

The US environmental artist Alan Sonfist will recreate an ancient landscape near the Thames Primeval forest for Tate in London

Primeval forest for Tate in London

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This September an ancient forest will be reborn on the banks of the Thames in front of Tate Modern in London. “I’m going to create a pre-Roman landscape for Tate,” says Alan Sonfist, the New York-based environmental artist who has been commissioned by the gallery.

Sonfist is known for creating environments in cities that replicate landscapes before human habitation. The Tate project, his first public commission in London, will include native tree species as well as plants grown from seeds harvested from cracks in London sidewalks. He plans to call the work Naked Truth: London’s Secret Seeds.

On the riverside terrace beside Tate Modern, Sonfist will plant two-metre-tall saplings of trees known to have grown in London in pre-Roman times and is collaborating with expert horticulturalists from the Royal Botanical Gardens and the Royal Forestry Service to determine which species were present in London in antiquity. He plans to acquire the specimens from commercial nurseries because he will not take trees from natural forests.

A second element of the forest will consist of plants grown from seeds found on the streets around Tate Modern. “Soil from cracked sidewalks will be

excavated and collected, then each soil sample will be cultivated and the seeds within allowed to grow,” he explains. “It will be a kind of archaeological dig,” he says.

Tate Modern director Vicente Todoli contacted Sonfist last year to discuss the commission. The artist has since visited Tate once and plans to come over next month to determine precisely where the piece will be positioned. Tate is expected to cover the costs of production. The duration of the project has yet to be decided.

Sonfist (b. 1946) has been making environmental work since the 1960s. “My thinking was to bring nature back into the city and to explore the natural history of the urban landscape,” he says. “We have landmark buildings within cities, I think we should create landmark nature.”

That idea became a reality in New York. In 1978, Sonfist planted a native forest on city-owned land at LaGuardia Place and West Houston Street in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. That piece was slated to remain for a year, but the City Parks Department adopted it and Time Landscape remains intact today, a patch of forest breaking up the street grid. Sonfist is currently working on a permanent Green Plaza for Florence, Italy, that is under construction and will be completed within a year. “Like all my projects it is about the natural narrative and cultural history of the city,” he says.

In March, Southwark Council approved plans for a new extension to Tate Modern designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. This will occupy land near Sonfist’s future forest. How that project will affect the forest remains to be seen, but the artist is hopeful that his native landscape will be allowed to grow indefinitely.

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