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Inside, outside

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Wandering around the arboretum one day, you happen upon a strange stand of birch trees.

They've been planted in the shape of a small, hollow rectangle. The tops of the trees nod toward each other to form the peak of a roof. The leaves form green, shimmering walls. A space at the front mimics the opening of a doorway, a worn dirt floor. You pace the edges of this tree-house, puzzling over its beauty and mystery.

In the villages of Wales, druid circles sit in the middle of supermarket parking lots and on farmland next to the freeways. A part of you hopes that maybe you've stumbled onto a pagan alter. In the middle of a city park!



But a little more snooping uncovers a nearby plaque that identifies this as a living piece of art, called "House for Summer," by artist Helen Lessick.

Curious, you manage to track down Lessick. She lived in Portland for 15 years, but now she calls Los Angeles home. Turns out she is feeling a little nostalgic about "House for Summer" because this year just happens to mark the 20th anniversary of the trees' planting.

Lessick explains that as a little girl growing up in Philadelphia, the fourth of five children, she often retreated to a neighbor's lilac bush when she needed to be alone with her thoughts, crawling behind the branches that reached down so low they "cut off the busyness of the outside world."

That sense of being "outside in nature, but inside and protected," was a source of inspiration for "House for Summer," which grew out of a series of installation pieces Lessick had done during the 1980s around the theme of houses. Sheetrock, even hay bales had cropped up in her previous works. But this, she says, was "my only living tree art."

Hoyt Arboretum was kind enough to give her space for the project -- and advice. (Plant Himalayan birch, they told her. It will stand up to what you hope to do. The birch also had the benefit of that beautiful white bark. "It's one of the few trees that implies the whiteness of walls," says Lessick.)

In the end, what was supposed to be only a temporary, five-year installation has lasted two decades now; it is in the city's public art collection, maintained in a partnership between the staff of Portland Parks and the Regional Arts & Culture Council. People have been married at "House for Summer." They've held picnics there. Lessick says she deliberately created the piece at a very human scale. The bower created by the trees is bigger than a closet, but not nearly as big as a conventional room. It's large enough to hold a person and his thoughts -- a small, intimate space to consider the "wonder of what's already there."

Not long after you speak to Lessick, you head up to the arboretum to visit "House for Summer" again.

Someone has just mown the grass, and the air is thick with the smell. A jogger crunches past on the pebbled trail. As you step over the threshold and into the little house made from trees, the wind kicks up, making the wall of leaves murmur. And it makes you think back to your childhood, to your grandmother, separated from her country, yet unable to leave it behind, whispering to you in Latvian to stand quietly and listen: The birch trees were speaking.

You stand inside the little house for a long time. No one else is around. There are gaps through which you can see the sky and the surrounding trees. Far off, you can hear the roar of Highway 26.

One of the beautiful things about the piece has been watching it grow and change over the years, Lessick had told you. At the same time, these trees will probably live for only 20 more years. "This is an artwork that will die," she said. "Birches have a limited life span."

And that was OK. Ultimately, the piece is "about transience, but also being in the moment," she said. Recognizing how quickly beauty slips away.

The wind comes again. You close your eyes and listen. As though that will tell you the secret to stilling time.

Celebrate the 20th anniversary of "House for Summer" with a party co-sponsored by the Regional Arts and Culture Council and the Hoyt Arboretum Friends on Saturday from 1:30 to 3 p.m. at the Hoyt Arboretum. 4000 S.W. Fairview Blvd. Artist Helen Lessick will be on hand. The first 50 attendees will get a door prize. Lessick also will speak at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Portland Art Center, 32 NW 5th Ave.