

TEXAS A&M
UNIVERSITY
COMMERCE

The Patrick Dougherty Project at Texas A&M University-Commerce | 2015



Deep in the Heart | Patrick Dougherty

at Texas A&M University-Commerce



Deep in the Heart: Patrick Dougherty

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letter from the president

Dear Reader,

When planning for the celebration of the 125 anniversary of the founding of Texas A&M University–Commerce, we wanted to do something more than recall significant moments in the university’s history. We wanted to do something that had never been done before. Patrick Dougherty’s *Deep in the Heart* is a wonderful artistic expression that does just that. *Deep in the Heart* is a fanciful blending of tradition and imagination. Starting with Mr. Dougherty’s choice of two stately live oak trees as the foundation, the “stick sculpture” features local saplings and tree branches harvested from the area by an army of volunteer students, faculty, alumni, and members of the community. This unique sculpture is truly an expression of the spirit of integrity, innovation, and imagination that exemplifies our institution. We are grateful to Mr. Dougherty for bringing his creative gifts to our campus, as well as to all who were privileged to participate in its formation. Through this volume, their efforts will be woven into the history and legacy of our university.

Sincerely,

Dan R. Jones, Ph.D.
President

Acknowledgements

There is no way to acknowledge each and every person who participated/contributed to building the environmental artwork *Deep in the Heart*, but many people who helped make this project a tremendous learning experience for everyone who touched the native branches used to create our sculpture.

To the Visual Art Committee: Randy VanDeven, Joe Daun, Emily Newman, David McKenna, Martha Foote and others, I would like to say thank you. Dr. Newman introduced the committee and the university to the concept of environmental art and Dougherty’s work.

The volunteers are too numerous to list individually, but collectively, I would like to thank the scores of students associated with the Department of Art, fraternities, sororities, international organizations, student government, religious organizations, Honors College and University College who embraced this opportunity from day one.

In addition, we have to acknowledge the community volunteers from the City of Commerce, the fire department, Commerce High School and the Chamber of Commerce for their willingness to make this a collaboration amongst friends.

To Joe Daun, Brian Weaver and Bethany Hargrove, thank you for your countless hours of organizing, managing and scheduling a project that touched so many lives along the way.

And to Patrick Dougherty, your sincere devotion to the well-being of students and our community is an inspiration that will remain with the Commerce family for many years to come.



Randy VanDeven, P.E.
Vice President, Advancement

Plates



“Working on this installation was an experience in transformation. I volunteered to work a handful of days from start to finish, and I never expected that the branches and saplings I helped cut down that first day would turn out to be the work I viewed three weeks later. However, the transformative qualities of the sculpture were not just limited to its materials. I chose art history as my major because I wanted to be close to art but thought I was only adept at discussing it. Through this project, I discovered I am capable of creating art as well.

Meagan May, Art History Major, Department of Art



“While harvesting, we navigated mud, thorns, steep inclines, brush and narrow uneven trails. We bent our backs to bend the saplings into manageable bundles. But the weather was excellent— mostly sunny, clear, with nice temperatures. A January lack of bugs and snakes was a plus! We sawed, cut, gathered, carried, piled, tied, loaded and unloaded many bundles. We wore gloves and eye protection to keep branches and thorns at bay, and long sleeves, pants and waterproof boots were a good idea, especially for the first couple of days. Gathering provided a sense of accomplishment, a collaborative group experience, and an appreciation of the upcoming work at hand. And, of course, the medium for the art. The action of cutting and gathering indigenous wood felt primal and good; the chance to use my hands was therapeutic. The only material used in the piece is wood. And using sticks from nature to weave into a large ephemeral piece that blends with its natural surroundings only to eventually return to the earth, fulfills a natural cycle that feels right and honest and makes sense.”

Jane Cornish Smith,
Graduate Student, Department of Art



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As we worked to tie the branches together to begin the shaping process, I began to see the living aspect of the work. The branches may have been cut free and might be dying, but the work is alive. After everything is tied together, the branches dry and take to their new shapes. And after they dry and conform to a shape, they will settle and shift.

Jamie Maldonado, Graduate Student, Department of Art

”

I am enjoying how much this has brought the community together. This campus is made up of some amazing people. There were people from nursing students to the track coach out helping gather sticks. It brought undergrad and grad students together to work as one. It gave many people the ability to meet others they normally would not have met. If the community had not come together with Patrick, this project would not have been possible. It was wonderful to see how positively the community of Commerce and the school reacted to Patrick and his art.

Wendy Franklin, Graduate Student,
Department of Art





“The longer I spend working on the sculpture the harder it is to leave. The piece is beginning to have a certain presence that is peaceful, interesting and habitable. I especially like how it has a symbiotic relationship with the tree by way of it hugging and respectfully interacting with the limbs. The tops of the sculptures for instance wrap around the limbs following the shape and expressing a gentle embrace. Patrick conceptualized this act by saying we want to respect the trees already there, and for our sculpture to have a positive relationship with the tree.”

Rashid Lane, Graduate Student, Department of Education



“The sheer amount of volunteering was awesome to see. Each day more and more people would stop and ask how they could volunteer. You could really tell there was some sort of energy there, and people wanted to be a part of it. A lot of sweat and hard work has been poured into the Patrick Dougherty project, and now we can enjoy the fruits of our labor. I have never been involved in a project of this magnitude, and I can say that I feel truly fortunate to have been a part of it. This is the kind of thing that stays with you for the rest of your life.”

Tanner Harmening,
Graduate Student, Department of Art



“There is a lot of interest generated by being in the middle of campus - lots of people stop to watch or read the informational sign. The response so far has been pretty positive and I know that people will enjoy it even more once they are able to get in and around them close up. I love the energy of everyone working together and I love playing outside (which is really what it feels like!).”

Bethany Hargrove, MFA Candidate, Department of Art



One of the unexpected lessons that I learned from Patrick had to do with self-discipline. Patrick is probably one of the most hard-working, disciplined people I have ever met. Basically every decision that he makes is weighed against the basic question: Will it alter, or does it have the potential to alter, whether or not I can continue to make work? Patrick said that biting off more than we think we can chew is one of the most valuable ways to

grow as artists and people. We never really know what we are capable of until we jump in and try. While I am happy to have had the opportunity to gain the technical knowledge and skills, it is the unexpected lessons that will really change how I go about living and working as an artist.

Bethany Hargrove, MFA Candidate,
Department of Art

I was dirty, scratched, sweaty, freezing, tired, and sore, but I loved working on this project. Every day I felt accomplished. I felt productive. It was nice to be a part of something that was greater than myself, especially since I knew that this sculpture would be here for years for others to enjoy even after I had graduated.

Shelby Rackley, MFA Candidate,
Department of Art



The installation piece Deep in the Heart was beautiful to see when I stepped on campus after having been away most of the semester. When I finally stood before the structure, the tree saplings towered over me and I contemplated the eroding quality of nature and life itself. Although the branches twist and curve upwards in a hopeful effort to reach the heavens, one day they will fall apart and the strength of their numbers will wither away.

Corina Richards, Studio Art Major, Department of Art

Temporary Glee: Patrick Dougherty

Emily L. Newman, PhD

Assistant Professor of Art History

From watching the construction to living with a Patrick Dougherty sculpture for a few years, one experiences a variety of different emotions. For volunteers who help gather the materials, they remember the sweat and blood that went into trudging through swamps to find just the right sticks. For those who work on constructing the sculpture form, they know the struggle of making a stick fit into a particular space and the angst of it snapping. And for those that stumble upon it fully finished, most feel a sense of shock, surprise, humor and intrigue. After all, what is this massive form of sticks doing? What is its purpose? These questions are often answered as people begin to explore the sculpture, moving into and out of the forms, glancing through windows and shapes Dougherty created. Pictures are taken, kids are playing hide and seek, dogs are running in and out, excitedly, and smiles abound.

At the center of these large, ambitious projects is the stick. This might seem simple at first, but anyone

There should be some starting points in your own life [from which] you can find an edge to start looking and thinking about a sculpture. For things that are made out of sticks there is a reference to the natural world and maybe it is your first kiss under a tree or it might be a bird's nest you've seen. A lowly material like sticks can be conjured into a great work.

Patrick Dougherty'





spending time with Dougherty on his project learns there are intricate differences in the medium and that the use of this natural material is both challenging and complicated.

For Dougherty, the interest in sticks recalls his childhood playtime but also evolved from constructing his own house with salvaged wood in the late 1970s. He never strays away from his home in North Carolina too long, making sure to save dedicated time while constructing his projects to return home to his family, his house and land. Having begun his career in hospital administration, he decided to make a change and returned to school in 1980

to study art at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. By 1982, with his first stick sculpture, *Maple Weave*, he was already articulating his desire to make artworks dependent upon this natural material, recognizing their potential to exist as art objects which could then easily return to mulch and the environment.²

In his site-specific installations, he stands on the shoulders of artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt and Mary Miss, each of whom made large environmental installations in the 1970s. These artists were some of the leaders in the land art movement that encouraged a serious rethinking of sculpture, pushing

artworks from the gallery outside into the landscape itself. Dougherty's works build upon these initial leaders, though he distinguishes himself with his combination of community involvement, temporality and the consistent use of materials.

For over thirty years now, Dougherty has been producing larger installation works made entirely of sticks, and he clearly has it down to a science. His process is laid out, and his format is clear. He visited campus once before the work's construction. What was remarkable during his site visit in Commerce was not just how well-planned and thought-out his method of working is, but how flexible

and adaptable Dougherty can be. He was able to take any setback or frustration and figure out a way to work with it so that it would serve the greater work.

In comparison to longer human lives, Dougherty's installations are only with us for relatively brief periods. At the time of this writing, it is uncertain how long *Deep in the Heart* at Texas A&M University-Commerce will stand. What is known for certain is that the piece has altered life on campus. Centrally located in front of the library and not far from the student center, the piece is hard to miss. This work is necessarily site-specific, and it can be located nowhere else as it hinges on Dougherty's



incorporation of a unique and distinct oak near the library. Visible from so many angles across the campus, it has not only altered the way that campus is seen but the way it is experienced.

It is not just the location of Dougherty's work that makes his pieces integral parts of the community. Indeed, his entire working process encourages a communal spirit. It began with his first visit, when he discussed possibilities for sculpture placement and sites for gathering materials. He worked with a local assistant, in this case, Bethany Hargrove, an MFA candidate in the Department of Art. There was an intense amount of communication necessary with a wide variety of people on campus — not just the art department, but groundskeepers, security, maintenance, agriculture, fundraising and marketing departments. At the end of this initial visit, a site was chosen, people knew their roles in the project, and most important, everyone was aware of how the project would unfold.

Upon second arrival, the work started immediately. For three weeks, Dougherty actually lived on campus. During

this short time, hundreds of people took on various roles in the construction of the sculpture. Materials were gathered, volunteers were fed, talks were given. The department even organized a class for graduate students to explore public art and its impact. These students served as the backbone of volunteers for the project, providing consistent, knowledgeable support for Dougherty and other workers, as well as logging hundreds of hours on the project as a group.³

Numerous people stopped by and Dougherty, Hargrove, and other workers frequently stopped to engage the often questioning, confused onlookers. Many times, these viewers returned to revisit the sculpture as its progress continued to take shape, and more than a few times these onlookers became volunteers themselves. Under the guidance and direction of the artist, the sculpture was created with the backing and support of the community. Even the title, *Deep in the Heart*, was a suggestion from a graduating art major, Ashleigh Luke. From local art teachers to firefighters, from faculty to students, the variety of people who contributed to the project spanned

the breadth of this small community of 9,000 people who make Commerce home.

After the scaffolding and fencing came down and the tools were packed, the work was justifiably celebrated. A grand opening was held, where sponsors mingled with students who helped construct the work. Then just as quickly as he had come into town, Dougherty moved on to the next project. The campus is luckily left with this installation for a few years. Thanks to the process and the openness of its construction, the work begins its life with the community already invested so that the work's integration into campus life happens seamlessly.

Oftentimes, in the three weeks the work was forming, the piece appeared as a mass of sticks that could never possibly make sense. But one day, almost overnight, the form suddenly appeared and felt as if it had always been there. Suddenly, everything came together and a form, tailor-made for the space, emphasizes that the artist knew what he was doing all along. The work is celebrated and becomes a part of its surroundings. But sadly, the euphoria is short-lived, as the sculpture is only meant to

be temporary. Eventually, it will become too unstable and have to be taken down, and one day, even more quickly than when it was installed, it will be gone.

While the investment of the community certainly opens up the work to acceptance and popularity, the form only succeeds if its design is strong. For Dougherty, the material recalls the woodlands of his childhood home. There, sticks were plentiful and easily accessible. But they are also useful, in their formal manifestations, as he describes, "Sticks are both tree branch and a line with which to draw. I can employ many of the same conventions used in drawing on paper [while] working on the surfaces of these sculptures; line weight for emphasis, raking diagonals and all kinds of hatchmarks."⁴ In that sense, Dougherty uses the sticks to draw, creating a sculpture by building up the form with repeated line work, similar to how one would create a graphite drawing.

In making his works, of with and within nature, Dougherty allows the viewer to see, and perhaps reevaluate a landscape he/she knows well. All of a sudden, a tree that might have been taken for granted



is recognized as a stalwart of the location. Most times, his works do not permanently modify or alter a location; rather, they move and work around an established form. This recontextualization of the space is one strength of his work and of many other public artists who create temporary art work. Patricia Phillips has articulated the importance of these types of projects, saying, “The temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but an intensification and enrichment of the conception of public. The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens. The encounter of public art is ultimately a private experience; perception outlasts actual experience.”⁵

And, in acknowledgment, the public of Commerce united around *Deep in the Heart*. At a time when arts’ funding is being hotly debated, this prominent and visible sculpture clearly demonstrates the vitality and significance of the arts. Commerce and its surrounding towns in east Texas, like Greenville, are utilizing the arts to add vibrancy to

cities in their mounting moments of rejuvenation. Murals, sculptures, and projects have the ability to distinguish a town from its neighbors. More than that, a piece of art can actually become a destination for visitors.⁶

Hopefully, *Deep in the Heart* and the Patrick Dougherty Project (as it is more informally known) are just the beginning of rethinking art at Texas A&M University-Commerce and within the region. In this digital age of social media, it is all the more imperative that we have projects like Dougherty’s that interweave into our everyday, physical space and consciousness. As the university celebrates its 125-year anniversary, this work can be seen as displaying a renewed vitality in the arts, paralleling the university’s vast growth in a multitude of other areas. If you were lucky enough to be a part of this project in any way, though, you probably are not thinking too much about the future of public art as you regard *Deep in the Heart*. For many, at the heart of the piece is the overwhelming happiness and childlike glee that the work itself inspires.

Notes

¹ Selection from an interview filmed for this project. See LionsMedia, “Patrick Dougherty Installation at TAMUC – full version,” YouTube video, 3:39, May 17, 2015, <http://tamuc.edu/dougherty>.

² For a longer biographical sketch and discussion of Dougherty’s general practice, see Jennifer Thompson, “The Incredible Rightness of Being.” In *Stickwork* by Patrick Dougherty (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

³ Most of the student quotes found earlier in this book are taken from reflections and journal entries written by Department of Art graduate students as they volunteered for the project. These writings were an integral part of their class experience and followed up on their sustained investigation into the scholarship on public art. I organized the class, which ran from December 2014 to February 2015.

⁴ Patrick Dougherty, “Yardworking.” In *Art Nature Dialogues*, edited by John K. Grande (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 18.

⁵ Patricia Phillips, “Temporality and Public Art.” In *Critical Issues in Public Art*, edited by Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 304.

⁶ Evidenced by promotion of the sculpture in various media, such as Christina Rees, “Texas A&M At Commerce Commissions a New Public Artwork,” *Glasstire*, January 23, 2015.





