

**Frances Grafton: *Once Upon a Time* Richmond Art Gallery (2006)**  
exhibition catalogue essay by Deborah Koenker

*Once upon a time* -- the title of Frances Grafton's series of monumental tree drawings -- suggests the beginning of a fairy tale, or more likely the beginning of the world. Trees are the very lungs of our planet. To imagine life without trees is to imagine life without breath. They stand as connectors between earth and heaven. Our own essential connection to trees is reflected in language that parallels our bodies -- trunk, limbs, veins, crown; we speak of our origins as "family trees". Standing in front of Grafton's drawings it is not the forest we see -- it is the particular tree, and the particular is what matters.<sup>1</sup> Using graphic essentials of black and white and a range of tonalities, Grafton draws images that breathe, alive with forms and spatial depth. Putting pencil, charcoal and conté to paper, Grafton pairs these simple materials with her impressive skills; through a repeated process of layering strokes, then erasing, she coaxes the tree from the paper. We marvel at the meticulous making that produces this mysterious emergence. Attention to detail contrasts with grand scale. There is a sense of being dwarfed before these drawings, as much by the scale as by the issues implied.

Each singular tree is drawn from a photograph taken by the artist. Just as fairytales set challenges for the hero or heroine that send them into the dark forest, so the artist herself set off on a quest which began in Australia and has since taken her to five continents over the past five years. Employing the continents as an organizational structure Grafton has condensed the world into a manageable yet comprehensive size. Likewise, by focusing on trees she has distilled vast conceptual considerations into a concise, specific representation. *Australia* is the first drawing in this series. Aboriginal Australians use the term "The Dreaming" to describe relations between the spiritual, natural and moral elements of the world, which is exactly the terrain Grafton sets out to explore. *Europe*, source of the artist's own roots, is second in the series. Europe, the second smallest continent, sent wooden sailing ships, built from royal oaks, to explore the world, bringing it from flat to round, sending part of the "old world" to colonize the new. *The Americas*, third in the series, references continents marked by development: clearing land, cutting forests, mastering nature and forging a "new world". *Asia*, cradle of civilization, follows like a graceful calligraphic mark, drawn from a tree on the 70 square mile temple site of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. *Africa*, the final drawing in the series to date, images roots of a tree from the Ngorongoro crater, generally considered the birthplace of the human species. Each drawing requires between nine and twelve months and countless hours to complete -- a tribute to Grafton's tenacity and commitment. She has made the trees, and what resonates from these works, important.

As trees respire, they also inspire. Personal memories of particular trees factor large in many a childhood; hiding in leafy branches, building tree forts, or daydreaming. Joy Kagawa, author of the acclaimed novel *Obasan*, recalls a cherry tree that grew at her childhood home. She had conversations with that tree while hanging from its lower branch like a monkey<sup>2</sup> until, at age six, she was deported with her family to an internment camp. But arboreal inspiration isn't limited to literary genres. German artist Joseph Beuys's project *7000 Oaks* was begun in 1982 at Documenta 7, the international art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. It involved planting seven thousand trees throughout the city, each paired with a basalt stone column. Kassel was the first stage in an ongoing project of tree planting that Beuys envisioned extending throughout the world to affect environmental and social change. Tadao Ando, celebrated Japanese architect, has also initiated several massive tree-planting projects in Japan. He sees his responsibility to the environment as a social aspect of his job.<sup>3</sup> However, it is Tatsuo Miyajima's *Kaki Tree Project* that most closely and most terribly connects to Grafton's work, as a kind of real-life fairytale. Miyajima, first recognized for his light-emitting digital counters, traveled to Nagasaki in 1995 to the site of the atomic bombing. There he met Dr. Ebinuma, a local tree doctor (dendrologist) who was growing saplings from a kaki tree (persimmon) that miraculously survived near the epicentre of the 1945 atomic blast. Viewing these trees as symbols of survival, healing and peace, Miyajima developed a performance piece in which the saplings were given to local children to plant. The bombing of Nagasaki and *Kaki Tree Project* tell a story of great evil and great transformation. There is an optimism and redemptive quality that *Once upon a time* shares with this work. Grafton's drawings invite contemplation through the tactility of the visual, the stirring of our senses---not through words. Yet in the context of global climate change they serve as solemn reminders: we must do more than hope for "...happily ever after."

1. From a conversation with the artist, October 2005.
2. The Georgia Straight, October 6, 2005.
3. Tadao Ando lecture, Urban League for Architecture and the Environment, Vancouver, October 2005.