



Máximo González's *Red Tree*, a collage of paper money, is part of a VAG exhibition rooted in the ancient symbol of the tree.

A show of arboreal alchemy

VISUAL ARTS

THE TREE: FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE SOCIAL

At the Vancouver Art Gallery until April 20

It was a far cry from the video depiction. At the Vancouver Art Gallery, in a documentary on Pedro Reyes's community art project *Palas por Pistolas*, Mexican schoolchildren are seen planting a sapling at the edge of a sandy, urban wasteland. There's no other flora in sight—neither a shrub nor a cactus nor a blade of grass. The sky is blue, the sun shines brightly, and you can almost feel the hot wind blowing across your face.

A local aspect of Reyes's work, a tree-planting in Strathcona's McLean Park, was accompanied by a cold, steady rain. It sluiced off the massed umbrellas of the gathered crowd, soaked into jackets and running shoes, and seeped into the fertile earth where a young snake-bark maple is now taking root. Children and adults took turns depositing loam around the newly planted tree, using a shovel that is significantly odd: a trigger is mounted on its wooden handle.

Reyes's project, whose title translates as *Pistols Into Spades*, riffs on the Old Testament phrase "swords into plowshares", part of an ancient anti-war admonition to convert weapons into tools of cultivation. The artist, positioned here as an agent of cultural change, worked with different levels of business, government, and the

military to engage the public in the city of Culiacán in northwestern Mexico. In that place, fraught with violence, he encouraged ordinary individuals to exchange the guns in their homes for supermarket vouchers.

By every measure, the *Palas por Pistolas* project is a great success—and a model for community cultural initiatives. Precisely 1,527 guns were gathered, their firing mechanisms removed and their metal parts crushed, melted, and converted into 1,527 shovels. In a recent interview with the *Straight*, Reyes talked about the "alchemical" process by which mechanisms of death were transformed into cultivators of life. He also spoke about the ways in which cultural institutions can become "nurseries" for fostering change. "Once an idea is embraced by others," he said; "it's not yours. Everyone involved is a coauthor."

Reyes's work is part of the VAG's big, ambitious survey show *The Tree: From the Sublime to the Social*, encompassing the work of some 40 artists. As advertised, the exhibition addresses the subject of the tree through its various representations over the past century, and as an essential element in the age-old dialogue between nature and culture. The tree, this show tells us, is an ancient and widespread symbol of life. With its roots in the earth and its branches in the sky, it spans the realms of existence and functions as the *axis mundi*, the pivot on which the world turns. In the present age, it has come to represent

a vast complex of cultural narratives and environmental concerns.

Form, media, and scale vary widely, from Gabriela Albergaria's huge installation of a felled and reconstructed oak tree, *Blenheim Street and 29th*, to Sybil Andrews's small linocut *Logging Team*, and from Nestor Kruger's head-spinning, room-rattling video and audio work *two turntables* to Máximo González's *Red Tree*, a collage made of old paper money. Through the considered placement of the works, various themes emerge. These include the use of the tree as a symbol of spirituality, godliness, and sense of place, as seen in the oil paintings of Emily Carr, the black-and-white photographs of Geoffrey James, and the ghostly azo-dye prints of Patricia Deadman.

Many works here address the play between the authentic and the artificial, between the natural world and its mechanical and electronic representation. In Vikky Alexander's witty installation *Lake in the Woods*, for example, a photo mural of a woodland lake is set opposite a row of mirrors mounted on a wall of wood-grained composite board.

Logging, tree planting, grow ops, optics, hope, disillusionment—many themes are broached here and many works deserve attention. For now, let's just say that the show is well worth a little personal alchemy. Convert a couple of hours of your frantic schedule into the transformative activity of looking at—and thinking about—the art of the tree.

> ROBIN LAURENCE