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Composer John Luther Adams' new campus 'Wind Garden' art installation is heard more than it is seen



Los Angeles Times





Composer John Luther Adams under the eucalyptus canopy of “The Wind Garden” at UC San Diego. (Erik Jepsen / UC San Diego Publications)

By LEAH OLLMAN

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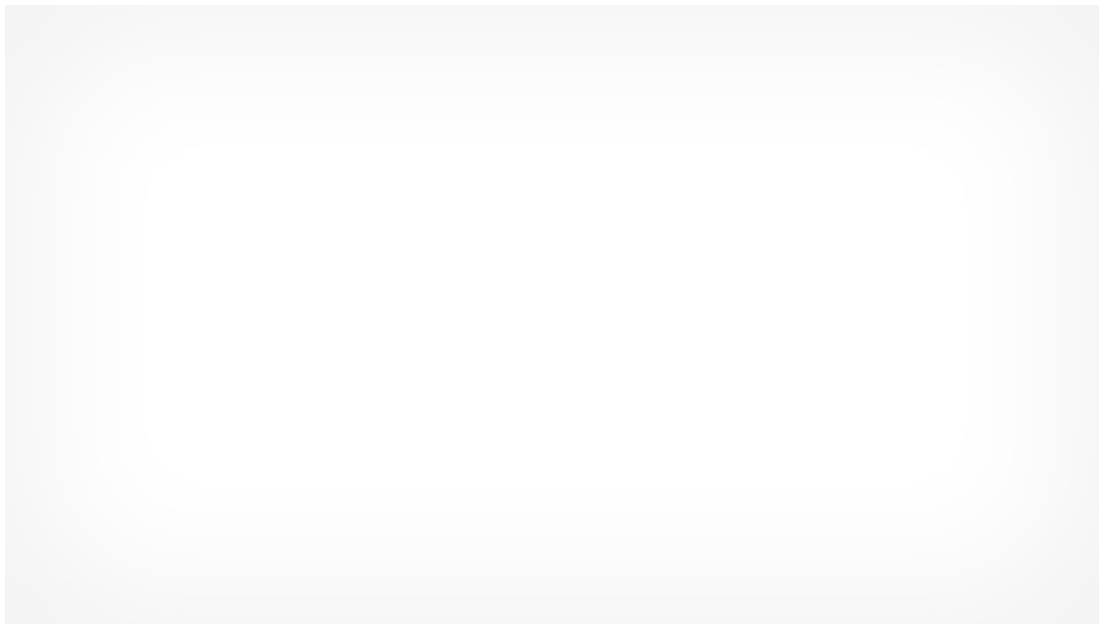
Reporting from La Jolla — It is sculpture that’s largely invisible, announcing itself subtly, almost stealthily. Walk an unpaved path through a eucalyptus grove at UC San Diego, and suspended tones with no apparent source weave their way into the already densely layered soundscape. Traffic on the adjacent road, jets rumbling overhead, clicking spokes of passing bicycles, the frictive thrum of a skateboard, the crunch of your own footsteps — all shift from background noise to counterpoint for the tones emanating from above.

“The Wind Garden” is the new work of Pulitzer Prize- and Grammy-winning composer John Luther Adams. It’s his first permanent outdoor art installation and the latest addition to the Stuart Collection of commissioned, site-determined sculpture on campus.

The work's tones are generated by 32 small, tubular devices that Adams has positioned on tree branches. A speaker assigned to each is mounted nearby, and four subwoofers in steel boxes are inconspicuously arrayed on the ground, atop the carpet of dried leaves. The wind's activity, time of day and season all determine what tones will charge the space.

Lighter, higher sounds in major tonalities dominate the day. At night, the register lowers, minor keys are invoked, and (thanks to the subwoofers) the sounds drop down from the canopy to the level of the body.

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“You have to move through the piece, or sit for a long time and let it move through you,” said Adams, 64, who was in La Jolla to make adjustments to the piece before its opening this month. Long and lanky, in a working uniform of jeans and baseball cap, Adams paced the path before settling onto a bench of reclaimed eucalyptus in what he considers the apse of his “arboreal chapel.”

“In recent years, space has become a fundamental compositional element for me, in the way that it would be for a sculptor,” he said, referring to the present work as well as music he has written to be performed outdoors, by ensembles dispersed across a landscape.

“Yes, I mean poetic space, a sort of metaphorical space, and temporal space, but I also mean physical, volumetric space. Everything about this piece is meticulously composed, but the thing that gives it its life, its breath, is the way we’re working with the space — the placement of this particular tone in that particular tree, in relation to that tone at the other end of the grove.”



John Luther Adams' composition notebook. (Erik Jepsen / UC San Diego Publications)

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Adams called himself “a Luddite by disposition.”

“I love that the conduit in the ground, the computer in the closet [in the nearby Mandell Weiss Theatre], all the sensors, all the data that’s feeding this — it all disappears,” he said. “When you walk through here, it’s just you and the trees and the wind and the sound. It’s certainly not about technology. It’s about listening.”

A dozen students arrived and fanned out across the grove, the sonic architecture of the piece choreographing their movement — and their stillness.

“I find it to be very zen,” says Mary Beebe, founding director of the 19-piece Stuart Collection. “It takes you out of the university, into another part of the world, and maybe another part of your head.”

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Beebe invited Adams to roam the 1,200-acre campus and conceive a project nearly 10 years ago. Long evolutions are not unusual for works in the collection, in part because artists are encouraged to stretch into new territory, and also because the logistics of site and engineering usually deliver surprises. Not long after “The Wind Garden” was first installed last fall, a fierce storm felled one of the largest trees in the grove, requiring months of recalibration.

Looking up into the eucalyptus trees, where Adams' tones drift down and blend with ambient sounds on the ground. (Erik Jepsen / UC San Diego Publications)

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For Adams, the origin of the piece was his “spur-of-the-moment” wedding in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge 29 years ago.

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