

TREE HUGGERS

REVIEW

BY FELICIA FEASTER

It may be difficult for Atlantans, faced with the destruction of acres of trees every day, to mourn the natural death of one tree. In the cold, hard vernacular of ruinous overdevelopment: shit happens.

The trees in Pamela Pecchio's photographs, environmentalists will be glad to know, died of natural causes, perhaps uprooted by wind or split by a bolt of lightning. Inspiring some sense of reverence over this final

fadeout of individual trees nevertheless seems Atlanta-born Pecchio's mission in documenting trees from Louisiana to Massachusetts that have met their maker.

It's an interesting idea — this fixation on the singular death of one tree — though one that seems stretched a little thin in *Forest Primeval*, an exhibition of works by three photographers dealing, in a nutshell, with the subject of trees.

Perhaps the idea of "the forest" is just too slight a connective tissue when ideas as basic as Pecchio's are placed next to works as profundity-laced as those of Ori Gersht. An Israeli artist, Gersht uses his forest landscapes to reference the history of the Holocaust in the Ukraine, where his family hid from the Nazis. This context imbues the work with the cold shock of true horror.

His photographs feature fairy-tale winter trees set against night skies, desolate, blurry landscapes draped in snow. Those images tend to pale next to the show's real stunner: a film, "The Forest," which documents in prolonged, slow-motion passages, the crashing tumble of a succession of felled trees.

Satisfyingly straightforward amidst the metaphor-draped trees in his compatriot's work, Southerner Jeff Whetstone's old-school black-and-white photographs are meaty, funny studies of humankind head-butting the natural world. Whetstone brings an indigenous wit to images like "Fishing Chair," of a tattered plastic chair facing a pristine, lovely lake, the chair's perimeter strewn with a blanket of litter.

That image — a megadose of reality next to the romantic and chilling visions of Pecchio and Gersht — celebrates the contemporary outdoorsman's ability to both revere and desecrate nature. Often at the same time.

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DEEP IN THE FOREST: Jeff Whetstone's silver gelatin print, "Fishing Chair, 2003"

Forest Primeval. Through Oct. 21. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia at SunTrust Plaza, 303 Peachtree St., Lower Lobby. Mon.-Fri., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 404-881-1109. www.mocaga.org.