BLIND FOREST

Alex Turner

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My work navigates the intersections of ecology, technology, and human experience, and *Blind Forest* embodies this approach through an extended study of trees as both ecological keystones and mirrors of human intent. Set across the diverse landscapes of California, the project uses thermal imaging—a tool of surveillance, fire detection, and tree health assessment—to reveal what lies beyond the visible: the conservation, transmission, and dispersion of heat through living systems.

Created in collaboration with ecologists, natural historians, and cultural anthropologists, *Blind Forest* reflects a cross-disciplinary inquiry into how natural systems absorb, reflect, and archive cultural and natural histories. Using a thermal hunting scope mounted on a panoramic tripod head, I construct large-scale images from hundreds of exposures, mapping thermodynamic activity in precise detail. In doing so, I treat heat not just as data, but as narrative—a record of vitality, decay, stress, and transition.

Trees are long-living witnesses to environmental and human histories, and they carry evidence of shifting climates, displaced communities, and evolving systems of power in their bark, roots, and canopies,. From junipers and pinyon pines valued by Indigenous communities, to redwoods logged for empire and citrus groves that once symbolized prosperity, the species featured in *Blind Forest* trace overlapping tensions—extraction and preservation, survival and erasure, change and continuity.

Blind Forest questions what it means to see—and what is made visible or concealed through the tools we use to understand the world. Thermal imaging extends human perception but also implicates us in systems of control. By turning this apparatus toward the forest, I aim to collapse the distance between scientific observation and poetic witnessing, rendering the unseen visible and inviting viewers to reconsider their relationship to place, memory, and environmental urgency.

Ultimately, *Blind Forest* asks how we document and understand the slow, often invisible forces that shape our surroundings. It positions trees not as passive scenery, but as active participants—living archives that conserve, transmit, and disperse meaning across generations. In a moment of ecological precarity, *Blind Forest* prompts reflection on the fragile systems we inherit, inhabit, and either sustain or destroy.

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Alex Turner (b. 1984, Chicago, Illinois) is a visual artist whose work has been exhibited internationally. He was named to the Silver Eye Center's inaugural 2021 Silver List and Photolucida's 2020 Critical Mass Top 50, won First Place in LensCulture's Black and White Photo Awards, received SPE's Innovation in Imaging Award has been named a finalist for many other awards and scholarships. His work is held in numerous collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Center for Creative Photography, and the Tucson Museum of Art. He has been featured in publications including Patagonia, Adventure Journal, Lenscratch, Fisheye, Der Greif, and C41. He holds an MFA from the University of Arizona and currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

"Mother Medicine Tree," Western Juniper and Pinyon Pine with Fused Root Systems, Estimated 500 Years Old, Inyo County, CA, 2024
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

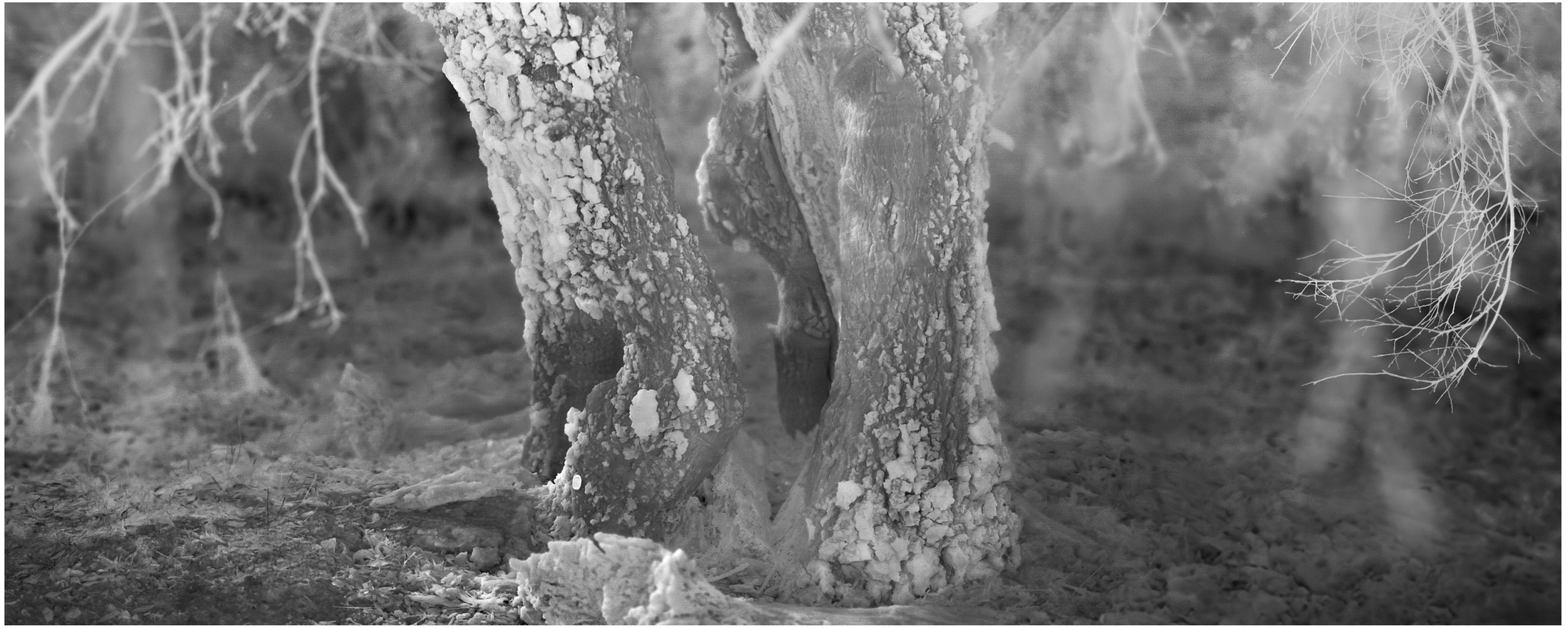
Pinyon Pines and Western Junipers hold deep significance for high desert Indigenous communities in California, contributing to both their diet and medicinal practices. Remarkably, these two share a fused root system—a rare occurrence between trees of different species.

Bartlett Pear, Estimated 110 Years Old, Manzanar Japanese Interment Camp, Inyo County, CA, 2023
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

Japanese American prisoners cultivated orchards at the Manzanar Internment Camp as a means of sustenance, resilience, and cultural continuity. Despite the harsh desert environment, they planted and maintained pear and apple trees which provided food, shade, and a sense of purpose amid confinement.

"General Sherman" Giant Sequoia, Estimated 2,200 - 2,700 Years Old, Tulare County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

Many of the largest sequoias were cut down in the late 19th century—harvested for timber or shipped across the world to be displayed as spectacles of scale. Today, most of the remaining giants are protected, including the General Sherman tree in Sequoia National Park, considered the largest living tree on Earth by volume.



Coast Live Oak, Infected with Goldspotted Oak Borer, Estimated 200 Years Old, Ventura County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

The goldspotted oak borer, introduced from Arizona in the early 2000s, is devastating native oaks in Southern California, especially Coast Live Oaks. Often spread by infested firewood, it disrupts water flow within the tree, causing die-off. This oak is tagged a “reservoir tree” due to a severe infestation that threatens the surrounding grove.

Burned Mexican Fan and Queen Palms, Palisades Fire Scar, Estimated 70 Years Old, Los Angeles County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

Non-native palms, like Queen and Mexican Fan Palms, are iconic fixtures in the Southern California landscape, yet pose a significant fire risk. Their dry fronds ignite easily and can be carried by wind, quickly spreading flames in urban areas.

Clementines, Felled Due to Drought, Estimated 40 Years Old, Kern County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 18 x 45 in.

Throughout the 20th century, Citrus was a defining crop in California. Today, citrus growers in California face mounting challenges as rising temperatures, prolonged drought, and shifting seasons strain crop viability. In response, many farms are replacing citrus and nut trees with less water-intensive crops.

Canyon Live Oak, Stunted by Wind, Estimated 300 Years Old, Monterey County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

On the wind-swept slopes of the Santa Lucia Mountains, mature Canyon Live Oaks often grow low and wide, their gnarled limbs shaped by constant wind. This grove of oaks grew horizontally until a landslide over ten years ago changed the topography and calmed the winds, allowing new vertical growth.

Coyote and Clonal Quaking Aspen Grove, Estimated 1500 Years Old, Mono County, CA, 2024
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

Clonal colonies of Quaking Aspen can survive for thousands of years by producing new shoots from a shared root system, allowing the grove to persist even as individual trees die. Colonies support high biodiversity, enrich surrounding plant communities, and stabilize soil. They also recover quickly from fire, drought, and other disturbances, making them ecological keystones.

Burned Joshua Tree with Dried Invasive Grasses, Estimated 100 Years Old, Dome Fire Site, San Bernardino County, CA, 2024
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

Invasive grasses like red brome and cheatgrass have increased fire frequency in the Mojave, creating fuel beds that allow flames to spread rapidly. Joshua trees, which aren't adapted to frequent fire, are often killed, and seedlings struggle to regenerate—threatening the species' long-term survival.

Valley Oak Used for Public Lynchings, Estimated 300 Years Old, Los Angeles County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

In California, Valley Oaks were often used for public lynchings, their widespread range and long, sturdy limbs making them grim instruments of racial violence. Historians believe this unnamed Valley Oak was used for multiple lynchings in the ranching community of Calabasas throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. Nearby, a more visible "Hangman's Tree" was promoted as the site of such events, though it was likely a fabrication for publicity.

Canary Island Date, Chilean Wine, and Mexican Fan Palms, Estimated 20-150 Years Old, Elysian Park, Los Angeles County, CA, 2023
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

In the early 20th century, Los Angeles planted rows of palm trees to beautify the city—while also aiding surveillance. Tall, narrow, and widely spaced, they made it easier for officials to monitor and deter public gatherings. Today, century-old Canary Island Date Palms along the Avenue of Palms in Elysian Park are dying from Fusarium wilt, and disease-resistant Chilean Wine Palms are being planted between them in preparation for their loss.

Arroyo Willow and Fern Grove, Monterey County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 14x 35 in.

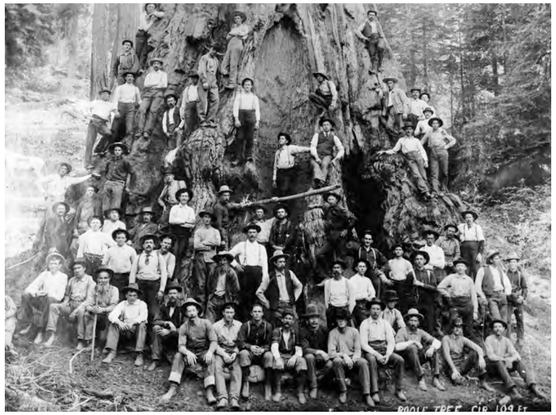
Arroyo Willows play a key role in California's ecological restoration, stabilizing stream banks and supporting wetland biodiversity. Though hardy and fast-growing, they face localized threats from drought, invasive species, and habitat loss, which can undermine their effectiveness in restoring degraded ecosystems.

One of the Largest Valley Oaks by Volume, Estimated 600 Years Old, Groveland Wastewater Treatment Plant, Tuoloumne County, CA, 2024
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

Native oaks in California are increasingly threatened by urban and suburban development, which fragments habitats, compacts soil, and disrupts underground root and fungal networks essential to their survival. Roads, grading, and construction often damage mature trees and prevent natural regeneration. As development spreads, oak woodlands continue to decline.

"The Boole Tree" Giant Sequoia, Estimated 2,000 Years Old, With 130 Year Old Carvings, Fresno County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 45 x 18 in.

"The Boole Tree," the sixth-largest living sequoia, was the only mature tree left standing by loggers in the Converse Basin Grove in the late 1800s—spared due to its size. A historic photo from the 1890s shows dozens of loggers gathered at its base, their names, hometowns, and dates carved into the trunk. Though long healed and nearly invisible to the naked eye, these inscriptions reappear more than 130 years later when viewed through a thermal camera, where the scar tissue emits less heat than the surrounding bark.



Interior Live Oaks, Covered in Invasive Cape Ivy, Estimated 200 Years Old, Monterey County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 8 x 20 in.

Tree ring studies show a decline in growth over the past 30 years in this grove of Interior Live Oaks—possibly linked to the spread of invasive Cape Ivy. The vine smothers native vegetation, climbing trunks and branches, blocking light, and placing severe stress on host trees. Its rapid growth disrupts ecosystems, displaces native species, and increases fire risk throughout affected areas.

Black Oak and Mule Deer, Mariposa County, CA, 2024
Silver Gelatin Print, 14 x 35 in.

Black Oak woodlands have been stewarded by Indigenous communities across California for generations. They cultivated Black Oaks for their acorns, using controlled burns, thinning, and harvesting to promote healthy groves, enhance biodiversity, and reduce wildfire risk.

Living Redwood Stumps, Logged in 1880s, Monterey County, CA, 2025
Silver Gelatin Print, 18 x 45 in.

This redwood grove on California's Central Coast was logged for timber in the 1880s. The stumps persist—not only because redwood is rot-resistant, but because the trees continue to live, drawing nutrients from a shared root system that can sustain them for centuries.