

Interview of Maddie McNeely by Kelly Zantingh of *Carrying Root Collective*, which is the collaborative print media and visual art collective of Kelly Zantingh and Allison Henry. Maddie McNeely and Kelly Zantingh met while wildfire fighting during the 2017 crisis in Williams Lake, British Columbia. They have since crossed paths both tree planting in the West and in Montréal, Québec.



Untitled, cherry wood, e padouk wood, orange osage wood, watercolour, 2020

KZ *What is your earliest encounter with art?*

MM My father was a painter, as is his father and his sister. He worked mainly with watercolours and from as early as I can remember I was his assistant; cleaning brushes, filling bowls with water and helping him set up still lifes sometimes. In the summers he worked in a corner of our overstuffed garage. A drawing table, a record player, a small opaque window. He would produce these soft paintings in this dark and crowded space and frame them himself in wood painted in a gold tone. He gave me a small drawing table and his wooden carrying case which I still use. My grandfather worked as an illustrator and in his studio, he had walls lined with catalogued filing cabinets of source imagery and magazine clippings. My brother and I would spend whole days sorting through the cabinets, picking out our favourites and scanning them to project them onto the walls to trace. My aunt paints landscapes of Italy and farm animals. For years she made these painted papier mâché animals. I distinctly remember the life size milk cow she made that took up most of the living room.

KZ *How did you start tree planting?*

MM While I was in high school, my brother went to Northern Ontario to plant and came back to tell me it was too hard and I could never do it, although he could. Once I was old enough to work, I travelled alone to British Columbia and have more or less been doing it since. It's a thrill and a challenge and even though it's repetitive it is enormously satisfying. I am now at a curious point where I've seen multiples changes in the industry and hope to continue to be a part of the evolution of the trade. I have learned a lot about forests and people, as much as I have learned about caring ways of working and living.

KZ *How does tree planting affect your process?*

MM A slower pace sets in as you are tired both physically and mentally. You are also removed from access to a studio, to most equipment and materials. With limited options, the sometimes frantic need to create slows and I can digest more thoughtfully. I mainly spend the months of May to August planning, daydreaming and working through ideas. Letting the environment of the job and sites we live on sway my ways of thinking about making work and ways of living. Being out in the forest reminds me of the essence of making. It feels once again like a highly intuitive thing. The act of making and creating stems out of something beautiful and murky in all of us. Some unnamed desire to build and share and exchange. Being here reminds me of the importance of limina space and method, without clear destination or intention, which is sometimes extremely fruitful.

KZ *How have you been thinking about your work lately?*

MM I've been thinking a lot about the body in relation to objects and how they fit with our shapes and our needs. I've been thinking about the relationships we build with inanimate objects and how deeply we depend on them to live as we do. We give objects like bottles the shape of our torso, or bowling balls the space for our fingers, or handles the grip of the inside of our hands. We become accustomed to objects as active players in our lives and treat them with care and respect, most of the time. I've also been thinking about furniture as objects with specific intentions for the body in a variety of purposes. Furniture as systems of support and how these objects carry values that also signify human values; integrity, balance, longevity. I've

been thinking about colour and shape and the potential they hold to incite emotion and thought. I've been thinking about composition and the opportunity it holds for narrative; the conversational potential of objects or materials when placed near to each other. I've been working on sketches for new sculptural works in wood, taking photos and writing lots.



Sketch for future work, 2020

KZ Tell me about a memorable experience from the past couple of months.

MM A friend picked up the hobby of birdwatching this summer. They bought a pair of binoculars and started identifying the birds in the areas where we've been working. Looking through the binoculars for the first time was hugely exciting. This fully heightened version of reality, this tool that gives you bionic eyes that unlock parts of nature you would otherwise never be able to find. We saw the entrance to small bat caves on the side of eroding cliffs and swallow's nests in the hollowed-out knots of Aspen trees. We saw birds watching us, watch them and felt once again how alive the woods are. A welcome reminder when working on cut blocks where creatures and plants are continually displaced.

KZ What are your plans after the tree planting season?

MM My plan is to gather a little bit of gear to make new sculptural work and head to Vancouver Island. In the seven years I've come out West to work I've never visited this spot and it feels like a good moment to escape to a beach for a few days. The idea is to turn my van into a temporary mobile studio and find a quiet space outdoors to make.

KZ What is one skill you have recently learned?

MM How to start a quad without a key.

KZ What is one new skill you would like to have?

MM Horseback riding. Ideally through an open field at sunset.

KZ What are some of your future goal?

MM To live more sustainably, grow food and create a cooperative artist space.

KZ What is one book recommendation?

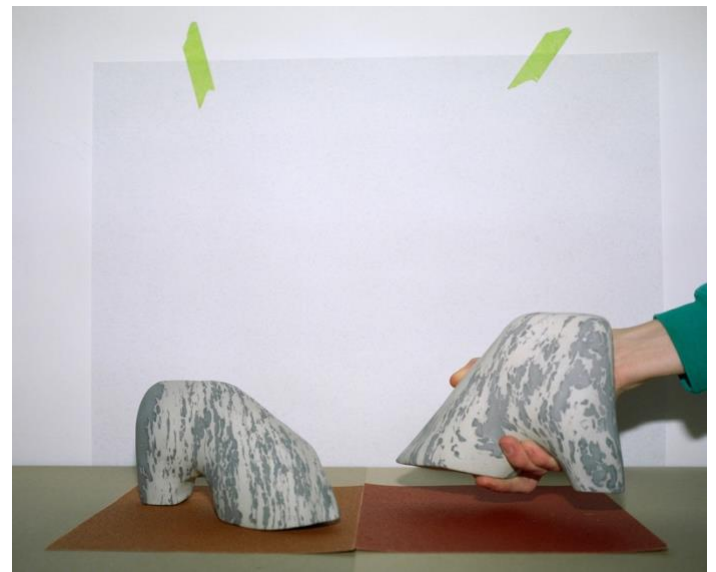
MM There There by Tommy Orange.

KZ What tree would you choose to be?

MM Trembling Aspen.

KZ What has been your most useful tool lately?

MM A yellow handheld two-way receiver radio. Also, communication in general.



Boots, carved marble, 2018 image: Brandon Brookbank

Questionnaire

Do you have a recurring dream or nightmare?

When I was young, I would dream once a year that I had to count every grain of sand on the beach.

Best place to “accidentally” bump into you?

Walking the streets of Montreal carrying a large amount of wood.

What historical figure, living or dead, would you like to have dinner with?

Eileen Myles.

If Hollywood made a movie about your life, who should play you?

Willem Dafoe or the pig from Babe.

If you could reincarnate as a plant, which one would you be?

Fool’s Parsley.

If you could be a texture, what would it be?

The peel of an orange.

Which superpower would you like to have?

Weather control.

Do you believe that alternate universes exist, and if yes, what universe are you currently in?

One with an Ennio Morricone soundtrack.

Is there any artist that you would like to share your studio with?

Laure Prouvost.

If a wizard ambushed you in the park and made you choose, what category of food would you give life and be forced to keep as your best friend?

A dried fig.

What is the oldest piece of art that you have kept of your own creation?

A red number 3 pencil crayon used until it was at its smallest.

What is the most bizarre thing you’ve ever done that most other people have probably not done?

A stand-off with a wild horse.