

A poet walks into a forest...

Professor and student exhibit combines nature with poetry

By **Ben Saalman**, Assistant Culture Editor

Lose your sorrows in the underbrush at the Hunterdon Art Museum, where visual art and poetry entwine in this limited-time collaboration of Lafayette College peers.

The Never Lost Forest exhibition — which had its opening reception on Sept. 21 and continues until Jan. 11 — is a collaboration between English professor emeritus Lee Upton, student Duncan White '26 and the director of community-based teaching Jim Toia.

“I’m immensely grateful to Jim Toia for this opportunity to collaborate with him,” Upton said. “His innovative use of unexpected materials and his artful sensitivity to language are revelatory. It is a continually surprising adventure to work with him.”

The exhibit is composed of physical visualizations of poems, unified by the theme of a forest’s complex webs of growth and their connection to mourning and memory.

On Thursday, Upton and Toia made an appearance at the museum to discuss their work and perform readings from their respective new books.

“I think people really respond to Jim’s work because, whether or not you’re an art appreciator, everyone understands nature,” said Jeanne Brasile, the executive director of The Hunterdon Art Museum. “I’m a big fan of poetry, and a big fan of art, and I just think Jim and Lee are such wonderful people.”

The project started about four years ago, according to Toia, when he asked Upton if she would be interested in writing poems centered on trees and forests that could be interpreted with a physical medium.

“I created a series of one-line poems and several shorter poems in response to our conversations,” Upton said. “Portions of those poems or entire one-line poems are included in the forms that Jim created.”

Crafting his interpretations using a myriad natural materials, ranging from bark and sycamore leaves to wasp nest paper, Toia worked tirelessly over the course of those four years to find the right “bodies” for the words to live in.

This process, however, was not a solo endeavor.

With the art department acquiring a grant to install a laser cutter, established last year in the Williams Arts Building, White was enlisted as a technician to help with the new tool and provide input on the composition of Toia’s materials.



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Other exhibitions currently at the Hunterdon Art Museum include “If Not Now, When” and “Resounding Remnants.”

“Professor Toia and I are great friends, and I often seek his advice, so we just kept making a habit of getting together and working on it,” White said. “Many of the material challenges forced me to learn new things about the tools I use constantly in the studio, things that I have now fully integrated into my process.”

This exhibit is on display alongside two other independent artists’, also getting their time in the sun.

“I think it builds empathy, I think it builds conversation and it straws us together as part of the human experience to know that other people are having these challenges as well and you’re not alone,” Brasile said. “I think that’s a very important conversation to have.”