



Courtesy Christopher Nelson

COLORADO CREATOR

Christopher Owen Nelson's "Deep Roots" is taller than 18 feet and nearly as wide.

Painter brings life to barren branches

Peering through the branches of a dormant cottonwood tree, the winter landscape appears stark, yet not sad. Is this photorealistic image a painting? A carving? Whatever it is, it's all happening on a giant piece of acrylic.

Artist Christopher Owen Nelson said he's always felt a powerful energy in the presence of trees. "Anywhere I am in the world, trees call out to me and I walk up to them, reach out to them, touch them and hug them." Including the dead ones.

In his Arvada studio, Nelson begins with a piece of Plexiglass. He sculpts shapes out of the back, working in reverse perspective, before adding paint, water and a few kisses from a blowtorch. The combination achieves a sharp contrast between the background and foreground, giving these works an unexpectedly three-dimensional look. The glossy front is untouched; never would anyone imagine the artwork

is made completely backwards.

The subject matter is curious: very large, very dead cottonwood trees. "I love when they're dead or dying; something about a tree in this stage of its life is beautiful to me," Nelson said. "It's because they're just these big, gnarly things. They've got these burly twists, clawing down into the ground with their branches."

A lifelong Coloradan, Nelson is at home outdoors. He revisits a handful of places, like Boulder's Sawhill Ponds, studying the lifecycle of the trees, watching them grow, die and eventually collapse. His love of the West's natural wonders has led him to experiment with concrete, glass, bronze, stainless steel, resin and even silver nitrate as he branches into larger sculptural works based on cottonwood bark and geodes.

Though dead, these gnarly, burly trees live on forever, courtesy of Nelson's artwork. — Leah M. Charney