



ART &  
SCIENCE  
COLLIDE

Presented by

Getty

**Skirball**  
Cultural Center

**NEWS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Media Contact:** Emma Jacobson-Sive, EJS Media, [emma@ejs-media.com](mailto:emma@ejs-media.com), (323) 842-2064

**Skirball Cultural Center Presents**  
***Ancient Wisdom for a Future Ecology: Trees, Time & Technology***  
**October 17, 2024–March 2, 2025**

**Evocative Exhibition by Artists Tiffany Shlain and Ken Goldberg**  
**Fuses Art with the Science of Tree-Ring Dating and Artificial Intelligence**  
**as Part of Getty's Region-Wide Initiative PST ART: Art and Science Collide**



The artists with their sculpture, *Tree of Knowledge*. The artists used pyrography to burn over 160 historical questions that underlie our collective pursuit of knowledge into a 10,000-pound, salvaged Eucalyptus tree section. Questions include: "Do we have free will?" "Is there a grand unified theory of physics?" "Can machines be truly intelligent?" (Photo by Stefanie Schwartz.)

**LOS ANGELES, CA**—The Skirball Cultural Center presents [\*Ancient Wisdom for a Future Ecology: Trees, Time & Technology\*](#), an evocative exhibit from artists Tiffany Shlain and Ken Goldberg who draw inspiration from dendrochronology (the science of tree-ring dating), Artificial Intelligence, and ancient Jewish texts and traditions to re-examine human narratives and their relationship to nature. The exhibition features six tree-ring sculptures that reimagine our past and collective futures in new ways, a video portrait of Los Angeles that draws from open-source ecology datasets, and an invitation for visitors to create personal tree tributes using AI software. As part of Getty’s landmark regional initiative *PST ART: Art and Science Collide*, which explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present, the exhibition will be on view from October 17, 2024, to March 2, 2025.

“The interdependence of trees and people figure prominently in the sciences, the arts, and spiritual practices; and we are thrilled to have these two brilliant artists at the vanguard of the intersection of art and science explore how trees are central to life on earth,” said Skirball Vice President and Museum Director Sheri Bernstein.

“Using ancient practices like pyrography alongside the newest predictive language technologies, like AI, Tiffany and Ken examine how history, the future, and hope can be intertwined in this ingenious exploration of trees and our natural environment,” said Skirball President and CEO Jessie Kornberg. “Trees figure prominently across many religions, including the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, so exploring these and other narratives that trees may have borne witness to in the exhibition is fascinating.”

Frequent creative collaborators, married Bay Area-based artists Shlain and Goldberg have conceived of the exhibition in two sections: Trees and Time, and Trees and Technology.

### **Trees and Time**

The first section includes six large-scale tree-ring sculptures. Using the historical timelines inscribed on large tree-ring cross-sections at many national parks as a point of departure, Shlain and Goldberg have created a set of six alternative timelines inscribed on cross-sections of salvaged trees. In contrast to the parks’ traditional timelines, which usually suggest an objective, authoritative accounting of history, the artists have created timelines that intentionally underscore their subjective nature and expand our perspective on trees, science, history, culture, and memory. The six timelines include:

- **Tree of Knowledge**—A 10,000-pound organic cornucopia of questions that exemplify humanity’s ongoing pursuit of knowledge.
- **If We Lose Ourselves**—A record of how human knowledge has been preserved and transmitted.
- **Living On the Edge**—Exploring California history through an arboreal lens.
- **Abstract Expression**—A wordless timeline tracing a visual history of science through mathematical equations.

- **DendroJudaology: A Timeline of the Jewish People**—A term coined by Shlain and Goldberg for their artistic interpretation of Jewish history.
- **Two Notes**—A sphere holding two opposing perspectives.

All text, numbers, and symbols were burned into the salvaged trees by the artists through the process of pyrography.

### **Trees and Technology**

The second section examines trees in cities—our urban forests—and how they provide essential benefits for public health and well-being. Emerging advances in AI and machine learning can make urban forest monitoring more accurate and affordable, especially for under-resourced cities and neighborhoods disproportionately affected by climate change. Posing the question of how best to measure and track urban trees so that we can develop more effective environmental policies, the artists apply these new technologies to identify trees, chart how trees vary across neighborhoods, and to facilitate personal reflections and connections for visitors.

To depict our urban forest, the artists have created an aerial video that captures an artistic interpretation of tree canopy coverage, inspired by artist Ed Ruscha's *Streets of Los Angeles* photo and video archive (1965-present in the Getty Collection). Whereas Ruscha's photography focuses on LA's urban architecture, Goldberg and Shlain focus instead on LA's urban treescapes overhead across four major thoroughfares in Los Angeles panning down Hollywood, Sunset, Manchester, and Whittier Boulevards from a bird's-eye view to contrast their differences. Incorporating data from Google's open-source Auto Arborist Dataset and utilizing new AI tools to identify tree species, Goldberg and Shlain created this video in collaboration with Google researcher Jonathan Huang, MIT professor Sara Beery, and University of California, Berkeley students.

Artificial Intelligence enables several of the works in this exhibit and is a recurring theme. In their historical timelines, Goldberg and Shlain reference the history of AI and its potential drawbacks. Their exhibit implicitly references the original Faustian bargain of eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge. What are the tradeoffs in exchanging blissful ignorance for Western knowledge of history, science, and technologies such as AI?

In the last section of the exhibit, visitors are encouraged to explore a tree in their own neighborhood and create a customized tree tribute based on biology, history, and their own unique perspective. Visitors are invited to identify and measure their chosen tree, , and submit this with personal impressions to [ancientwisdom.art](http://ancientwisdom.art) Using AI, the artists create a customized image and text tribute for the submitted trees that interweaves personal reflections with the tree's life and LA events. Goldberg and Shlain collaborated with editor Jenny Traig, and University of California, Berkeley students in implementing the website.

## **About the Artists**

Creative partners Tiffany Shlain and Ken Goldberg have collaborated on art projects and film documentaries for over twenty years. Both are award-winning artists who use technology to critique and question the status quo as seen in their Sundance award-winning documentary feature, which they also co-wrote, *Connected: An Autobiography about Love, Death, and Technology*; and their Emmy-nominated series *The Future Starts Here*, including episodes *Why We Love Robots*; *Robots, Botox, and Google Glass*; and *Technology Shabbats*.

Ken Goldberg and Tiffany Shlain have also worked independently for decades as artists—including exhibits at the Whitney and at MoMA in New York—and technologists.

Goldberg is an artist and professor of engineering at the University of California, Berkeley where he questions the boundaries between the digital and natural worlds. At UC Berkeley, he leads a robotics research lab and is chair of the Berkeley AI Research (BAIR) steering committee. He and his students have published over 300 papers on robotics, and he is a sought-after speaker on Artificial Intelligence.

Shlain is an interdisciplinary artist and author whose works in film, sculpture, and performance explore ideas in feminism, neuroscience, philosophy, technology, and nature. Shlain has worked with media technology since high school when she was a student ambassador to the Soviet Union in the late 80's talking about the potential of personal computers being linked together. When the World Wide Web emerged in the 90's, she founded the Webby Awards and combined state-of-the-art technologies to create original films and events.

## **Curatorial Acknowledgments**

*Ancient Wisdom for a Future Ecology: Trees, Time, and Technology* is co-curated by Associate Curator Vicki Phung Smith and Guest Curator Selma Reuben Holo.

## **Donor Support**

The exhibition *Ancient Wisdom for a Future Ecology: Trees, Time, and Technology* and its related educational programs at the Skirball Cultural Center are made possible with support from Getty and Raskin Family Foundation in memory of Jay Raskin.

## **About PST ART**

*Ancient Wisdom for a Future Ecology* is among more than 70 exhibitions and programs presented as part of PST ART. Returning in September 2024 with its latest edition, PST ART: Art & Science Collide, this landmark regional event explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information about PST ART: Art & Science Collide, please visit [pst.art](https://pst.art).



### **About the Skirball Cultural Center**

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

### **Visiting the Skirball**

The Skirball is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Reservations are recommended for General Admission and the permanent exhibition Noah's Ark at the Skirball, which requires timed entry and is ticketed separately. Tickets are \$18 for adults, and \$15 for seniors, full-time students, and children 2-17 years old. The Skirball is always FREE for Members and children under 2 years old. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit [skirball.org](http://skirball.org).

###

