

Exploring the Elusive Nature of Time

We're stuck in time like a fish in water.

— David Eagleman

We are all familiar with the feeling that, as we age, time seems to go by faster and faster. That's the way I feel as the clocks tick off their minutes and hours and the calendar their days, weeks and months toward my retirement date of Aug. 31.

In addition to my general fascination with all things science, I've had a special interest in the subject of time this year. People have been thinking about and trying to understand the notion and nature of "time" for a very long, well, time. The presence of time and the awareness we have of time's passage are ubiquitous in both our lives and our consciousness thereof. Time is always on our minds: Time flies. Time stands still. It's time! Time is on your side.

Time is of the essence. Time heals all wounds. Time waits for no man. All in good time. Now is the time!

We're pretty sure time flows only one way. Beyond that, no matter how much we talk about it, time eludes the language we need to describe it. Time is not an element, the way air is; time is not a phenomenon the way a lightning storm is; time is not just the way we perceive. Time is not simply the distance between one place and another. Of course we know what time is. But somehow we just can't put it into words.

And more than any clock or calendar, being in a garden every day certainly inspires curiosity about the nature of time. For here, in a garden, we can actually see the presence of time passing and the effects of time's passage.

In its importance to the enjoyment of a garden, we decided "time" would make a great theme for a show in the Sturt Haaga Gallery. After all, the garden abounds with the effects and imprints of time. The cross-section of a fallen tree reveals the familiar growth rings, one for each year, making each and every tree a living record of the passage of time, a year at a time. The changing seasons further divide the garden year; and the months and days divide it ever more finely. Each day represents a familiar chunk of time, moving from dawn to morning to afternoon to dusk and evening then night and back around to dawn – but at a slightly different time from the one before. In the garden, we feel the rhythms and cycles and intervals that all plants – indeed, all living things – experience. But every plant, every

Marking Time Preview

What: Member-only preview of *ELEMENTAL | Marking Time*

When: 10am – 4pm Aug. 11 – 13

Where: Sturt Haaga Gallery

Public Viewing: Aug. 15 – Dec. 3. During exhibitions, the gallery is open 10am – 4pm every day except Mondays.

tree is running on a different time scale. Some plants complete a life in a few months; some in a year; trees in chunks of time from tens to hundreds to even thousands of years. Compared to the 350-year-old coast live oaks at Descanso, the normal span of a human life is brisk indeed. Compared to the one-year life span of a Monarch butterfly, we humans must seem ancient, ponderous and venerable.

Our consulting curator John O'Brien is back this summer with a contemporary art-based exploration of time. Entitled *ELEMENTAL: Marking Time*, the show will feature the works of artists who are wrestling in their work with the nature of time. We can see the minute hand of a clock moving, and the numbers flickering on a digital clock; we can see a fall day and tell the difference between it and a day in spring. But we can't really see time itself. What we can and do see is the evidence of time's passage – whether the process itself, the results of the process, or the accumulation of results over time, we can see and know the effects of time, if not time itself.

David R. Brown, Executive Director



The sundial was one of the earliest inventions for visualizing the passage of time as created by the earth's daily 24-hour rotation around its axis. This sundial was a gift from the Kresser Smith family to the Descanso Gardens Guild in 1987 on the occasion of its 30th anniversary. Mrs. Forrest Kresser Smith was the founding president of the Guild and served as its president for 10 years.

Image: Sundial at the Boddy House.