Rewilding

THROUGH THE LENS OF JANICE WRIGHT CHENEY

By Meaghan Laaper

ELYSIUM, INSTALLATION AT ART IN THE OPEN, CHARLOTTETOWN, PE, 2018 | PHOTO BY SEAN LANDSMAN

A STUDY OF FLORA, FAUNA AND FUNGI, 2018, SPECIMENS FROM ODELL PARK, FOUND LETTERPRESS DRAWER | PHOTO BY KELLY HILL

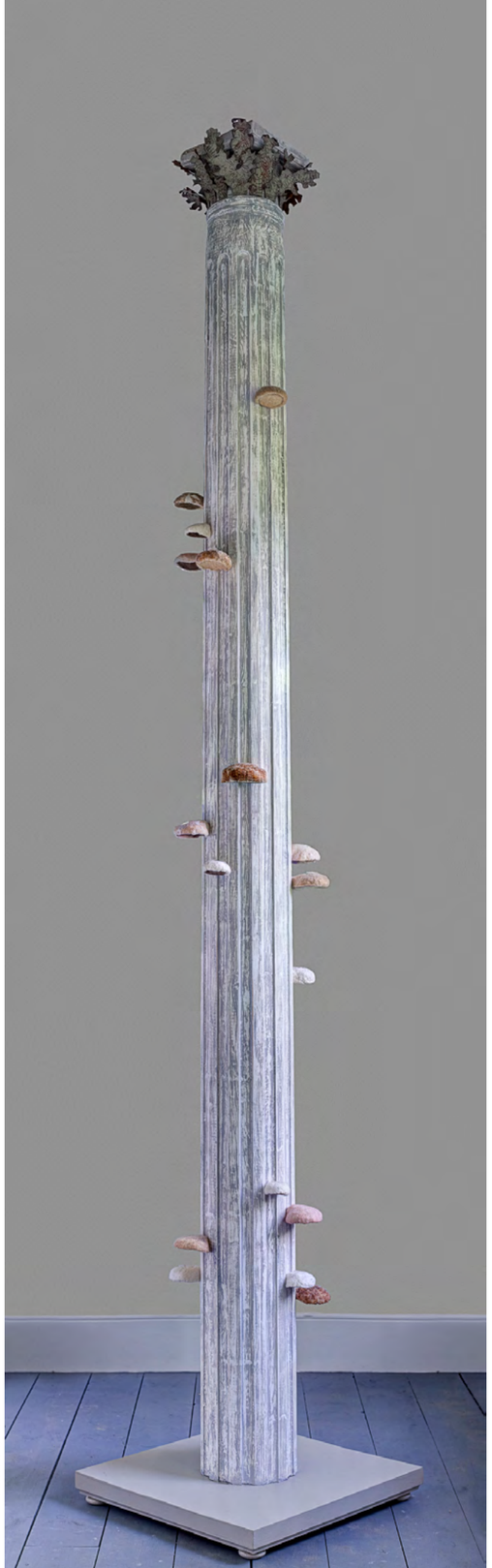
Artists create new spaces where viewers confront their own biases. With skilled hands, artists can draw attention to the seemingly arbitrary by unveiling new truths. In a movement like environmentalism, the goal being to shift minds and engage voices, art is an asset.

Fredericton artist Janice Wright Cheney is an environmentalist whose artwork navigates the boundaries between cultural and natural worlds. Her practice is research-based and began with embroidering insects and larva on handkerchiefs. She jokes that she is making her way through the animal kingdom one creature at a time, exploring increasingly larger organisms. From small creatures like cockroaches, rats and sardines, to imposing bears, giant squid and coywolves, her work holds true to this claim. In her most recent project, she looks into the decaying forest debris to explore a very large organism: the fungal mycelium.

Spurred by an interest in foraging for edible mushrooms, Janice began researching the world of fungi and as is the case with her practice, research bled into art.

"The more I read about fungi the more I began to admire an entire kingdom that I'd never really thought that much about."

She soon learned that the edible mushrooms she sought were only the tip of the iceberg, or in this case, the mycelium. A mushroom is merely the reproductive fruiting body of a large and complicated underground network. The mycelium make up the main body of the fungi, their hyphae fibers threaded through the soil. They span hundreds of acres[2] and have evolved as a natural communication system of the forest, trading nutrients for carbon between trees and offering to balance our impossibly high emissions. What seems to be a class of tiny insignificant organisms actually includes the largest organism on Earth.



FERA MOIRA

FERA MOIRA | DETAIL | PHOTO BY JEFF CRAWFORD

"In a healthy ecosystem, all the little things are also as important as the big things."

While images of polar bears stranded on melting ice flows strike a strong chord and speak to the ever-pressing concerns of global warming, not many are eager to adopt a mushroom. It is easy to see the value of protecting the mammals we have grown up admiring, but when society has learned to ignore something unseen, we need art to unveil it. Through a collection entitled *Fera Moira*, Janice brings to light the fascinating aspects of fungi and gives this neglected organism long overdue recognition.

An exquisitely skilled textile artist, her hands are at home in a multitude of materials. For *Fera Moira*, a mixture of wet and dry felting methods allowed her to sculpt the different shapes of mushrooms. She went so far as to make actual mushroom dyes to achieve subtle gradations of colour on the felted fungi. She attached her felted mushrooms onto reclaimed artifacts: old porch columns, newel posts, drawers, and even a rusty baby crib.

"I am thinking about a crossover between nature and culture, how these wooden columns were once trees, and how nature can reclaim an object when its left alone."

The baby crib, now titled *Elysium*, has become the centerpiece of the collection. Her felted mushrooms appear to sprout from the elevated bare springs. Crocheted with single strand wool, her network of mycelium branches out beneath the crib frame, echoing those networks stretched-out beneath Earth's surface.

LESSONS IN NATURE, 2015, FELTED WOOL, WOOD, FOUND MATERIALS | PHOTO BY MICHAEL KHOURY

Elysium was shown for the first time at Art in the Open, an open-air art festival in Charlottetown, PEI, in August 2018. The crib and several columns from the *Fera Moira* series were installed in a wooded area of Victoria Park, a perfect setting for this work. The exhibit displayed the resilience of fungi and the concept of rewilding—a term meant to describe the phenomenon that nature can reclaim in amazing ways those spaces from which the human hand is removed. Though a tree can be taken from nature and deformed, humanity cannot change its nature and fungi, when given the chance, will claim it again.

"I wanted to show it in a large enough space that it could be powerful. . .to show the possible largeness of the mycelium."

Cradled among trees and leaf debris, it served as an eerie reminder of how quickly humanmade objects can be taken back, but latent in that destruction is a hope for the future. Mushrooms consume matter, but they are also the start of life, giving nutrients back to the earth for plants to consume. Cribs are an emblem of new life (though this crib left to rust may tell a different story) and the mushrooms growing from it speak to a future where life continues without or despite our intervention.

"Mushrooms are related to a possible future that is hopeful."

FERA MOIRA, 2018, FELTED WOOL, SILK AND LACE ON FOUND COLUMNS | PHOTO BY JEFF CRAWFORD

At the end of the day, the many installations at Art in the Open were dismantled and the park returned to its original state, but that would not be the end of *Elysium*. In the spring of 2020 this work was to be featured at the University of New Brunswick Art Centre in *Attending the Apocalypse*, a two-person exhibition with Jennifer Lee Wiebe. However, just as the works were to be installed, COVID-19 restrictions were put in place and the gallery was closed. Gallery director Marie Maltais adapted the exhibit to life online, where visitors are able to view the works on the gallery website as well as the accompanying catalogue.

For the two artists, this project became an act of collaborative practice where they discovered that their seemingly disparate visions were distinctly related. While Jennifer's series took messages tweeted through cyberspace and summoned them in physical form, in this unexpected societal shift, Janice's crib now evaporated from nature into ones and zeros.

Our current situation is a modern twist on the old adage "as above, so below." In a time of crisis, humanity has relied heavily on online networks to talk, to work, and to entertain each other. Without these webs of communication, the COVID-19 pandemic would be an even greater struggle than it is right now. Meanwhile, the forest depends on its fungal networks in times of disease and stress. When a tree is attacked by pests, it will push its nutrients away from itself through neighbouring mycelium. This encourages its seedlings to grow further away from the infected site and warns local trees of invaders[1]. While humanity reaches through social media and video chat, distancing our bodies while sending messages of life support, the trees reach for each other through millions of strands, offering gifts of advice and nourishment to their counterparts.

"It's about much more than just mushrooms," says Janice.

Situated in the forest, *Elysium* tells the story of a future where the interconnectivity of life allows it to carry on through us, while Elysium situated in the virtual web reminds us of the lifeline social connectivity has always been for humankind. ⇩

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[1] *Fantastic Fungi: The Magic Beneath Us.* Directed by Louis Schwartzberg.2019; Moving Art, 2020. Vimeo.
[2] "Mycelium." World of Microbiology and Immunology. *Encyclopedia.com*, Last modified May 1, 2020. https://bit.ly/encyclopediamycelium