

The wheels on the tree go round and round

By John E. Mitchell, North Adams Transcript

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 Friday, August 8 NORTH ADAMS -- Energy conservation doesn't have to be a dry subject and artist Joseph Smolinski is using it as a nexus point between design, science fiction and whimsy.

Smolinski, an art professor at the University of New Haven, has taken his creative interests and translated them into the real world, via a small wind turbine made to look like a tree, currently featured in the Mass MoCA "Badlands" show.

In "Badlands" Smolinski's interest in sustainable energy is traced from conception to reality -- his tree turbine sits in back of the museum, where it powers itself. Smolinski had recently done shows involving alternative energies and had a long fascination with the nexus between nature and technology -- one of his favorite subjects to draw is a cell phone tower tree. The tree turbines grew out of these.

"After reading about wind power, I found that most the opponents of it were concerned with the aesthetics of it, how it would degrade the landscape, mar the landscape, so a good solution seemed if those people would accept their cell phone towers as trees, I figured why not have their wind turbines as trees as well.

Smolinski moved the project from sketches to animation and was then commissioned to finish the project for Mass MoCA. It immediately became a collaborative work -- Smolinski engaged the help of engineering students and professors at his school

to work out the practicality of his designs. Later, the crew at Mass MoCA helped him get the actual contraption up.

"It was a lot different for me," said Smolinski. "I've always just made work by myself in my studio, but this was like being a designer and a project manager rather than just being an artist in a studio. It was a really different process -- a really exciting process, but at the same time, I couldn't really get in there and make it myself, it took a lot more people."

Smolinski's personal hope is that he will have another opportunity to build a tree turbine, since the work on this current one has given him the opportunity to come up with improvements not only on the design, but also the construction. Still, while Smolinski pursued the project as a statement more than any sort of practical solution to the energy problem, he also views it as a research and development period that could someday lead to more applicable and serious ideas. He also sees it as something more playful.

"I'm from Minnesota originally and out there every little town out in the middle of the country has an icon of some sort, like a giant Paul Bunyan or a huge fish," said Smolinski. "The town I grew up in had a 40-foot-tall cement snowman, that was the icon of the town. So I thought about these roadside curiosities that people drive by and wonder, what the hell this is, why it's there, it was another way I thought about it."

It was also a move back to sculpture, which used to consume most of his creative time -- nowadays, his sculpture work is mostly three-dimensional modeling for his animation programs, which are time-consuming but like his drawings and the turbine project, built around an enduring fascination with trees.

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"All the trees that I do, the virtual trees, I use an algorithm program that does tree generations," said Smolinski. "It's not like drawing, it's more like punching in numbers and seeing what happens. You tweak the different algorithms and you get different things to happen."

Smolinski is also working on a series of drawings involving trees in various situations with technology -- perhaps a car or a plane has crashed into it, or the tree is crushing or overtaking a vehicle somehow.

"The tree is a powerful icon, not only because of these giant, fake cell phone towers, but it's kind of a symbol of environmentalism that keeps happening over again, and more recently I've been looking at the religious symbolism of the tree," said Smolinski.

Different drawings present different situations -- and each situation suggests that trees are plants with numerous personalities and roles to play. Like human beings, no two trees are the same.

"Sometimes they become the victim, sometimes they become a powerful figure," said Smolinski. "The one with the car, the tree is the environmental crusader, the car is the opponent. I've done a few of them with the car being crushed by the tree or the car crashing into the tree, things like that. I think that's probably something I'll return to again. Each composition becomes a little bit of something different, the ideas change throughout. That's the nice thing about working through this, I haven't really exhausted it, I've still been able to come up with new ideas and speak to different areas."

Smolinski's particular dual interest is easy for him to trace -- his father and his grandfather were major influences for him.

"My interest in nature started when I was really

young, my grandfather was a landscape painter," said Smolinski. "He would take me out and show me how to paint, we'd draw trees and ducks and things like that. That started really early and I had a strong appreciation for things like that. In terms of the technology, I've always been interested in the way things work, interested in taking things apart and seeing how they work. My father is an electrician and I grew up in the family trade. He owned his own business and I started working as an electrician when I was 13-years-old, so I've had that kind of connection to the inner working systems of things."

Smolinski is very interested not only with the idea of technology copying nature but also nature reclaiming its territory and absorbing technology. In his most bleak depiction of this idea, Smolinski rendered Biosphere 2 crumbling on an apocalyptic landscape populated by logged forests that have been replaced by tree turbines. Within the structure, plants are growing outward and around it, small, real pines are sprouting. This was inspired by a honeymoon trip to the actual structure.

"At one point we were in the bowels of this place, they were showing us what they call the lungs," said Smolinski. "There's this huge glass pyramid on one side and the air pressure gets so high that they have to have this diaphragm on one side of the building that has to inflate so it doesn't blow the windows out. So we're underneath the garden in this thing and all of a sudden the power goes out. I felt like we were in 'Jurassic Park.' I wanted to do a drawing based on that experience."

Smolinski says that his preoccupation with the breakdown of technological systems within apocalyptic natural settings and the wacky architecture that can sometimes go hand-in-hand with that leads some viewers to enthusiastically look at his work like pieces of science fiction.

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"A lot of people will say to me, 'Oh, you've got to see this old sci-fi movie that reminds me of your work!' said Smolinski. "And I do, I need to sit down with Netflix and start watching movies."

His next show at the Mixed Greens Gallery in New York City acknowledges this artistic debt -- its title is "After the Fall," three words that elicit anything from "Planet of the Apes" to "Logan's Run" and beyond and mix those with Biblical themes.

"One of the main pieces I'm working on is called 'Apple Tree,'" said Smolinski, "which is this apocalyptic Garden of Eden with an apple tree that's a cell phone tower tree, the chord winds down from the transmitters and turns into a serpent. Most of the garden has turned into thistles, it's a wintery sort of scene. All the apples are rotting on the branches."

Techno-natural hybrids may be where Smolinski's art is headed, but it's also where the world seems to be headed nowadays and Smolinski is just following along, capturing the movement and commenting as he renders.

"There's all this new technology, biotech hybrids, which are kind of why I got fascinated by cell phone trees, they were like this poster child of hybrids, this obviously fake thing, but wanting to have this mix of technology and nature," said Smolinski. "I just don't think it's going to be very long -- you can already have a computer chip in your dog for if they get lost. A lot of technology is going to be moving towards that. Maybe we'll grow computer chips instead of producing them."

Cell phone transmitters as roots that sprout up from the ground, man-made structures as ramshackle hideaways from the fallen technological world, trees exacting their revenge on humans -- this is the future as seen by Joseph Smolinski. And yet through the possible bleakness, it's a humor that comes

though -- a situation of absurdity for which Smolinski is, at the very least, offering a few solutions.

"I guess in some way I'm looking at things through an apocalyptic view, but then the tree turbine becomes an optimistic view, it looks at a way to solve the problem or at least address the problem," said Smolinski.

Joseph Smolinski's "Tree Turbine Prototype Number 1" and other work can be viewed at Mass MoCA. He can be found online at www.josephsmolinski.com.

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