

The Art of Well-Being

Jay Mead '78

Artist Jay Mead '78 is creating the sort of work—and leading the sort of life—where questions of politics, energy, environment, and art share a common answer in the principles of sustainability.

One cannot accuse Jay Mead of creating art for art's sake—at least not only for art's sake. There is humanity to think about as well, and all the trouble we get into. In the late '70s and early '80s, when Jay was studying art at Dartmouth College, such trouble included the Reagan administration's covert actions in Central America and Dartmouth's investments in South African corporations that endorsed apartheid.

"I very vividly remember seeing and being part of the Bread and Puppet Theater performances on the Hanover Green at Dartmouth," Jay says. "It was my first real exposure to art as a means for social change. I saw that you didn't necessarily have to preach. Instead you could make statements through imagery, statements that were also fun and whimsical. And funny thing—the police were never negative to people who were animating giant puppets."

Then there's also art for nature's sake. Jay grew up immersed in nature, pruning branches and planting seedlings on a Christmas tree farm on the shores of Squam Lake. That was after Jay's architect father had moved the family away from a troubled public school system in Massachusetts to land owned by Jay's grandmother; it also happened to be close to a good independent school.

As a day student at Holderness, Jay came home evenings and weekends to work on the tree farm and learn firsthand the ethos of sustainability that lies at the heart of farming—and about the inherent beauty of trees as well. In front of Jay's house a lovely spreading elm had succumbed to Dutch elm disease. The tree was supposed to come down, but Jay prevailed upon his parents to leave its trunk standing.



LEFT: The old pavilion Jay renovated and filled with a forest of birch trees. The pavilion was part of this year's Sculpturefest, an exhibition mounted annually in Woodstock, VT. **RIGHT:** The stump that Jay made from discarded redwood timber. On display in San Francisco, the installation called attention to California's destruction of its redwood forests.

Once he graduated from Dartmouth and came back to the Lakes Region to teach art at Holderness, as he did through much of the '80s, that tree stump became his first big sculptural piece. "It was abstract," Jay laughs. "I carved it so that it resembled a giant Celtic rune, I guess, and hollowed it out enough so you could sit inside."

During that time Jay joined Bread and Puppet as a puppeteer at several large demonstrations in New York and Washington, DC. Then, in 1989, he moved to San Francisco and became a core member of the Wise Fool Puppet Intervention troupe, a sort of Bread-and-Puppet West that similarly combines theater and social activism.

It was there that the sort of environmental art Jay had first practiced by Squam Lake blossomed into the art of environmental activism. "Found Stump," done for the San Francisco Arts Commission, had more than a passing resemblance to that transfigured elm—twenty feet high, a naked trunk raised in the middle of



the city. But this one was made entirely of discarded redwood lumber, and therefore disturbingly suggestive of the headlong destruction of the state's redwood forests.

Meanwhile the Wise Fools staged skits on issues of multiculturalism, AIDS/HIV, the societal impacts of capitalism, and the second Iraq War. The latter two subjects shared common ground with matters of oil consumption and its effects on the environment. Politics, energy, environmentalism, and art all became more firmly superimposed on each other in Jay's mind.

In 2002 Jay moved—with his wife and two boys—to Cobb Hill, a cohousing community in Hartland, VT. Also a working farm, Cobb Hill is dedicated to living as lightly and sustainably on its land as possible. Meanwhile Jay's art was moving more and more out of the gallery and into the outdoors. "When I had work in galleries, I missed having a dialogue with an audience," he says. "Public art, on the other hand, in either performance or installation

Radiating Cheerfulness

form, seems to be more about connecting directly with people.”

For the past ten years, Jay has been one of the artists exhibiting at Sculpturefest, which is mounted annually, from Labor Day through the fall, in the fields and barns of two farms in Woodstock, VT. This year’s installation, “The Forest Within,” began with a crumbling summer pavilion that Jay restored and then filled with an artificial grove of limbless white saplings.

Jay’s friend Peter Heller, author of the acclaimed debut novel *The Dog Stars* (Vintage, 2012), describes the installation as follows: “The old pavilion suddenly looked like it would burst its seams with pride. Because it was now a shadow box that held a forest. A ghost forest. A forest of birch at night, or aspen. It was a little church, and inside danced the rows of slender luminous trees, and it was a sepulcher also, and the forest was skeletal, a photographic negative of the living world, what it may become.”

Jay’s is the sort of art that is both a warning of what the world might become and a celebration of what it is—and therefore wide enough in its force to straddle both danger and delight. And it flows out of an ethos that made him a natural for a 2013 Fellowship for Leaders in Arts and Culture from the Rockwood Leadership Institute. There Jay is even further refining the skills in vision and communication necessary for community leaders in the arts, says the RLI, who are “concerned with the well-being of humanity and the biosphere.”

Jay sometimes feels that the phrase “art work” is a misnomer—that “heart work” is what it really involves. In Jay Mead’s heart are both a civil human community living within its means, and a world of healthy, flourishing forests. You might call it art for sustainability’s sake.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Forest Within image courtesy of Carla Kimball. 🐾



“A Reef Forever,” hand-cut paper and acrylics, by Sine Morse

Sine Morse '88

Sine Morse '88 did a lot of cutting and coloring paper with her small children when they were young. Mia and Max may have outgrown that, but Sine hasn't. Now she's brightening the Pacific Northwest.

A few years ago—once her two small children were attending school full-time, and she wasn’t doing so much cutting and paper-coloring anymore—Sine Morse thought about school for herself.

She had gone to Colorado University at Boulder with a love of snow sports and to accomplish a combined major in psychology and biology. She was on the pre-med track then and primed for a career in medicine. But now she was thinking more in terms of a graduate

degree in child psychology and work with abused or neglected children.

But somehow that never happened. “Instead I went back to kindergarten,” Sine laughs, which means that she just went on cutting and coloring. But that’s worked out alright for a self-taught artist who is now one of the bright new lights in the Portland, OR, arts community.

“No, I never took art past the eighth grade,” Sine admits. “I grew up in Aspen and was mostly into Nordic skiing at Holderness. At CU I got sidetracked into snowboarding. So then I got a job with Wave Rave, which makes snowboarding clothing—I worked in international sales for them—and then ran my own snowboard retail shop in Boulder for six years.”

Then there was some time spent doing property management on the thousand-acre Aspen ranch of film producer Peter Guber. By then her family had mostly moved out of Colorado, and in 2004—with her husband Mark and their youngest only four months old—she made what she calls “a blind move” to Portland. They knew only that the city was manageably small, with Mt. Hood, the Pacific, and wine country nearby.

Then some combination of nature and nurture took over.

“My dad was a woodworker, and I grew up watching my mother do art all the time,” she says. “And once the kids were in school, I realized how much I enjoyed simply cutting things out, and painting them, and assembling them. As a personality I’m very Type A, and also very meticulous. So cutting paper? Well, you don’t need a lot of skill, actually, but you do need time and patience because it’s kind of tedious. And I find it has become a sort of meditation practice for me.”

So instead of cut-paper artifacts to entertain Mia and Max (now 11 and 9, respectively), she began to make artifacts to entertain adults. But don’t look for the influence of, say, Henri Matisse in her work; look instead for the effect

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62