree slice could accomplish something I'd wanted to do for my late father. His dying wish was that my brother and sister and I publish the last book he had just written on da Vinci, called *Leonardo's Brain*, the book was like a brain scan on da Vinci's creativity and scientific mind. My father, a surgeon who wrote about art, science, feminism and the evolution of the human brain, believed Da Vinci represented the future of our species: strong right and left thinking, gay, vegan – progressive in so many ways. We sold the book to a publisher and it was my job to work with the editor. The editor we worked with was terrific, but she did want to cut my favorite chapter, "Flowers and Humans," because she thought it didn't belong in the book. After a lot of back and forth I agreed, deciding I would do something special with that chapter later, perhaps release it on its own. When I saw this slice of wood, I knew I'd found the perfect outlet. My father's chapter is distilled into four points showing how humans co-evolved with flowers.

□



The olive tree slices, unlike the other tree rings, all look so different, so for these, I get them from different trees but they need to all have the feeling of being a brain and a flower. Here is the text:

## Flowers & Humans

4.5 billion years ago: Earth forms  
256 million years ago: Flowers appear  
300,000 years ago: Homo sapiens arrive

### **Humans and flowers coevolved and remain interdependent today.**

Flowers shaped the very working of our metabolism and psyche. The ascorbic acid and glucose in flowers' fruit fueled early human brain growth and thinking. Foxglove, poppies, calendula, chamomile and yarrow can treat sickness, give a sense of wellbeing, and even alter the way we think. We cultivate them in turn. And flowers are invited to every important event. We use them to woo and tend to them like loved ones. Earth, trees, flowers, and humans are nature – inextricably connected.

### **Where and how do you source them?**

I only work with salvaged fallen trees. I would never want to chop down a tree for my art. I have several people that I source from. Sometimes I will see a tree ring and it will inspire an idea. Other times I am looking for a specific kind of tree ring to tell a certain kind of story. We had so many storms in Northern California this past winter, and so many trees either fell down or had to be cut down, so there are stumps everywhere...which to me are like canvases. Right now the landscape is filled with canvases to tell different stories.

### **How did you find out about pyrologists?**

When I first had the idea for the feminist history tree ring, I had originally thought about burning the text into the wood but then worried with so many lines of text (there are 30) the potential for mistakes was high, and with the salvaged wood being so precious and expensive, it was a risk. To tell the story of feminist history I needed a big canvas, so I was using the biggest deodar cedar I could find. I was so excited when I saw the tree slice I ultimately used. (When I fall in love with a slice of salvaged wood, I usually get six slices, for two artist's proofs and four editions. You can imagine the piles of stacks of beautiful wood at my studio.) These particular slices were enormous. What I found out, after calling every place in the country that lasered on a large scale, was that my very large cedar was exactly 2 inches too large to laser-print on.

At first I was so mad at myself for not figuring that out first, but then it returned me to my original idea of burning, which I also liked because I wanted a handmade feeling from the start. And I wanted women to be the hands of this important telling of feminist history. I came upon a woman pyrographer, Rachel Strauss, who literally wrote the book on this ancient art form. When I told her about what I wanted to do, she was so excited about the idea of a feminist history tree ring and she was all in. It was an incredible collaboration. She could only fly in from Portland to San Francisco for one day because she has young kids at home. She brought one of her mentees and it was nearly an all-nighter. Watching the two of them expertly burn the letters from a carbon paper template into the wood that I had labored over was both spiritual and beautiful. It was very quiet and the smell of the cedar wood burning was nearly mystical. We all felt passionate that we were burning in a story that needed to be seen.

I always burn all the dots into the wood on my pieces. The dots signify the mark of time on a tree ring.

**TEXT on the tree rings mentioned above:**

## **DENDROFEMONOLOGY**



- **50,000 BCE** Goddesses are worshiped.
- **10,000-3000 BCE** Women are healers, shamans, and warriors. A number of societies acknowledge multiple genders.
- **3100 BCE** Literacy develops, and seeds of patriarchy spread.
- **2400 BCE** Mesopotamian law declares: "If a woman speaks to a man out of turn, her teeth will be smashed in by a burnt brick."
- 200 BCE Goddess worship is forbidden in Judaism, and later, in Islam and Christianity.
- **690** Wu Zetian becomes the first—and only—female ruler of China.
- **1100** Matrilineal and matriarchal Hopi tribe establishes the community of Oraibi in present-day Arizona.
- **1450 to 1918** 50,000 women tortured and executed as witches across Europe and America.
- **1576-1610** Queen Amina rules over Zazzau (present-day Nigeria).
- **1690s** Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz becomes the first published feminist in the Americas.
- **1776-1860s** Abortion up to four months of pregnancy is legal in the United States.
- **1880s** Inspired by indigenous and abolitionist leaders and British suffragists, first-wave feminism gains momentum in the United States.
- **1920** 19th Amendment grants US women the right to vote, although most women of color are disenfranchised until the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.
- **1920** The Soviet Union legalizes abortion.
- **1960** FDA approves birth control pill in the United States

- **1960** Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) becomes the first woman to be elected to lead a democratic country.
- **1962** Dolores Huerta co-founds US National Farm Workers' Association.
- **1960s** Second-wave feminism begins with leaders including Dorothy Pittman Hughes, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinman, Flo Kennedy, and Shirley Chisholm.
- **1963** First woman in space Valentina Tereshkova flies a solo mission and orbits Earth 48 times.
- **1972** Title IX prohibits gender-based discrimination in US federally-funded educational programs and activities.
- **1972** The US Senate approves addition of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. (The states have not yet ratified it.)
- **1973** Roe vs. Wade legalizes abortion in all US states and territories.
- **1974-1980** The Combahee River Women's Collective calls out the interconnectedness of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and demands change in mainstream feminism and civil rights movement.
- **1975** Icelandic Women's Strike held to protest inequality in the workplace and the home. 90% of women participate, and 15 years later Iceland elects a woman president.
- **1989** Kimberlé Crenshaw defines the concept of intersectionality and ushers in third-wave feminism.
- **1993** Women allowed to wear pants on the floor of the US Senate.
- **2006** Tarana Burke begins #MeToo movement.
- **2016** Hillary Rodham Clinton receives the majority of votes in the US presidential election.
- **2017** An estimated 5 million people attend Women's Marches globally. #MeToo goes viral.
- **2017** Oregon becomes first state to include non-binary gender category on IDs.
- **2020-2022** US elects first female Vice President Kamala Harris and first trans State Senator, Sarah McBride; Ketanji Brown Jackson becomes first Black woman confirmed to Supreme Court.
- **2022**
  - Roe v. Wade is overturned, eviscerating federal protection of reproductive rights in the United States.
  - Globally, 65 countries have legalized abortions, four in the last year.
  - Globally, 86 women have been elected president or prime minister to date...

## The Big Picture (perspective tree ring)

Reclaimed Redwood Wood Sculpture  
60" x 63" x 2.25" | Edition of 4+2AP



- **315,000 years ago We Are Here** Homo sapiens evolve into existence
- **147 (ish) We Are the Center of Everything!** Ptolemy proposes that the sun revolves around the Earth
- **800s We Can See Better** Invention of a magnifying “reading stone,” the first lens
- **1543 We See That Earth Is *Not* the Center of the Solar System** Copernican Revolution: Earth no longer viewed as center of the galaxy
- **1600 We Can See Closer** Microscope invented
- **1608 We Can See Farther** Telescope invented
- **1876 We Can Connect With People We Cannot See** Telephone invented

- **1887 We Can Reach Mass Audiences** Discovery of electromagnetic waves paves the way for radio and television
- **1893 We Can See Inside Our Heads** Subconscious conceived
- **1895 We Can See Inside Our Bodies** X-ray invented
- **1903 We Can See from Above** Airplane invented
- **1924 We Realize We're Not the Center of the Universe Either** Edward Hubble's findings prefigure the Big Bang Theory and show existence of other galaxies
- **1938 We Can Destroy Ourselves** Discovery of nuclear fission leads to development of atomic weapons.
- **1943 We Can See the Big Picture** Accidental discovery of LSD provides the mind-altering experiences humans have found in other psychedelics for millennia
- **1957 We Can See the Bigger Picture** Quantum mechanics suggests the possibility of parallel universes
- **1967 We Can See Our Planet "Earthrise"** photograph taken from space, and environmental movement begins
- **1989 We Can All Be Connected** World Wide Web invented
- **2007 We Can Connect Anywhere/Anytime** iPhone debuts
- **2009-ongoing We Can't Stop Connecting Anywhere/Anytime** Screen addiction becomes a problem
- **2011 We See There Is No Center of the Universe** and it's rapidly expanding
- **2022- We can 2022 We question our relationship with intelligence**
- Generative AI is released
- **Today... Where Are We?**