

Growing a Community: How to Draw a Tree

How to Draw a Tree was a correspondence mail art (CMA) project at Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD) that sprouted from an email to all students in February 2007. CMA projects traditionally use the postal system and simply require that submissions be mailed and eventually documented. *How to Draw a Tree* also asked artists to consider the definitions for "draw" before completing their arboreal representations:

"To pull; to attract; to take in; to take out; to get information from; to produce a picture or diagram by making marks on a surface; to formulate; to write out for encashment; to search for game; to make one's way; to infuse." (*Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, 1988)

In response to this definition, artists produced interpretations of trees in various media and mailed these to the Marion Nicoll Gallery for an exhibition in April. The project grew in November 2007

when Fish Creek Environmental Learning Centre exhibited it as part of their *Art in the Park* program.

Student artists' submissions reflected the diverse interests and practices supported at ACAD. Representing nearly every discipline at ACAD, artists created opportunities for viewers to contemplate aesthetics as well as the value of irony when addressing social and environmental issues. For example, Rick Cline installed a ready-made roll of toilet paper on a tree branch. Jessica Hauser used a Bob Ross-endorsed fan brush to paint a "happy" tree with accompanying "friends". The composite nature of the CMA project appears to lend itself to pointed critical observation along with the production of striking visual objects for viewers' interests.

The subject of "Tree" can stimulate discussion about the environment as trees have stood as symbols for human relations

with nature. Jamie Gray drew her tree in sculptural form by using ceramics, text and a water spigot. Her work emphasized how we take a lot from trees such as wood, syrup and shade, and that trees provide in less obvious ways as makers of oxygen and filters for water. So she says, "Replanting is vital...we must not take trees for granted." Gray's view is captured in the spirit of the project where every artist's contribution matters and makes a difference to the aggregate. Process is valued as much as final product.

Caitlin Dalby created an image of the tree as a processing network no less interesting than our own bodies and environment. She says, "the web-like forms of the tree and its roots mimic lungs or veins," and adds, "trees and roots question our understanding of nature through the lens of urban life." Penny Chase describes her experience in northern Canada transforming her tree into an observation on cultural survival in a harsh landscape: "Traveling north across the tundra, I watched trees get smaller and eventually disappear. Trees decorate the landscape in the same way as First Nations people embellish their clothing." Chase's interpretation demonstrates CMA's value among burgeoning artistic communities.

Through collaborations like the CMA project, ACAD students have successfully defined and nurtured their own creative processes. *How to Draw a Tree* spreads roots and grows as the larger creative community continues to respond. It provides a viable alternative to the modernist notion of art production as a solitary and angst-ridden prospect by demonstrating how art-making, when driven by community, is both critical and enjoyable.



How to Draw A Tree (L-R)

Penny Chase. 2007. Mixed media (beads, ribbon). 10" x 8".

Caitlin Dalby. 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 11" x 5.5".

Jamie Gray. 2007. Mixed media (ceramic, water spigot, printed text). 18" x 9".

Jessica Hauser. 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 11.5" x 8".

Rick Cline. 2007. Mixed media. 12" x 4" x 8".