

Seeing the forest and the trees

Multi-disciplinary art project uses tree concepts to explore belonging, community ties and other big questions about modern life

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM

PHOTOGRAPHY • DEAN PALMER

All her life, artist Deb Cripps has found answers to her questions during a walk in the woods.

When she was a child, one of eight siblings growing up in a small town in Nova Scotia, she would head for a clearing in the woods near her home to play.

There, she had spirited conversations with the tall trees. For a child, it felt natural and comforting, she says.

"I would talk to the trees and tell them my woes and the deeds of my brothers," says Cripps, smiling. "And as I told stories, I would hear the trees talk back. I had that feeling of being comforted and having an adviser and friendship and community."

As an adult, Cripps finds the same feelings during her frequent walks on forested trails in Waterloo Region. It's where she feels most connected – to herself, to others, to the community.

"If I feel disconnected, it's mended when I get into the forest."



That feeling of connection is the driving force behind an artistic project that Cripps, an artist, writer and photographer, has launched with her husband, Carl Hiebert, a photographer, author and motivational speaker.

They call it the "Illuminative Forest of Storytelling Trees" and it's being launched this year to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary.

Using arresting photographs they've taken on their frequent jaunts into the countryside, across Canada and around the world,

Deb Cripps and Carl Hiebert (left page) are working on an art exhibition they call "Illuminative Forest of Storytelling Trees" in their Waterloo home. Hiebert created the sculptural piece (above) to be part of one of the "trees."



Deb Cripps works on pieces of “found” wood that will be incorporated into the art. The 17 “trees” in the project will draw from photography, storytelling, music and other artistic input.



they’re creating an installation of 17 “trees” and giving them distinctive personalities and voices. Each tree is about 2.4 metres tall. Photos – an aerial view of farmland, a host of butterflies on a branch – give them colour and perspective.

At an indoor venue, original music incorporating nature sounds will draw visitors to the artists’ trees. Viewers will be able to aim their smartphone at a code imbedded in a tree to hear its two-minute story, or they

can read it in French or English. The story begins and ends with music composed for that tree’s “personality.”

Trees of different shapes and artistry have been given names and voices to relate stories that revolve around themes such as atonement, freedom, identity, transformation, humour, elder, divine touch and the question, “Do you live on my block?”

The trees’ stories will help viewers explore their place in a community and

their feelings about it, Cripps says. After viewers have toured the “forest,” they can fill out a questionnaire at an “engagement stump” in which they relate something about themselves. Information will be shared with cities, municipalities and other change-makers to help them find ways to make people feel more connected to their communities, the couple says.

The need to belong is common to everyone, Cripps says. While she and

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DEB CRIPPS

Hiebert feel strongly connected in Waterloo Region, there were “different times in our lives when we felt we didn’t belong, just like anyone else,” Hiebert says.

“This is about community,” Hiebert says. “Do you belong, and if not, why not, and what would it take to make a difference?”

“It’s exciting to present art in a new way that combines visual arts, storytelling, technology and music with a ‘belonging barometer.’ ”

A diverse group of five additional artists, called the “Sentient Collective,” will help tell each tree’s story. They are inter-arts and multidisciplinary artist Nicole Battista; musician, composer, singer-songwriter Amanda Lowry; storyteller Mary-Eileen McClear; actor and videographer Aaron Williams; and composer and musician Al Ralston.

The installation is designed so it can be moved from place to place. The exhibit will open at Themuseum in Kitchener on March 24 and run until May 22.

The project received a \$12,000 arts grant from the Region of Waterloo, Hiebert says.

The fact that the project is an artistic collaboration reinforces the idea of community, says Lowry, who is composing the music.

“Working with a collective in Waterloo Region, there’s a sense of belonging in the arts scene,” Lowry says, adding she had the same feeling of belonging when she attended Wilfrid Laurier University for her undergraduate music degree.

It’s one reason she returned to the region after receiving her master’s degree in music composition from the University of Toronto, she says.

Lowry focuses on improvisation in her compositions. “I’m interested in soundscape, working with recorded sounds of the environment, of the forest, our city.” She puts it together with “more traditional elements and melodies, using synthesis and other forms of sound creation to add

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to these textures.”

Hiebert credits Cripps for the project's artistic vision.

Cripps says she has come to realize that the trees' themes – some more than others – are part of who she is. For example, while she is a curious person who embraces change like the “Transformation Tree,” the “Humour Tree” reminds her that she needs to laugh out loud more often, she says.

Cripps and Hiebert, who married in 2007, are imaginative, adventurous and passionate about their art. You probably first learned about Hiebert in 1986 when he left his wheelchair on the ground to become the first person to fly across Canada in an open-cockpit ultralight, at the same time raising money for the Canadian Paraplegic Association. A hang-gliding accident in 1981 had broken his back and made him a

paraplegic, a label he has never allowed to define him.

He flew the ultralight cross-country a second time in the early 1990s, this time taking stunning aerial photographs that he published in a bestselling coffee-table book, “Gift of Wings.”

More recently, in 2006, Hiebert and Cripps drove together across Canada – Hiebert on a 1949 tractor and Cripps in a motorhome. They did so to document another community – farm families.

On the day of this interview, the couple has stood some of the “Illuminative Forest” trees in front of a large window in their Waterloo home. Some trees are completed, some are underway. All are unusual, colourful and thought-provoking.

The indoor “forest” suits the light-filled bungalow, which has a sunroom off the kitchen that looks out at lush Grand River

Conservation Authority green space. Large framed photographs taken by Cripps and Hiebert are on the walls, and smooth, hand-carved wood sculptures, bowls and other art are scattered throughout the house, made by Hiebert, who does the work at an Old Order Mennonite farm.

A “tower garden,” an aeroponic system in which lettuce and other edible plants are grown with light and water but no soil, makes gentle waterfall sounds beside the kitchen table that Hiebert made from the beams of his father's barn.

The couple's house is a bright, creative space, though most of the work happens in the basement workshop where there's paint thinner and other materials. Cripps' office is beside the workshop where she does most of her design work.

“I knew as soon as I walked in that house and looked at the first sculpture that there's

so much there for inspiration,” Lowry says.

Each tree is different. The “Atonement Tree,” Cripps and Hiebert explain, is made from a spalted maple tree; a maple in the initial stages of decay which gives the wood dark lines and streaks. The wood has messages imbedded in it beside small black-and-white photos that invite a viewer to look closer to think about life's challenges and hope.

“It talks about when life knocks you down and you dust yourself off,” says Hiebert, who became Canada's first paraplegic flight instructor within two years of his accident.

To make the “Elder Tree,” Cripps dragged a tree stump from a forest more than three kilometres from their home. That tree suggests wisdom and respect, Cripps says. The “Freedom Tree,” with its bike wheels, spokes and doves suggests motion and “letting go,” she says.

The “Divine Touch” tree includes images of a 115-year-old person's hands and a look into the eye of a newborn baby. It invites touch with the use of fabric and smooth maple wood carved by Hiebert.

The trunk of the “Identity Tree” includes photographs from 10 countries and talks about doors that a person has opened and those that he or she has avoided.

“I truly believe that if life by circumstance doesn't present you with new challenges, you should make your own,” Hiebert says. “At the end of the day, it's only and always about perspective and not circumstance but what you do with it.”

The “Serenity Tree” features a photo of a sand mandala created by monks in St. Jacobs a few years ago. Cripps and Hiebert hosted the monks in their home. They played crokinole and “talked about flow and chanted to us,” Cripps says.

The “Humour Tree” includes a worn car seat from a 1968 Camaro that was made into a Mennonite buggy seat. Cripps found the discarded seat during one of her forest walks.

And the “Transformation Tree” is alight with photos of Monarch butterflies at Long Point, Ont. “Its story is about change and resistance to change and the ability to morph into a winged life,” Cripps says.

“The question is ‘do you like change?’ All trees will ask questions of visitors.”

Battista, who is curating the exhibit, praises the project for its originality and vibrancy.

“What I love about it is there is not very much that combines photography and sculpture in a really effective way,” says Battista, who founded Chrysalides House in Waterloo, an art school and gallery. “This brings photography to life in a new way. It's not just sitting on the wall. I'm really



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excited about the sound elements as well. "I think it delves back into one purpose of art in general," Battista says. "It's there to make us question the world, question ourselves, inspire us, and I think we live at a time where maybe personal reflection is not a priority for people. We're really busy. We get distracted by so many things. "I hope people will walk away from it being touched in some way, whether that's an experience of nostalgia or thinking about their place in the community."

Cripps and Hiebert feel it's the right time in their lives to explore the idea of belonging. After all, their adventures have taken them across Canada and around the world to photograph and talk to people about how they live, whether they're Canadian farmers or villagers in remote parts of India and Cambodia.

"We've done so many things in life; endured and overcome so many things in life, and we've had adventure," Cripps says. The couple amazes friends and colleagues with their energy, tenacity, creative ideas and adventurous spirit. They choose projects that they believe will make a difference to people.

Hiebert has published six photographic books that he estimates have raised more than \$2 million for charitable organizations. In the award-winning book, "Us Little People," Hiebert, who grew up in a Mennonite farming community, gives a rare glimpse into the lives of Old Order Mennonite families in Waterloo Region. Another book, "Where Light Speaks," features stories, poems and images of the people and land of Haiti.

He's working on his seventh book, this time using a drone to take precise aerial photographs of Waterloo Region locations. Recognition of his work includes an honorary law degree from Wilfrid Laurier University and awards that acknowledge his photography, humanitarian work and making aviation history.

As a freelance writer and photographer,

Cripps has taken photographs in 14 countries and across Canada. An artist all her life who liked to sketch and paint, she developed her photography skills after meeting Hiebert. Her eye for colour, detail and unusual slices of life are evident in the photographs she took in 2009 while circling the globe with Hiebert in 56 days, stopping in six countries; Italy, South Africa, Namibia, India, Cambodia and Cook Islands. Photos and entries from her journal are on her website, www.tryoneofakind.ca.

She was co-photographer and author of "Keepers of the Land: A Celebration of Canadian Farmers." That book required some "white-knuckle" driving in the rain through the Rockies as they made their way from West to East, Cripps says. It rained every day but five during the first three weeks of the 2½-month summer journey.

Cripps would often drive ahead in the motorhome to locate the farm families and interview them. Hiebert followed on the old W4 McCormick tractor, similar to the tractor his father used to own but modified with hand controls for Hiebert. He slung his wheelchair on a rack behind him. Wearing a headset to muffle the loud engine and to listen to weather reports on satellite radio, Hiebert drove about 24 kilometres an hour, sometimes for seven hours of the day.

Battista says no matter what project the couple is working on, they have "a lot of faith in what they do." They're a "force to be reckoned with," she says, laughing.

"To make a difference, be creative and make things come from nothing, that's what artists do. But they're really motivated to do that and they're really hard-working and they're really good at making something out of nothing.

"They have a strong desire to be a positive force in the world." 

On the web: For more on "Illuminative Forest of Storytelling Trees" check out: www.illuminativeforest.ca

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