

Martha McDonald: The Wood is Singing in Color
September 14 – December 30, 2023
Performance Dates: October 21 & 22, November 11 & 12

Acclaimed Artist Martha McDonald Performs *The Wood is Singing in Color* at the Wharton Esherick Museum

First live performances from WEM's Artist-in-Residence program reframe Esherick's creative legacy through handmade costumes, movement, music, and song.

Malvern, PA – The Wharton Esherick Museum (WEM) is pleased to announce the opening of *The Wood is Singing in Color*, a new site-responsive performance by WEM's 2023 Artist-in-Residence, acclaimed artist Martha McDonald. In this immersive piece, McDonald activates handmade costumes and wooden set elements through original music, lyrics, and choreography, reframing our understanding of Wharton Esherick and his creative legacy. Each aspect of the work reflects McDonald's research into Esherick's creative output and influences in the 1920s and 1930s, including his expressionistic stage sets for Hedgerow Theatre, experience with avant-garde rhythmic dance, prismatic furniture, and interest in anthroposophy, a holistic philosophy developed by Rudolph Steiner.

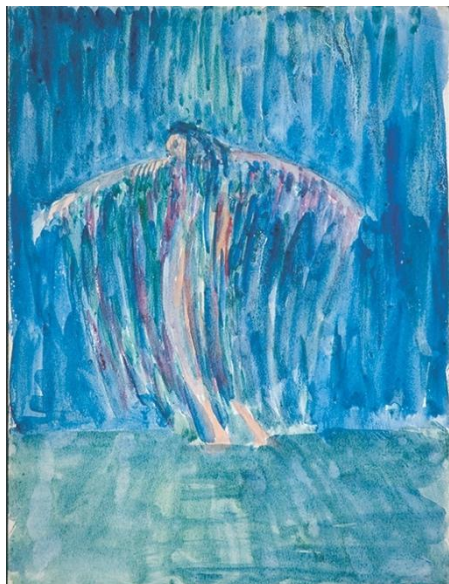


Photo by Brooke Sietinsons.

The Wood is Singing in Color marks the first live performance by a WEM Artist-in-Residence, a program the museum began in 2021 to invite meaningful conversation between contemporary makers and the museum's collections. To develop the performance, McDonald conducted a series of residency stays on WEM's campus throughout 2023 to explore the collections and archives, including boxes of Esherick's watercolors, sketches, and letters, as well as photographs and ephemera. McDonald drew directly from her discovery of Esherick's handwritten notes for the lyrics to several of the songs created for the performance.

“Esherick isn’t known as a writer, but I was struck by how lyrical his notes to himself were,” McDonald says. *“Many were meditations on the natural world around his studio—the changing colors of leaves in Autumn, ‘the call of a lonely buck deer.’ Others explored self-doubt and isolation. They seemed to call out to be song lyrics.”*

McDonald was the first artist-in-residence to stay overnight in Esherick’s family farmhouse Sunekrest, part of WEM’s larger campus, so that she might experience the landscape as embodied, sensory research. McDonald’s exploration also extended beyond WEM’s campus. She and collaborator Brooke Sietinsons traveled to the anthroposophical community of Spring Valley, New York to learn elements of eurythmy, Steiner’s expressive movement art that seeks to make speech and music visible through gesture and color. McDonald worked with a series of collaborators, including musicians Sietinsons and Miriam Goldberg, fashion designer Dana Meyer, and woodworker Casey Chew to integrate all of this inquiry into *The Wood is Singing in Color*. Additional elements were commissioned from woodworker Larissa Huff.



Painting of a Dancer, Wharton Esherick
Watercolor, early 1920s. Wharton
Esherick Museum Collection.

During one of the key moments of *The Wood is Singing in Color*, McDonald wears *Prismatic Cape*, an elaborate costume that reflects the angular asymmetry of some of Esherick’s most iconic furniture. During the performance *Prismatic Cape* seems to consume her body with the power of these irregular, faceted shapes. To create this garment, McDonald and collaborator Dana Meyer looked to Japanese pattern making techniques that build dimensional angular shapes through precise pressing and seaming to create dynamic movement. McDonald also drew her color palette for several costumes from Esherick’s *Painting of a Dancer*.

“Before I started researching, I had a very simplified idea of Esherick as this heroic American woodworker. Then I saw a photo of him in a diaphanous Greek shift, dancing with a group of women on the lawn of a dance camp in the Adirondacks in 1920 and I thought, ‘oh, now this is exciting!’ I felt like I was peeling back the layers of the Esherick onion,” McDonald says.

Martha McDonald: The Wood is Singing in Color will be staged in Esherick’s 1956 Workshop co-designed with Louis I. Kahn and Anne Tyng. An accompanying installation exploring McDonald’s residency research and a costume made for the performance will be shown in WEM’s Visitor Center from September 14, 2023 – December 30, 2023.

Performance Dates & Times:

October 21 – 4:00pm

October 22 – 1:00pm and 3:00pm

November 11 – 1:00pm and 3:00pm

November 12 – 1:00pm and 3:00pm

For performance details and to book tickets visit <https://whartonesherickmuseum.org/events/list/>

Performance guests will enjoy entrance to the Studio gallery before the program.

For details on tours of the Esherick Studio, which are offered by advance reservation only, please visit <https://whartonesherickmuseum.org/visiting-info/>

Learn more about Martha McDonald and view past projects at <https://www.marthamcdonald.com/>

About Martha McDonald: Martha McDonald makes performances and installations that feature handcrafted costumes and objects, which she activates through movement and song. She often develops site-specific interventions grounded in deep research into collections, archives, and historic material practices; and in response to the physical site. McDonald has developed work in historic house museums, botanic gardens, a Victorian cemetery, a construction waste recycling facility, and small boat journeying down a river.

Her work has shown internationally at Brotfabrik, Berlin; Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, Australia; Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney; the Tamworth Textile Triennial, which traveled throughout Australia; and Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museum, Aberdeen, Scotland. Nationally, her work has been shown at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Evergreen Museum & Library at Johns Hopkins University, RAIR (Recycled Artists in Residence), The Museum of American Glass at WheatonArts, The Woodlands cemetery, and The Rosenbach Museum & Library. She received an MFA from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. McDonald lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

About the Wharton Esherick Museum: The Wharton Esherick Museum, located just outside of Valley Forge Park in Malvern, PA, is the handcrafted home and studio of Wharton Esherick (1887-1970), an internationally significant artist and leader of the Studio Furniture Movement. Esherick worked primarily in wood and extended his unique forms to furniture, furnishings, interiors, buildings, and more. His motto, "If it isn't fun, it isn't worth doing," is evident in the joyful expression of his work. A National Historic Landmark for Architecture, his hilltop studio/residence has been preserved much as it was when the artist lived and worked there.



Wharton Esherick's Studio. Photo by Charles Uniatowski, courtesy of the Wharton Esherick Museum.

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