

Drawing inspiration from nature

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Like many Winnipeggers, I've been thinking about trees lately.

In the aftermath of the Oct. 11 storm, broken branches and downed trees lie on the sidewalks and boulevards of my neighbourhood, and this destruction comes on top of recent losses of mature ashes and elms. Looking at our city's forest canopy, I'm newly, and poignantly, aware of the cycles of life, death and change.

Connie Chappel has been thinking about trees for years. Working in assemblage and installation, the Winnipeg artist often uses trees and their complex, connected lives as subject matter. She also uses trees and plants as material, working with bark and branches, pulled-up root systems, birch sap, vine tendrils and even fungal galls.

At this month's First Fridays Art Talk, Chappel will speak about the connections between the human and natural worlds and an art-making practice that explores organic processes such as adaptation and evolution, disease and healing, regeneration and transformation. She'll also speak about the rewards, risks and occasional surprises that come with using natural materials.

Chappel often combines artificial objects and natural forms, creating evocative, unsettling new hybrid wholes. Embodiment, her April 2019 show, created a delicate, eerily beautiful "forest" in the gallery spaces of aceart.



Artist Connie Chappel's works, *Passages* (clockwise from above), *Bloom* and *The Healer*, combine artificial objects and natural forms to create evocative new hybrid wholes (Supplied)



Her process is often serendipitous. "I just find things and I hang onto them," Chappel explains. "Eventually things just fall together." *Bloom*, a recent work, started with a stick she found at Victoria Beach. Chappel has been inspired by a chunk of lava rock that showed up in her flowerbed, as well as a huge, heavy tree root that was dug out of her yard. "I couldn't even move that one," she says. "I had to hose it down and dry it and use a system of mats and ramps to drag it into my garage for the winter."

A lot of Chappel's work "responds to the cycles of life and death in nature, and how that relates to human beings," she says. "My work is a lot about death, because we all end up there eventually."

Connie Chappel's *Rare Gestures*

Talking about a birch tree on her street that was felled by high winds, she says, "I'd been following that tree for a long time, and when it came down, I took some bark from it. "I collected materials from the tree and did something with them. Some of the other parts of the tree a neighbour took and burnt them in his fireplace. That warmed the house. The ashes were recycled back into the earth." The energy of that tree moved into other forms, Chappel suggests.

Chappel has participated in the Herbarium project at the University of Manitoba, which allows artists access to the school's biorepository of preserved plant specimens. She's done work about Winnipeg's annual worm infestation and the city's canker worm control program. She's created a photo-work for the side of a city recycling bin.

Some of this work explores the connections between ecology and feminism. "These are buzzwords that can be kind of clichés," Chappel says. "But women are often caregivers, and that includes caregivers of nature. "I think of all the trees I've planted and pruned and cared for and worried about and noticed." Right now, Chappel is thinking about the loss of so many trees in the recent storm, "of something that's been there and then it's gone or it's changed or broken," she says. For Chappel, art can be a way to explore these changes and marking these losses.

This First Fridays' Art Talk/Art Walk with Connie Chappel takes place at the Free Press News Café at 237 McDermot Ave., on Friday, Nov. 1, at 6 p.m., with a guided art tour of the Exchange afterwards. Call 204-421-0682 or email wfpnewscafe@gmail.com to reserve tickets, which include dinner and cost \$25 plus tax.

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