

SEAN WHALLEY: Trimmed

September 1- October 4, 2014

Sean Woodruff Whalley was born in St. Catharines, Ontario. Located in the "Golden Horseshoe", St. Catharines was once part of the largest broad leaf forest in the world, a fact that influences much of Sean's work. Between his BFA from York University in 1993 and an MFA from the University of Regina in 2000, Sean pursued the "old-world technologies" of blacksmithing and coopering. Whalley currently lives in Regina, Saskatchewan and teaches sculpture in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Regina.

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Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
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Exhibition Curator: Karen Schoonover
Essay: Jessica Richter
Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ www.dalek.ca
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Cover: "Trimmed" installation detail

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Canadians have a complex relationship with their trees. In urban environments, trees are planted to serve our needs for shade, windbreak and ornamentation. Sean Whalley refers to these trees as the "Urban Forest." The relationship that has developed between this "forest" and its stewards can be precarious, municipalities and individual citizens alike. Sometimes viewed as giant weeds, city trees are pruned, cut and removed on a regular basis. Conversely, trees are also often revered and every measure possible is taken to preserve them. This incongruent relationship with urban forests is the basis for Sean Whalley's exhibition, "Trimmed".

Whalley's interest in the erosion of forests and the natural environment, through human consumption and industry, caused him to re-examine the environment he lives in: the Urban Forest. Entering the gallery, one is confronted by a quiet dark space, filled with six sculptures sitting on the floor, lit with a series of small lamps. Each piece has been re-created from photographs of trees affected by pruning for power lines. Uncannily real and unreal, they are smaller in scale than real trees and covered in recycled wallpaper. Solid wooden shadows anchor the trees to the ground and contribute to the unnerving balance of our perception of natural vs. man-made. The branches scattered across the gallery floor mimic branches we might see on the ground from trees that have been trimmed by power companies. The results of this strange mix of natural and artificial are disconcerting, and reflect the complex relationship Canadians have with urban trees.

The process of trimming figures heavily within the work. City workers trim to protect power lines and buildings, often leaving the ground littered with branches. This interaction is done quickly with little to no regard for aesthetics or the impact on the surrounding environment. Trees are left with peculiar and unnatural shapes like strange topiary, altered by humans but without regard to aesthetics. Branches that have been left on the ground, like the branches surrounding Whalley's trees, will eventually be washed away by rain, moved by people, or simply rot into the ground. No longer a living part of the tree, they are generally discarded or ground for chips.

Trimming is not the only human process that impacts our forests and trees: the everyday consumption of wood products by Canadians contributes to the massive destruction of trees. Whalley uses the phrase "decadent consumption" to describe the imbalance between reasonable and excessive use of tree products. The wallpaper used in his work exemplifies this phrase: the over produced and discarded wallpaper has replaced the natural aesthetic of a tree much like our own over use of tree products have replaced actual trees.

Fragile and easy to replace, wallpaper is a symptom of a consumptive culture that values changing style over sustainability and substance. Soon after its invention, wallpaper itself had come to stand for a decline in values, both moral and social. As early as 1760, Madame de Genlis (a French writer and educator) bemoaned the frivolous ephemeral fashion for English wallpapers which had driven the Gobelins produced tapestries out of style:

"In the old days, when people built, they built for two or three hundred years; the house as furnished with tapestries made to last as long as the building; the trees they planted were their children's heritage; they were sacred woodlands. Today forests are felled, and children are left with debts, paper on their walls, and new houses that fall to pieces!"¹

Wallpaper has always been the more affordable cousin to more the expensive decorative elements such as tapestries, mosaics and paneling. Owing to its affordability and ease of removal, wallpaper was and still is often the first to go when it comes to decorating homes and is quickly dated by changing fashion. (2)

Unfortunately, the trees that were used to create the wallpaper are not so easily replaced, and we are left with garish patterns on walls instead of trees in our forests.

Over the last century, we have seen a world-wide depletion of forests as a result of human industry and urbanization. The natural balance between man and nature has shifted as humans recklessly capture, dominate, consume, and destroy without regard for the consequences. For the first time in history, the man-made environment is overcoming nature; and all too frequently humans continue to ignore the impact of this.

Whalley's work reflects this unnatural dominance. His trimmed and deformed trees represent a sacrifice in the name of human comfort, convenience, and whim. They poignantly capture Nature's submission to humankind. What was once natural has now been changed by the human hand, much like the Canadian landscape and that of Whalley's home province of Ontario.

The mixture of natural shape with the handmade aesthetic in Whalley's work gives us much to think about regarding our attitudes towards Nature and our relationship with trees. With false shadows, inaccurate height, and unnatural bark all juxtaposed against a very real silhouette of damaged trees, the viewer is able to see the results of an uneven balance between us and nature. Something is very unnerving about Whalley's trees and the branches that litter the ground; and we are left to think about the balance of real and unreal, natural and artificial, humans and Nature.

Jessica Richter
2014

¹ "A Short History of Wallpaper", Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed August 28, 2014.
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/short-introductory-history-of-wallpaper/>

ii *ibid.*



"Trimmed" installation detail



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