

Out on a Limb

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, Nature is Imagination itself.

William Blake, 1799, *The Letters*

The phrase 'out on a limb' can be defined as finding oneself in a very precarious position. While it generally refers to risky actions, it is an apt description for the multitude of issues confronting life on earth in these opening decades of the 21st century. One of these concerns is forest management. In 2006 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution declaring 2011 the International Year of Forests. This designation was made to strengthen sustainable forest management and conservation of all types of forests for the benefit of current and future generations.

While the concern for global forest management is largely a current political, economic and environmental phenomenon, trees and forests have figured in the cultural consciousness of humankind for millenia and visual artists have long recognized trees as subjects for artistic investigation. Until the 17th century the tree as a feature in artwork primarily served symbolic or allegorical functions, representing fertility or functioning as a metaphor for human life. With the gradual development of the 'true' landscape in European art during the 1700s and 1800s, however, the tree came to be recognized for both its aesthetic and formal qualities. This interest in trees 'as trees', or objects within the landscape, remained predominant in landscape painting throughout the 20th century. But how are trees portrayed today? What are some of the ways artists in the 21st century express this subject and what might these representations mean?

Out on a Limb examines the changing face of the landscape genre, with a focus on artistic presentations of trees. Featuring the work of contemporary Alberta artists John Maywood, Holly Newman, Erin Schwab, Gerald St. Maur and Peter von Tiesenhausen, and including works from the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, this eclectic exhibition celebrates the International Year of Forests, artistic expressions of this resource, and the importance trees have in our personal lives and to life on earth.

Out on a Limb was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA Travelling Exhibition program is supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

Travelling Exhibition

2010-2012 Season

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition for the 2010-2012 season. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves up to 50 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide for the show. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks To

John Maywood

Holly Newman

Peter von Tiesenhausen

Erin Schwab

Gerald St. Maur

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

Contact

Shane Golby, Manager/Curator
AFA Travelling Exhibition Program Region 2
Art Gallery of Alberta/CSF
10550-107 Street
Edmonton, AB T5H 2Y6
T: 780.428.3830
F: 780.421.0479
shane.golby@youraga.ca

Front cover images:

Left: Peter von Tiesenhausen, *Balance*, 2008, Charred wood and whitewash, Courtesy of the artist

Top Right: Erin Schwab, *Woundwood*, 2008, Charcoal on paper, Courtesy of the artist

Middle Right: Holly Newman, *Wonder of Wonders*, 2008. Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist

Bottom Right: John Maywood, *Silver Wind* (top image), 2010, Silverpoint and India ink on paper, Courtesy of the artist



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts
Travelling Exhibition Program

Out on a Limb

I've cut down thousands of trees with bulldozers. It never felt right, that abuse of the land. I realized it was not sustainable. Now I paint.

Peter von Tiesenhausen, artist





Gerald St. Maur
Clearing III, 2009
Charcoal on Paper
Courtesy of the artist

The artworks in the exhibition **Out on a Limb** examine ways that trees have been represented by visual artists in the 20th and into the 21st century. Created through a variety of methods and in a mix of media, the artworks range from the traditional to the more experimental and offer glimpses into humankind's relationship to the natural world.

The use of light and dark to create illusionistic volume and space are primary concerns in the work of both Erin Schwab and Gerald St. Maur. Both artists make use of the technique of **chiaroscuro** to create space in their works and give their subject matter a tangible presence. **Chiaroscuro** refers to the distribution and contrast of light and shadow in a painting or drawing. The term is derived from the Italian *chiaro* (light) and *oscuro* (dark) and generally refers to a technique that contrasts bright illumination with areas of dense shadow. As seen in Erin Schwab's work (front cover), this contrast is used to achieve a sense of volume in modeling three-dimensional objects. The illusion of three-dimensionality is created by the value gradation of colour and the division of light and shadow areas.

In the work *Clearing III* by Gerald St. Maur, the contrast between light and dark areas creates the illusion of space in the composition. Through staggering dark areas against light areas, St. Maur draws the viewer's eye from the dark foreground along the forest path to the bright middle-ground of the scene and finally back into the dark regions of the background. The artist uses charcoal to create a tonal gradation and softness that gives the drawing a sense of mystery and, perhaps, melancholy.

While both Schwab and St. Maur make use of a traditional means of artistic expression, however, they do so with 21st century sensibilities. As stated by both artists, there is a hint of irony in their works expressed by the fact that they use dead trees (charcoal) on paper, which comes from trees, to render trees.

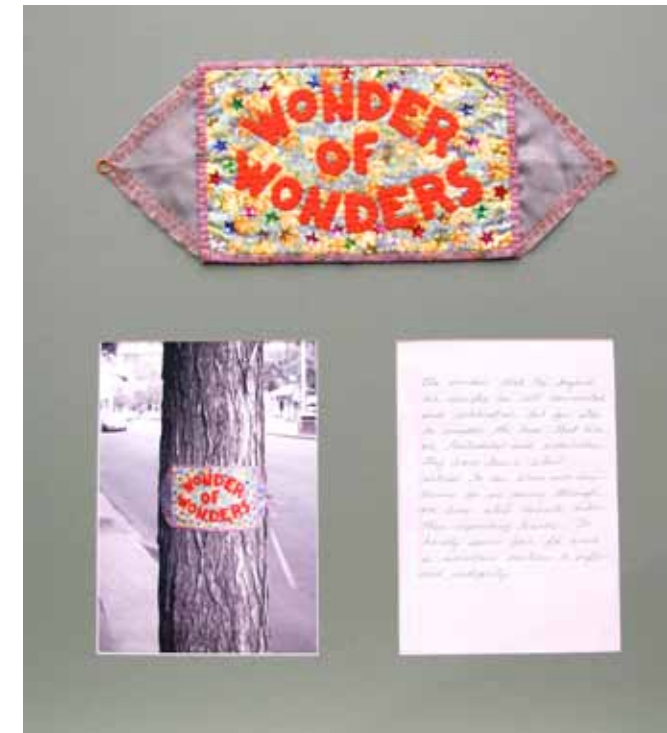


Peter von Tiesenhausen
Firewall #55, 2008
Charred Wood
Courtesy of the artist

Northern Albertan artist Peter von Tiesenhausen sees himself in a similar mindset as a prairie landscape painter, and his work is always tied to realistic elements. He keeps his imagery as simple as possible, however, to get to the essence of objects and concepts. For this artist, artmaking is a way to be 'conscious'. Art allows him to further meaning and is a mechanism to make sense of the world around him and his experiences. In all his work, whether it be sculptural, painting, or installation, von Tiesenhausen manipulates a few symbols to create new meaning both for himself and for viewers of his work.

The Firewall series by Peter von Tiesenhausen provides excellent insights into the sources of his practice, his working methods and possible meanings behind his subjects. As described by the artist concerning the genesis of this work: "I love the idea of accident. One day I was walking along with my Tiger torch and on a whim burnt the tops of one of the (beehive) boxes." The colour of the unburnt portions of the box-tops reminded him of fire and so, basing his imagery on photographs of fire, von Tiesenhausen then 'attacked' the burnt tops with a hatchet and was guided by the resulting marks to realize his imagery.

In this work von Tiesenhausen references modern art movements of the mid-20th century. Though representational, the 'accidental' beginnings of the work reference the spontaneous nature of Abstract Expressionism while his further process speaks to Action Painting. Peter von Tiesenhausen sees the act of creating an object as just as important as the object itself, if not more so. The Firewall works were a total response to the making of the object and responding to the process. For von Tiesenhausen, the work is literally a 'wild fire' and he had no preconceived idea of what would come out.



Holly Newman
Wonder of Wonders, 2008
Mixed Media
Courtesy of the artist

Wonder of Wonders by Edmonton artist Holly Newman is part of a series of works collectively entitled *Tree Bands*. This series is a public art piece, planned and executed specifically for the public domain, placed outside and accessible to all. Sometimes this type of work may be intentionally ephemeral and possess a spontaneous quality. It may also often be displayed without the consent of authorities. Newman expresses these aspects of some public art pieces when she states:

'Tree Bands' was an experiment, I wanted to see if anyone would notice, they did; seven of the original twelve were lost to the streets. Yet it was very liberating to leave the embroidered pieces in places of my choosing, letting them have a surprising and unpredictable life of their own.

The Tree Band series was also influenced by other artistic concerns. One of these is Earth Art, a form of art where the landscape and the work of art are inextricably linked. While Holly Newman states that her work makes no grand gestures or extreme transformations as seen in the work of Earth artists of the 1960s, her '...small pieces acknowledge some of the same sensibilities, where landscape and place are given a significant voice.' Text is also very important in the Tree Band works. Inspired by other contemporary artists and Medieval religious work, the artist states:

Trees are often used as markers for celebrations, memorials and love declarations, a living reminder of a moment in time. Using textile and embroidered words I constructed signs for city trees, banding them with bits of domestic text in hopes of turning the gaze towards the urban landscape. For some the tree was only a vehicle for dialogue between passerby and me, but a few of the viewers might have imagined the sign embodying the tree's voice.

In the Tree Band works Newman is investigating the relationship between language and the passer-bys' perception of how they see themselves in relationship to the tree. The work is an attempt to give the tree a voice and space and to share personal feelings about trees with others.