

STEPHEN BULGER GALLERY

RITA LEISTNER

The Tree Planters

Exhibition Dates: October 21 – November 18, 2017

Reception for the Artist: Saturday, October 21, 6-9pm

Online Preview: beginning October 14 at ffotoimage.com

The Stephen Bulger Gallery is pleased to present “The Tree Planters”, our first solo exhibition of work by Canadian artist Rita Leistner.

Having planted over a half a million trees between 1983 and 1992, Leistner perceives this series as an homage of sorts, to all the Canadian tree planters; past, present, and future. Canadian tree planting is unique in the world and is entering its third generation. It has become an indelible part of our national identity, changing not only the geographic landscape of Canada, but also its cultural mindset. It is an essential contributor to Canada being the world leader in sustainable forest management, which all our futures depend on.

Best known for her work in war zones as a conflict photographer, Leistner came to recognize how the strenuous, remote job of tree planting prepared her for that role. Now she has turned the tables and is using her accumulated knowledge as a photographer to offer a unique perspective of her former occupation. After years of photographing war zones, Leistner reached a point in her life where she wanted to make photographs that did not represent death, despair, hatred, loss, and violence. Instead of the deserts of the Middle-East, these photographs were made in British Columbia during 2016 and 2017, while “embedded” within the planting camps of Coast Range Contractors.

Using high-resolution digital cameras and a battery-powered electronic flash, Leistner’s large-scale colour photographs present the tree planters in heroic fashion; the sheer physicality of their work depicts a back-breaking dance of bodies, shovels, and dirt. To help orient gallery-goers to the live-action context on the ground, a video of the planters with Rita and her assistant accompanies the exhibition. While each photograph features an individual tree planter, they represent something more universal about hope, belief in the future, living in the moment, and the power of perseverance – one tree at a time.

Award-winning photographer, writer, and educator, Rita Leistner’s varied career has taken her from academia to war and back again, intersecting the genres of art, photojournalism, and literary criticism. She is a graduate of the International Center of Photography in New York and has a Master of Arts in comparative literature from the University of Toronto, where she has also previously taught the history of photojournalism and documentary photography. Her first sole-authored book, *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Marshall McLuhan Award for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology. She is co-author of several other books including *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in*

Iraq and The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story. Her photography has been exhibited and published internationally, and her articles, essays, and reviews have appeared in numerous magazines and books including Julian Stallabrass's *Memories of Fire: Images of War and the Wars of Images* and Michael Kamber's *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*. In 2015, she completed work on a ten-year trilogy project in the Levant, which includes the award-winning film *Miklat*. Leistner was also a finalist for the 2017 Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography at Harvard. The Canadian War Museum in Ottawa has recently acquired fifteen years of Rita Leistner's work from Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Afghanistan—among the largest additions to the collection by any photographer and the largest by a female photographer.

The Art and Science behind The Tree Planters Exhibition

Panel Discussion: Wednesday November 8, 6-7:30pm

To RSVP please email info@bulgery.com or call the gallery at 416.504.0575

Gallery artist **Rita Leistner** will be joined by two of Canada's leading experts on reforestation, **Dr. Sandy Smith**, Professor of Forestry, University of Toronto, and **Mark Kuhlberg**, Associate Professor of History at Laurentian University. Leistner met Smith in 2016 while doing research for "The Tree Planters", and Smith introduced her to Kuhlberg. Their respective passions for the forest were mutually contagious and friendship soon followed. In this informal, intimate panel, surrounded by Leistner's large-scale, heroic portraits of tree planters, the three forest aficionados - an artist, a scientist, and an historian - will ask the question, "How can art, science and history work together to advocate for a healthier planet?" They will share some of the discussions they've had over the past year including their strategies and optimism for the future of Canadian forests and the significance of Canada's role as the international leader of forest management.

Dr. Sandy Smith a Professor in the Faculty of Forestry at the University of Toronto, serving as Dean (2010-2012). She specializes in forest health, specifically using natural controls to address invasive species in urban forests. Professor Smith has published over 125 papers, served as a reviewer for numerous refereed journals, NSERC panels, and on scientific panels for managing invasive insects such as the Asian Long-Horned Beetle (ALHB) and Emerald Ash Borer (EAB). Her research focuses on biological control of forest pests including invasive forest insects, earthworms, and plants such as dog-strangling vine and Phragmites. Sandy is a Past President of the Entomological Society of Canada, a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society, a Strategic Advisor for LEAF (Local Enhancement & Appreciation of Forests) and serves on the Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation Board and the Ontario Invasive Plant Council.

Mark Kuhlberg was born and raised in Toronto. After accepting that his hockey career was not going to be a paying proposition, he turned to tree planting for sustenance. It took only twenty seasons in the bush for him to realize that there were easier ways to make a living; he turned to academia. He is now a Professor of History and the Director of the MA History program at Laurentian University in Sudbury. His publications span many sub-fields of history, including the realms of business, environmental, political, education and Aboriginal History, and his fields of expertise are Ontario's forest history in particular and the history of Canada's woodlands in general. His latest book, *In the Power of the Government: The Rise and Fall of Newsprint in Ontario, 1894-1932* (UTP 2015), has won 2 National History Book Prize awards. Mark lives with his wife, two children and their new puppy in a woodland outside Sudbury. Mark remains a diehard fan of the Maple Leafs; he is still awaiting his call up to the team.