

Strictly Critical

Matt Saunders Treads An Overgrown Path at Marian Goodman

By Christian Viveros-Fauné and Artlance (July 10, 2026)



Weeds choke the unused path. To maintain connections to important people, places, things and ideas, a Scandinavian proverb goes, it's best to beat such trails and frequently.

Matt Saunders, a shutterless photographer who prefers painterly periphrasis to fixative terseness, relishes the jungly road, the stray meander through the dense wood — a collective mental wilderness from which he routinely rescues neglected ghosts in the form of hybrid images, stray markings and the washed-out likenesses of celluloid divas like Barbara Sukowa, Jane Birkin and Candy Darling. Saunders has made a career of metaphorizing the slipperiness of visual experience. Were he a poet of the word as opposed to the image, he'd handwrite less Robert Frost's taut metrics than Walt Whitman's free verse.

For his most recent exhibition at New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, titled *On an Overgrown Path*, Saunders found inspiration in the music of turn-of-the-twentieth-century composer Leoš Janáček. The melodist's melancholy piano sonatas provide the show's title as well as a soundtrack to an expansive, sometimes unwieldy display that includes 15 unique silver gelatin prints, 10 unique C-prints, 13 photogravure woodcuts and a two-channel video installation. A stroll through the exhibition constitutes

a trip through a forest of lyrical associations. That traipse also recalls Frost on Whitman’s baggy poetic innovation: “Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down.”

Saunders’ practice can be described as photography without a camera or, alternately, as light-strewn painting. Working with found or sourced photos and film, he draws and paints on surfaces like photographic paper, canvas and Mylar to create a negative. He then uses that negative to make prints. Time, as well as the artist’s “performance” in translating his forms onto different strata, are consequently inscribed in the work. The resulting still and moving pictures reflect an elaborate analog process that aims for a kind of camp naturalism: small prints and woodcuts like *Memory Piece (Degas Drawing)* (2025) and *Birkin Rosso 1* (2025) emerge from the gallery’s corners, pillars and window frames like forest mushrooms. Paradoxically, these handmade efforts look most abstract where the artist insists on their capacity to capture the quality of fleetingness.



A process not unlike trying to cup gas, repeated efforts to register time’s fugacity or “escaping tendency” — the phrase is borrowed from the study of thermodynamics — constitute both the text and subtext of Saunders’ oeuvre. His latest exhibition further embraces hybrid forms through the incorporation of music, which acts as an additional improvisatory pivot. The artist’s twin-channel video installation, also called *On an Overgrown Path* (2026), collages Janáček’s music onto the gallery’s two projections. These manifest as colored abstract shapes (which are reminiscent of painterly brushstrokes) and views of corpses of black and white trees (which recall William Kentridge’s animations of “thought forests”).

There’s no disputing the dreamlike quality of Saunders’ installation — especially where intuition and peripheral thinking drive the layering of various images. Take the unique silver gelatin print *Memory Piece (Barbara Sukowa)* (2025). Hung on one of the two walls that harbor the artist’s rhythmic video projections, the framed photograph features the German actress’ face emerging from a mottled black

pool. The lost art of plaster death masks comes to mind, as well as John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* (1851-52).

"I'm interested in the private experience of a performance and its mediation," Saunders told one interviewer about his artisanal efforts to represent unrecoverable time and ramifying memory. "These are singular moments of a captured performance...The changing time in the film, my changing relationship to the image over time, and the place of that performance in all the unrecoupable parts of [the actors'] lives are all time-based processes that I engage in the work."

Few exhibitions picture that transitive, changing, shifting wilderness like Saunders' latest.



Matt Saunders

On an Overgrown Path

Marian Goodman Gallery

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Images courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

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