

## Reno News & Review Long view - Art of the State - Arts&Culture

*Kelsey Fitzgerald*

Not long ago, Jonathon Keats—a San Francisco-based artist, writer and philosopher—was thinking about a disconnect that he'd noticed between our society and the natural world.

"I've been—I guess as all of us have—noticing how totally out of sync we have become with our planet," Keats said. "We seem to be aware, at least some of us, of the fact that there is massive climate change taking place, that we're having a profound effect on the planet. And yet at the same time, all of our systems are built on top of the planet in a way that they don't really correspond to the ground truth of the planet and how the planet is subsisting, what is happening to the planet itself. So, I started thinking about what the most fundamental way might be to approach that, to potentially provide some mechanism for change in mindset. And it seemed to me that time is really at the essence of everything. We really are, as a society, completely regulated by the clock and by the calendar."

This train of thought inspired Keats to start a new project, a calendar rooted in the daily happenings of the planet. Trees, he realized, were natural timekeepers.

"Their ring growth is annual, so therefore we have a new ring every year," Keats said. "But the thickness of those rings varies with environmental conditions."

The outcome of this idea—a project called Centuries of the Bristlecone—is now in the planning phase. Working in collaboration with the Nevada Museum of Art and the Long Now Foundation, Keats has proposed to construct a 5,000-year "calendar" based on time as it is experienced by the Great Basin bristlecone pine. Bristlecone pines, one of the world's most long-lived species, can live for more than 5,000 years. On Mount Washington in eastern Nevada, the Long Now Foundation—a nonprofit that specializes in long-term thinking—owns property that includes groves of these ancient trees.

One portion of Keats' project will occur on Mount Washington, where he has selected five bristlecone pines of varying ages and altitudes. Around each tree, he will place 10 limestone markers in a double-spiral formation, each marked with the estimated date that the tree's trunk should grow into—and ultimately knock over—the marker. Stones will be placed at intervals of 100 to 500 years, depending on the age of the tree, demarcating each tree's expected growth during its 5,000-year life span.

A second element of the project will be housed at the NMA, where a mechanical calendar will display real-time data on the growth of a sixth bristlecone pine. Data will be sent from Mount Washington back to Reno by satellite.

Bristlecone growth is irregular, and climate change may impact the trees in uncertain ways. Over time, Keats expects that dates of the bristlecone calendar will diverge from those of our society's Gregorian calendar, leaving the viewer to ponder which calendar is correct.

"Inherent in this project is that you can see it as an act of extreme hubris that we are going to designate what time it is by the placement of these stones," Keats said. "One way or another, these are going to be out of sync ... and might be out of sync in some sort of completely crazy way."

Keats hopes to see this project come to fruition by 2020, but he's not making any promises. After all, what is five more years when you're living on bristlecone time?



Artist Jonathon Keats is working on a 5,000-year calendar that measures time against the growth of long-living bristlecone trees.