

Sean Whalley *Second Story*

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Sean Whalley

Second Story

GREG BEATTY

Dumpster diving is an activity not ordinarily associated with art. But when preparing for his exhibition *Second Story*, Regina sculptor Sean Whalley spent a considerable amount of time digging through dumpsters in back alleys and at construction sites. Taking the scraps of wood he found inside, he built with the aid of nails and glue what some might regard as the ultimate urban fantasy, and others the ultimate nightmare — a compact forest, complete with four gnarled trees, a clump of tree stumps, and a boardwalk for gallery patrons to stroll on. As we do, recorded bird calls sound overhead.

Whalley, who was born in southern Ontario in 1969, traces the roots of his exhibition (pun intended) back centuries to a time when Britain, its own forests depleted, dispatched loggers to North America to cut down trees for use as sailing masts for its imperial navy and, once converted to charcoal through partial burning, as fuel for factories during the Industrial Revolution. What had once been the largest broadleaf forest in the world was subsequently reduced to scattered copses of trees, like one, Whalley recounted in an interview, in a cemetery across the street from his childhood home in St. Catherines. Once cleared, the land was given to farmers. But without the nutrients provided by the forest (deadfall, decomposing leaves), the soil's fertility was soon exhausted and, as is currently happening with large parts of the tropical rain forest, farmers were forced to clear more land. Modern forestry practices, while they do provide for reforestation, are only moderately less harmful to the environment, as old-growth forests are replaced by genetically modified trees which, by virtue of their lack of bio-diversity, are vulnerable to insects and disease.

Lacking the heavy concentra-

tion of population and industrial activity that central Canada has, Saskatchewan enjoys the reputation as a relatively pristine area free of environmental ills. But because of widespread farming and ranching, the prairie ecosystem is regarded as one of the most altered in the world. Trees are part of that equation. Settled as it was on the open prairie in the late 19th century, every one of Regina's trees — which number in excess of 100,000 — has been hand-planted. The majority are elms, which were chosen for their hardy nature. But as a monoculture, they too are vulnerable to disease, and for over ten years the city has waged a desperate battle to protect its urban forest from Dutch Elm disease. Not being native to the region, trees are essentially an alien presence here. With their fanciful appearance, and smoothly sanded exterior instead of rough bark, Whalley's trees evince a similar sense of otherworldliness. Although that perception is perhaps skewed by the rigorous pruning trees are subjected to in urban settings. In the wild, trees must adapt to the dictates of their immediate environment, and thus rarely grow in a symmetrical and uniform fashion.

Whalley obtained his BFA from York University. Prior to moving to Regina to pursue his graduate degree, he worked as an historical interpreter at Black Creek Pioneer Village in Toronto. While there, he learned the craft of coopering, a skill Whalley relied on in building the trees on display here. With their hollow centres, they strongly resemble vessels. The composite layers of wood, matched carefully according to colour and texture, while vertical in orientation, do evoke thoughts of growth rings in the tree's interior. In some instances, Whalley has incorporated discarded windows, doors, and 2 x 4 beams into his trees, literally transforming them into tree houses — effectively reminding viewers not only of the role trees play in sheltering wildlife, but of wood's longstanding importance to humanity as a construction material. Taken as a whole, Whalley's installation

recalls the type of faux wilderness experience one finds in a park — where people without the knowledge or inclination to live in the wild can access nature in a convenient, and safe, manner. No bears lurk in this forest, no poison ivy grows. We need not even concern ourselves with being pooped on by birds flitting overhead. There are no birds, just an audio recording of their songs, which heightens the artificiality of our experience.

A few weeks before Whalley's show opening I learned of an intervention undertaken by University of Regina MFA student Ruth-Anne French that also explored the uneasy relationship that exists between humanity and nature — particularly as it plays out in an urban setting. Beginning in October 2003 and continuing throughout 2004, French clandestinely installed 40 tiny cobalt blue ceramic birds at select locations, like the downtown library, the Legislature, Shoppers Drug Mart, and Chapters/Starbucks. Birds are a regular part of the urban landscape, of course. But the species that dominate tend to be those that many people regard as a nuisance — sparrows, pigeons, seagulls. So much so that the sighting of a more elegant species like a purple martin, red-winged blackbird, or cedar wax wing is regarded as a rare treat. Shapewise, the birds were life-like. While the blue chosen by French was not indigenous to any bird in Regina, birds like canaries and parrots do sport such vibrant plumage. Even the manner in which French installed them on benches, planters and

whatnot — in a rigid line, as opposed to scattered clumps — is not atypical of birds, such as when they perch on a power line. From a distance, a viewer might well have initially mistaken them for a flock of birds. But within a few seconds their lack of movement and non-skittish behaviour would reveal their true nature. By placing them in public locations French tested the tolerance of property owners and Regina's in general to two types of intrusion: first, the symbolic intrusion of wildlife; second, the actual intrusion of art. At some sites, like the Cathedral Bakery in an arts-friendly neighbourhood, where a store employee actually placed a sign beside them reading "Birds Sunning. Watch Your Step," the birds were welcomed and marvelled over. In other places, however, like Chapters and Shoppers, they were removed within hours, or else vandalized and stolen by passersby.

Were Whalley to employ a similar interventionist strategy with his trees, I suspect most would meet an equally ignominious fate. We cut down real trees all the time, after all. And while Whalley is presumably not advocating the complete cessation of logging, his starkly beautiful trees do argue eloquently in favour of a much greater effort being made to reuse and recycle wood (and paper) products to alleviate the need to exploit so heavily such a precious natural resource. ←

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Sean Whalley: *Second Story*
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina (Sask.)
November 6 – December 28



Sean WHALLEY:
Second Story,
2004. Mixed
media. Photo:
Courtesy of the
artist.