While most people mistakenly refer to all the birch trees growing in Interior Alaska as paper birch, the majority of birch trees in Alaska are Alaskan birch, *Betula neoalaskana*. Alaskan birch is a different species than paper birch, *Betula papyrifera*, which grows throughout New England, the Great Lakes regions, and much of Canada. Paper birch has a limited presence in Alaska around Haines. While Alaskan birch can hybridize with paper birch, Alaskan birch is a Beringian species and most closely related to Asian species of birch than to paper birch. The difference between the two species is significant.
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even those of us lucky enough to live in the woods sometimes take for granted the trees that surround us. People like vistas, and often Alaskan artists have been happy to oblige. But what these three artists and one scientist would challenge us to do is to drop our gaze from the distant horizon to what is near at hand, readily available and worth our while for closer consideration. Here we have birch trees seen up-close and personally. In some of Barry McWayne’s black and white photographs, a viewer might feel his face pressed to within inches of the bark of a tree. In other of his pieces, viewers might be asked to consider the harsher contrasts of fire damaged birch trunks against a white background. Still others celebrate birch in wintry hoarfrost splendor. Kesler Woodward insists on the same intimate examination of individual birch trunks, arrangements of overlapping branches and small stands of trees. But look at his use of shape, color, and texture. Woodward’s paintings reveal the rich variation of birch trees in nature. Margo Klass may be one of these three artists who responds most abstractly to the idea of birch—pitchforks, brushes, brass rods stand in for the trees themselves. Some pieces use actual elements of birch—twigs, branches, trunks. One makes use of a beaver-gnawed limb, recognition of a fellow architect working in birch. For as Kimberley Maher’s observations note, we people have used birch for all sorts of purposes, from the spiritual to the medicinal, to everything in between. Birch has served us Alaskans well as a source of fuel, a treat for the sweet tooth, and, as shown here, a rich variety of artistic exploration. Read the complex story of birch, take a look at the art, then go out into the world and take a harder look at the birch trees around you. Chances are you’re going to see more than you did before.

—Frank Soos