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Art among the leaves: student-artists take over Pembroke Campus

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While hurrying to class at Smith-Buonanno or grabbing lunch at the Gate, students may have noticed that the trees on Pembroke Campus are sporting more than fall foliage. A large paper-maché squirrel clings to one tree, while others are covered in red yarn or pieces of burnt umbrellas.

The installations are part of a student-coordinated exhibition called "A Week and a Half: Installations in Brown Trees," which officially closes today. Organized by five small groups of visual arts and art semiotics concentrators, the show features the work of 15 students who are striving to reshape the way students think about nature and art.

"We were really after a way to give viewers a chance to look at art differently," said Beth Enterkin '07, one of the event's organizers.

Enterkin, who wove a web — or "dream-catcher" — of hemp and feathers into the branches of one tree, said the idea for the show arose during a weekly forum held by the visual arts department. Led by Visiting Lecturer in Visual Arts Jay-Gould Stuckey '90, the Friday meetings are designed to help students transition into the art world beyond Brown.

"A group show shows that you have drive, that you can jump through administrative hoops," said Stuckey, whose meetings focus on applying to graduate school, approaching galleries and arranging portfolios.

Stuckey said he himself felt unprepared for the business aspect of working as an artist after he left the University.

"I didn't even know where to begin," said Stuckey, who believes the students' experience arranging the event will help them significantly as artists after graduation.

Organizer Jessica Taylor '07 said this is her first installation show, though she has exhibited paintings. Her piece, "Day Glo/Night Glow," features branches wrapped in brightly colored and glow-in-the-dark tape, evoking the cycle of day and night.

Taylor said the organizers have met once or twice a week since late September to plan the exhibit. Their duties included securing permission to use the space, talking with administrators and encouraging other students to take part in the show.

Their "call for artists" resulted in a number of unique installations. One tree, designed by Sarah Hotchkiss '07, features laminated cutouts of paper animals, including a lobster, a moose and an elephant. On a sign attached to a nearby lamppost, Hotchkiss's description reads: "Elephants don't belong in trees. You should know that."

Another organizer, Bevan Weissman '06, wrote that his painting of a tire swing hanging from a tree is a "reference to an object and its representation, where the representation is placed in the same context as the original." Weissman also created "Rotten," which originally featured dozens of apples dangling from a tree outside of Smith-Buonanno Hall.

The piece's apples have disappeared since the Nov. 10 opening. Organizer Elizabeth Echeverria '07 said that while weather may have destroyed some of the pieces, she suspects students may have damaged them as well.

"One kid actually bit into a varnished apple during the opening," she said.

Echeverria's own piece featured jawbreakers strung from one of the tree's branches. The idea was for rain and dew to erode the candies, causing them to change color over the exhibit's 10-day run. While the corroding jawbreakers were meant to evoke a sense of temporality, Echeverria's piece was shorter lived than she had planned.

"Basically, they're completely gone," she said. "I suspect that some college students just stole them."

All of the participating students provided brief descriptions of their art. While some students gave theoretical explanations for their work, others described their pieces in a simpler fashion.

Tree art

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Alex Malkin '09 wrote that he "just thought it would be cool to make a bird's nest out of a 2 by 4. And then place it in a cube constructed of plywood. And then put it in a tree." High winds blew Malkin's piece to the middle of Pembroke Green — another example of damage inflicted upon the installations.

Though the organizers expressed gratitude for Stuckey's help with the project, he insists that he was merely a guiding force for "Brown Trees."

"They deserve all the credit, they made it happen," he said. "But that's the beauty of Brown students — there's always a certain level of motivation."