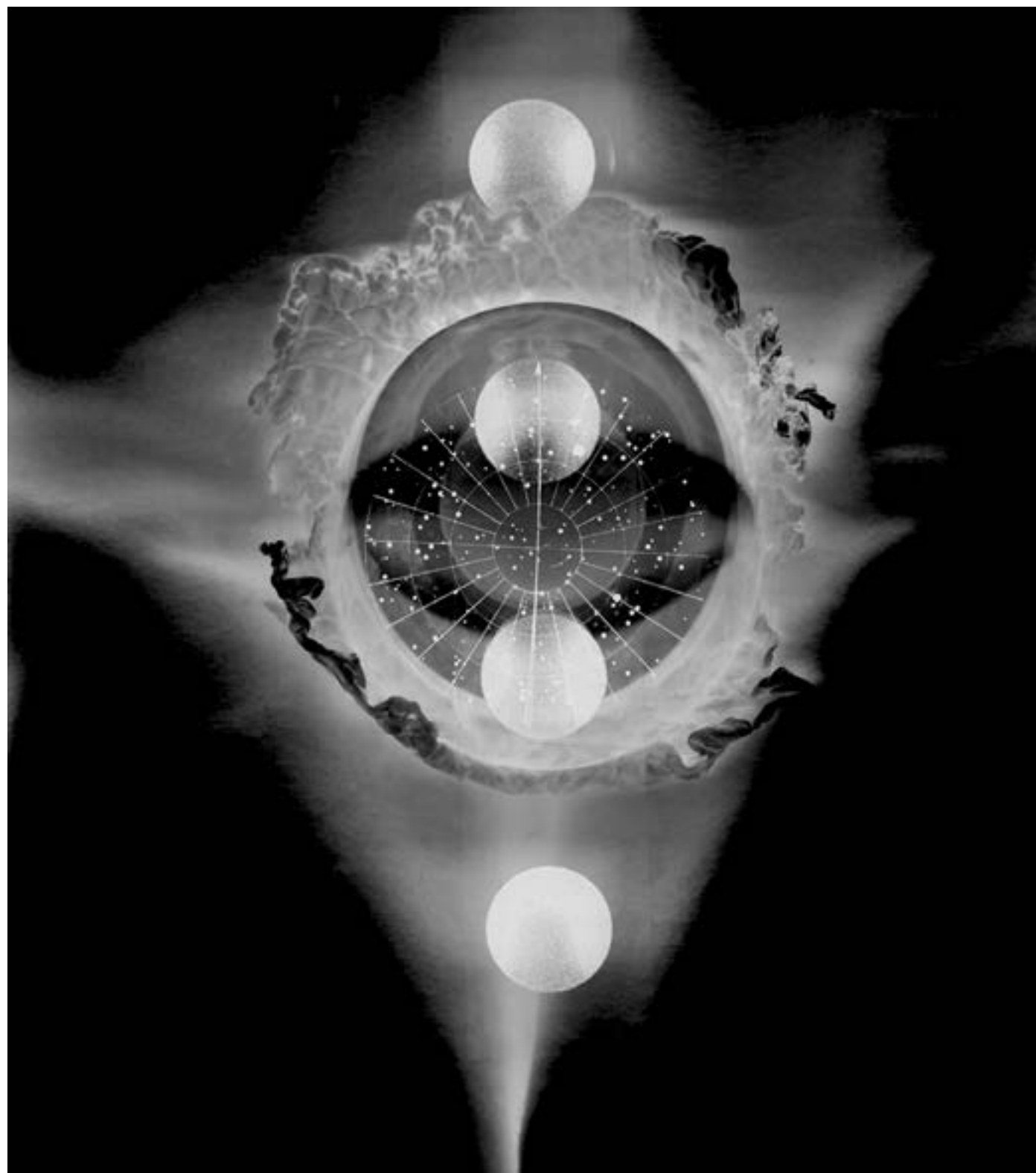


CHERYL CALLERI

Gathering Symmetry #6, 2017
Pigment print, 5 x 5 3/4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHARLES HOOD

Champion Trees

Secret Nature and
the Meaning of Life

We all know how to spot bird-watchers: they wear the “uniform”—khaki trousers, wide-brimmed hats, and nerdy shoulder bags to hold their field guides and water bottles and pocket notebooks, notebooks that document such esoteric experiences as the fact that at “0640, 2 GBHE were feeding, main pond. 4 RUDU in alt plum. Many RWBB.” (The bird-banding codes denote great blue herons, ruddy ducks, and red-winged blackbirds.) They have binoculars too of course—Swarovski, Zeiss, Nikon, Bausch and Lomb—thousands of dollars of premium optics hanging from weary necks like black, overpriced bricks. Bird-watchers must be dedicated indeed to schlep it all around.

Turns out, they are not alone. Equally devoted are the herp people (snakes and lizards), and also the dragonfly spotters, mushroom hunters, cactus listers, and cloud fanciers. (Yes, there are new “species” of clouds still being catalogued and named.) California recently adopted its first official state lichen, thanks to determined lobbying by those for whom lichens matter (and matter a lot). Name any taxonomic unit and it will have a devoted tribe busy seeking out the rarest or biggest or queerest item of all, then when they find it, everybody will high-five and dance the happy dance.

By extension trees are going to have their tree people—folks who seek out, celebrate, want to be photographed standing next to trees, and not just any kind of tree, but champion trees. What’s a champion? Basically, the all-time biggest one, since if there is such a tree as the snot apple (*Azanza garckeana*), then inevitably somebody will want to find the biggest snot apple of all.

These are treasures hiding in plain sight. According to a forestry website, California has 207 big-tree listings, 126 national champions, and 37 cochampions. It’s a points thing, like trophy antlers on a moose. The winning tree does not have to be deep in a forest; overwatered city parks make prime foraging grounds for an alert tree spotter. Maybe you have a champion in your local patch, don’t even know it yet. To check, borrow a surveyor’s measure. Here’s the formula: Trunk Circumference (inches) + Height (feet) + ¼ Average Crown Spread (feet) = Total Points. To get circumference (or “dbh,” diameter at breast height), you measure the trunk four-and-a-half feet up from the ground, unless there is a branch or the tree is on a hill. You can do