

Palazzo  
Citterio



Museo  
Nazionale  
dell'Arte  
Digitale



# Debora Hirsch **VANISHING TREES**

GRANDE ● BRERA  
MILANO

Palazzo  
Citterio



In collaboration with



With the scientific support  
of the New York Botanical Garden

# Debora Hirsch

## VANISHING TREES

15 January – 15 April 2026

Palazzo Citterio  
via Brera 14, Milano  
[palazzocitterio.org](http://palazzocitterio.org)

[museoartedigitale.cultura.gov.it](http://museoartedigitale.cultura.gov.it)

In the silence preceding every word, nature guards a language that humankind has forgotten. With *Vanishing Trees*, Debora Hirsch restores voice to three endangered species in the wild: *Ginkgo biloba*, *Pterocarya fraxinifolia* and *Torreya taxifolia*, transforming them into living presences, witnesses of a world that endures time and oblivion.

The work was born as a digital installation, but its true driving force is the memory that animates it and transforms it into experience. The images take shape and dissolve like natural cycles, evoking the continuity between growth and disappearance. The digital lens amplifies memory, translating the biological and symbolic legacy of the past into a contemporary language.

In the artist's work, vegetal forms become presences suspended between vital time and historical time, evoking an almost archetypal dimension, where the tree is elevated to a silent icon of resistance.

In the video the trees express themselves in the first person, they "speak", through the texts of Lucas

Mertehikian, a scholar with whom Hirsch has developed her research in the field of Plant Humanities. In this way the artist replaces the human point of view with that of nature; it is a radical and at the same time compassionate gesture. In this monologue technology becomes a language of resonance and a means through which the vegetal matter regains consciousness and voice. The generated images thus take shape as a site of mediation between scientific memory, imagination, and cultural tradition, where contemporary technologies operate as instruments of continuity, reactivating the past within the present.

*Ginkgo biloba* is the sole survivor of a plant order dating back more than two hundred million years.

Having withstood geological catastrophes, glaciations, and even the atomic explosion in Hiroshima, it embodies the principle of immortality. In its bilobed leaves, a symbol of unity within duality, Hirsch recognizes a form of life that endures without ever extinguishing itself, and a memory that traverses epochs as a continuous line between destruction and rebirth.

*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*, or Caucasian wingnut, sinks its

roots along rivers, inhabiting the shifting boundary between water and land. With its hanging inflorescences and winged fruits travelling on the wind, it becomes for the artist a symbol of voyage and transmission. It is the image of an unending energy that migrates, adapts, and survives mutation like a thought in motion. Its vegetal wings form both a vital principle and a biological structure, carrying the hope of life itself.

*Torreya taxifolia*, known as Florida nutmeg, lives on the edge of disappearance. The rarest of North American conifers, it survives almost solely through clonal sprouts that regenerate from its own stumps: a body that is reborn but does not grow, a life suspended between being and vanishing. Hirsch transforms it into a poetic figure of extinction, a symbol of the turning point between rebirth and surrender. It is a form of life that resists but does not evolve. At the base of the project there is archival research of iconographic, literary and scientific origin, carried out in collaboration with two institutions of excellence: the Orto Botanico di Brera, part of the University of Milan, and the New York Botanical Garden. Video footage produced at the Orto Botanico di Brera,

photographic material, images arriving from herbaria, others arriving from extensive historical research of engravings, lithographs, botanical drawings and rare materials, are selected and reworked by the artist in a process that merges scientific memory and aesthetic sensitivity, translating the legacy of the past into a contemporary language.

The Orto Botanico di Brera marks the origin of the project: the place where the artist worked and the site that houses the three trees at its center. Among them, the Caucasian wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*) and the two Ginkgo biloba trees (male and female) have recently been designated as 'Monumental Trees' by the Italian state for their age, size, and historical significance.

The direct observation of these specimens – in their slow transformations, in their scars, in their variations of colour – allowed Hirsch to grasp aspects that no archive can restore. Brera thus becomes the context that imprints its rhythm and its presence on the work. The images of the video preserve this direct experience, bringing into the digital dimension the matter, the light and the traces of the real trees.

Debora Hirsch's research has developed over the years through the investigation of the cultural genealogies of nature, combining botanical, historical and technological studies and working on archives, datasets and algorithmic processes. In this continuity, her practice finds today a territory in which the painterly gesture and algorithmic experimentation influence each other.

The project *Vanishing Trees* therefore inaugurates a new aesthetic: painting becomes the starting point that directs the forms generated by the digital. At the same time, the vision produced by AI, with its capacity to relaunch unexpected forms and to amplify invisible details, returns to the physical plane, influencing the composition and rhythm of the material works that the artist develops alongside the video. In this reciprocal exchange, AI introduces a quality of unpredictability, intensifying the work of the artist who, through the choice of datasets and editing, directs the algorithmic generation. Painting and AI thus become two creative processes that feed each other: the digital opens areas that the artist's hand can make her own, the painting returns to the digital a latent physicality. This reciprocity generates

a new visual language, attested by the presence in the exhibition of a physical work, *Fragmenta*, also created specifically for Palazzo Citterio.

The video unfolds like a visual poem, and the phrases that move across the images, spoken by the trees themselves, constitute an essential account of the life and time of the three trees. Hirsch conveys to them a conscious and lucid voice. It is an act of empathy in which the artist places herself in a position of listening, allowing nature to tell its story through artificial language. The work begins with an essential question: what does it mean today to recognize and preserve what is at risk of disappearing? As Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "everything that lives is a riddle that asks to be seen." It is not only a question of protection, but of gaze. It means questioning how much we are still able to truly see, to feel the continuity between us and what lives outside our perimeter.

To recognize becomes an act of responsibility, and to preserve a gesture of listening towards what, though not speaking our language, concerns us intimately.

Alongside this, another element emerges from the work: imagining a tomorrow for life forms that risk

extinction. Artificial intelligence generates continuity for the image, a way to prolong the presence of the trees beyond their biological fragility. The video seeks to extend the existence of the three trees by evoking memory, providing them with additional time and a renewed space to inhabit, if only within the confines of the image.

In the dialogue between art, science and humanistic thought, *Vanishing Trees* reactivates a memory that belongs to Western culture, the one that has always recognized in trees the visible form of thought.

From the tree of knowledge in Genesis to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tree of life, up to Charles Baudelaire's forest of symbols, arboreal nature has been for centuries the language through which humankind has expressed the complexity of the world.

Hirsch gathers this legacy and translates it into a digital grammar, where every image is at once scientific data and metaphor.

Her reflection is situated in the territory of contemporary Plant Humanities, which investigates plants as subjects of knowledge, capable of shaping thoughts, worldviews

and forms of relation, and through which humanity has developed categories such as origin, transformation, cyclicity and care. In this framework, Hirsch's work introduces a further dimension, showing how new technologies can become tools to rethink our cultural genealogy, reactivating in vegetal images their ability to produce knowledge.

Finally, the work finds its deepest core through the awareness that every form of knowledge, ancient or contemporary, is born from an act of listening towards life. Every image in the video is thus the result of a double genealogy, natural and cultural.

Science provides the structure, history and philosophy offer the meaning, and digital art unites them in a language that brings knowledge back to its original value, that of an experience shared between humankind and the life that surrounds it.

### **Clelia Patella**

Curator





**The Brera Botanical Garden is a romantic green oasis enclosed among the buildings of the center of Milan and part of the renowned Palazzo Brera complex.**

The garden has a centuries-old history: since the 14th century it has been a place of cultivation and meditation for the Humiliati Fathers of Brera and, subsequently, for the Jesuits, until 1773. The establishment of the Brera Botanical Garden dates back to 1774–1775, within the context of the action of renewal and foundation of public institutions for education and research promoted by Maria Theresa of Austria in Milan.

Since then, the Brera Botanical Garden has been a center of advanced education and preserves a heritage that today includes about 1300 species over an area of half a hectare. Since 1935 it has belonged to the University of Milan which, starting in the 1990s, has carried out restoration and redevelopment interventions to return to the community the original eighteenth-century layout of long and narrow flowerbeds that characterize the formal area and the informal character of the

arboretum. Since 2005 it has been officially recognized as a museum. In collaboration with the artist Debora Hirsch, we have selected three tree species classified as at risk of extinction in their native ranges, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In the Brera Botanical Garden there are four magnificent specimens of these species: a Florida torreyia (*Torreya taxifolia*), two Ginkgo biloba, one male and one female, and a Caucasian wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*); the latter three are officially recognized as monumental trees, for age and size. We invite you to visit the Brera Botanical Garden Museum to explore and enjoy its wealth of plant species of all shapes, colors, and scents - an incredible stage of nature that will impress you throughout all seasons and where majestic trees prevail.

**Martin Kater**

President of the Brera Botanical Garden Museum and Herbarium of the University of Milan

We thank Giorgio Bardelli (Archive of the Brera Botanical Garden) for the images provided.



In *Philosophia Botanica* (1751), Carolus Linnaeus revolutionized natural history by establishing rules for naming plants that urged botanists to forget-to forget their texture, smell, even their colors, and focus on the features that remained unchanged over time.

It's not that Linnaeus was indifferent to change, but he knew that to name something, we need the illusion of a beginning.

I was reminded of this when I first encountered Debora Hirsch's work. In her series *Plant*, Debora fed a computational model thousands of botanical images, so that each species it generated would contain traces of many others. If Linnaeus sought clarity through subtraction, Debora found resonance through accumulation.

Over the summer of 2025, we met often at the New York Botanical Garden, where I coordinate academic and artistic programs grounded in the premise that there are no human societies without plants.

In the Garden's archives, we went through botanical

illustrations, herbals, herbarium specimens, and journals to understand the history of trees on the verge of disappearing. The result of this exchange is *Vanishing Trees*, a video where each chapter tells a story of persistence and precarity through image and text.

The question of how we tell plant stories is at the heart of Plant Humanities, an emerging academic field that I've helped shape at Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington DC, and now at the New York Botanical Garden.

We start with a very simple fact: although plants make life on Earth possible and shape human culture (including medicine, food, and religion), we rarely pay attention to them. Think about it: how many trees did you pass on your way here? How many of them can you name?

Linnaeus taught us to forget in order to see clearly, but today, when 45% of all flowering plants are endangered, the forgetting we face is of a different kind.

It's not a method, but a habit. In this context, the goal of Plant Humanities is to create spaces of conversation for scholars and artists who, like Debora, share an urgency to remember that our lives and those of

plants are inextricably tied together. That's the new beginning that her work invites us to consider.

**Lucas Mertehikian**

Director of the Humanities Institute,  
New York Botanical Garden

## GINKGO BILOBA

**Scientific name:** *Ginkgo biloba*

**Area of origin:** China (Zhejiang Province)

**Conservation status:** Endangered (IUCN Red List)

### Ecology

The only living representative of the ancient order *Ginkgoales*, dating back more than 200 million years. A deciduous tree with fan-shaped leaves, extremely tolerant of urban pollution and poor soils.

### Description

Known as a “living fossil,” the ginkgo has survived multiple mass extinctions, and some specimens even resisted the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

Female trees produce pseudofruits with a strong odor, rich in butyric acid.

Wild populations are now extremely rare: most specimens derive from cultivated plants, resulting in reduced genetic diversity.

### Presence at the Brera Botanical Garden Museum

The garden hosts one female and one male specimen. They appear indistinguishable at first; however, each spring new individuals sprout at the base of the female, and in late autumn a strong odor can be perceived nearby, caused by the maturation of its pseudofruits. With two and a half centuries of life, they have been recognized as Monumental Trees of Italy.

*In Debora Hirsch's vision, the ginkgo embodies the idea of immortality: a life that crosses eras and catastrophes without extinguishing.*



## **PTEROCARYA FRAXINIFOLIA**

*(Caucasian wingnut)*

**Scientific name:** *Pterocarya fraxinifolia*

**Area of origin:** Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia, Turkey)

**Conservation status:** Vulnerable (IUCN Red List)

### **Ecology**

A large deciduous tree that can reach 30 meters in height. It grows along riverbanks and in alluvial plains on deep, moist, nutrient-rich soils. It plays a fundamental ecological role in riparian ecosystems, stabilizing banks and creating shaded habitats.

### **Description**

The common name comes from its winged fruits, which develop in long hanging chains.

Once widespread in humid forests, it is now threatened by habitat fragmentation caused by agriculture, dams, and urbanization. However, it is an adaptable species and is appreciated for its shape and ornamental fruiting.

### **Presence at the Brera Botanical Garden Museum**

The *Pterocarya fraxinifolia* specimen at Brera (80–90 years old) is recognized as a Monumental Tree of Italy. Despite its relatively young age, it is one of the most majestic trees in the garden.

*In Debora Hirsch's vision, it becomes the symbol of travel, transmission, and the continuity of life.*



## **TORREYA TAXIFOLIA**

*(Florida Nutmeg)*

**Scientific name:** *Torreya taxifolia*

**Area of origin:** Ravines along the Apalachicola River, northern Florida and southwestern Georgia (USA)

**Conservation status:** Critically Endangered (IUCN Red List)

### **Ecology**

An evergreen conifer growing in humid, shaded environments.

Once dominant in its restricted range, it now survives almost exclusively through vegetative regeneration, as seed-producing individuals have nearly disappeared.

### **Description**

Known as “Florida nutmeg” or “stinking cedar” for the strong odor emitted by its bark when cut, it is one of the rarest conifers in North America.

It has undergone a decline of more than 98% due to fungal diseases, storms, and environmental change.

However, it shows a form of vegetative resilience: from dying trunks emerge clonal shoots, keeping the species alive in a fragile balance between presence and disappearance.

### **Presence at the Brera Botanical Garden Museum**

Brera hosts one of the very few specimens cultivated outside its natural habitat. The tree grows next to the historic building, symbolically uniting fragility and resistance.

*In Debora Hirsch’s vision, it becomes a poetic image of extinction: a life that persists while remaining suspended on the threshold of disappearance.*



**Debora Hirsch is a multimedia Italo-Brazilian artist working across drawing and painting, AI models, proprietary datasets, algorithmic processes, post-production, and animation.**

Her practice centers on biodiversity preservation and endangered species, exploring how technology can be used to reconsider notions of life, memory, and disappearance. Seeking to restore the complexity of the real, her work intertwines botanical, ecological, historical, and cultural studies through a methodology grounded in investigation, reinterpretation, and theoretical reflection. Her recent research unfolds within the field of Plant Humanities, examining our shifting relationship with plant life. Her sources range from herbaria, scientific archives, rare books, illustrations, and digital repositories to textual materials, while dialogues with scientists, humanists, and botanists often inform the conceptual architecture of her oeuvre.

Her works have been presented in public and private institutions internationally, including Hutchinson Modern & Contemporary, New York (solo show); Museo Villa Bernasconi, Cernobbio (solo show); Palazzo della Ragione, Verona; MuBE Museu Brasileiro da Escultura e Ecologia, São Paulo (solo show); Museo Santa Maria della Scala, Siena; MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow; Smack Mellon, New York; A.I.R. Gallery, New York; MAXXI National Museum of the 21st Century Arts, Rome; nGbK, Berlin; Fondazione A. Olivetti, Rome (solo show); Il Chiostro Arte & Archivi (solo show); Galleria d'Arte Moderna Palazzo Forti, Verona; and MAGA Museum, Gallarate.



**The artist thanks:** Flavia and Alberto Ades, Marina Affanni, Samantha D'Acunto, Douglas C. Daly, Pietro Hirsch Butté, Isabella Hutchinson, Martin M. Kater, Cristina Puricelli, Eric W. Sanderson, Stephen Sinon, Nicole Tarnowsky, Antonella Testa.



GRANDE ● BRERA  
MILANO

Palazzo  
Citterio



Museo  
Nazionale  
dell'Arte  
Digitale