Mirra Meyer was born Lou Ella Meyer in 1942 and grew up mostly on farms in Iowa and Missouri. Of her childhood she later wrote:

An only child growing up on a hall farm has a lot of time to think and to look. A child who has an inborn propensity for the visual is surrounded by a wealth of form, color, and pattern … a solitary hickory tree on a hillside, the slow curve of the hill itself, the changing sky drama of a thunderstorm. All these are seen and recorded in the mind …

After one year in the art program at Drake University, a storm drowned the calves whose sale would have funded her education. A riding accident in 1964 was a further setback. She was married to Don Walker from 1961 to 1968 and her only child, Jarrett Walker, was born in 1962.

After several years of painting, she became interested in batik in the mid-1960s. In 1969 she married jeweler Max Robillard and settled in Portland, where she established a batik studio. Over the next 15 years she would produce over 2000 works. At first, many of these were pillows, quilts, and other practical objects suitable for the many craft fairs that the couple attended, but she soon began to exhibit, with works appearing at shows at Seattle’s Henry Gallery, Tacoma Art Museum, Portland Art Museum, and many other juried events around the Northwest.

She recalls:

A recurring theme of the work of that period was the tree form, symbol of a living being, sometimes bursting with the fiery energy of life, sometimes twisted by storms, sometime quietly holding the moon. Frequently the tree compositions included what is not visible, the reach of the root system, the geologic structure of the earth, the fragmentary remains of what has gone before.

Her name changed through successive marriages, and included Lou Ella Meyer, Lou Meyer Walker, and Lou Robillard. Finally, in 1978 at the end of her second marriage, she took the name Mirra Meyer.

Over time, her work turned more to framed wall pieces. Most of her work in this exhibit is from the early 1980s. In this period, the images grow more diverse. Following the death of a close friend in the 1980 Mt. St. Helens eruption, the mountain begins to brood over some of her work. An interest in aerial views of land appears, still tending toward abstraction. But the tree always remains, increasingly as both living subject and as a structure that binds the world together.

Mirra gave up batik in 1985 and began a series of jobs in arts management, including serving as the Executive Director of the downtown arts festival Artquake in the early 1990s. Her last job was as the Director of the Historic Cemeteries program for the State of Oregon. From girlhood Mirra had always loved cemeteries, and leaves thousands of photographs of them.

In 1994, Mirra spent a full year in Australia, living just outside Canberra, the national capital. From this period, and for the rest of her life, the limbs and trunks of eucalyptus trees, which are often evocative of human limbs, appear in her work. In this period she did several blockprints, reverse paintings on glass, and watercolors, all featuring the eucalpytus in some form.

Around 2000, back in Portland, she began painting without much thought to exhibiting. Paintings from this period are personal and often autobiographical, fusing images of Iowa, the Pacific Northwest and Australia in striking ways. Still, as always, the tree is often at the center.

Mirra Mayer passed away at home on April 19, 2019, in the company of Nan Evans Miller, one of her closest friends from her craft-fair days.

Jarrett Walker