

# Walter May

Born 1950, Edmonton, Alberta  
Lives and works in Calgary

## Artist Statement

“The works comprised of wooden handles inserted into cut branches, trunks and roots of various trees were generated with a system of constraints. I resolved that all of the handles must be made of wood, and must come from tools that have been used, broken or abandoned. The natural wood must be deadfall or windfall from the forest or prunings and cuttings from urban parks and gardens. The handles were also only to be inserted into the “tree” where a branch or limb had grown. In this way, the anatomy of the tree determines the placement of the handles. The result might be seen as an odd map or diagram or perhaps a mutation of what was there before, with the handles as some kind of strange growth. Many of the objects and materials that I work with are **thought to be dysfunctional, no longer useful, or at the very least, underappreciated.** By using these kinds of things I hope to redirect our understanding of the objects, from things that we are only able to see as utilitarian or as a resource, to something that can carry meaning, act poetically or tell a story.”

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Walter May’s sculptures relate the landscape to the workshop, combining both zones into an art that speaks to our interdependent relationship with the environment. His title *Scavenger and Forager* pairs words that rhyme but carry vastly different implications. Scavenger connotes a condition of negative survival, a feeding off of what has been left behind. Foraging is a constructive and purposeful way of life. Both terms frame our own fluctuating inhabitation of the land. May’s sculpture raises sensitivity to what has been lost, or fallen from use, in distinction to what has been gathered by choice. Its elements are the products of windfall, deadfall or cutting. The transformative alterations he makes by substituting shop tool handles for branches and roots of natural trees connects nature to a poetry of human agency and responsibility. In describing these elements as something “thought to be dysfunctional, not longer useful, or at the very least, underappreciated,” May exposes a humanist thread in this concern with the environment. Its demise is a mirroring of our own perceived demise, a weight of declining history that May often makes literal with the counterweights and suspensions involved in the presentation of his objects. Their palpable physicality becomes a foil for attributing a body weight to them, which becomes an entry point to the human condition. May makes a serious, instructive sculpture about the costs of change and passing time. His work belongs within a grand tradition of figurative art that is restored to vitality by transference to a broader compass, one where the lines of separation with nature have disappeared. The fusion of natural and manufactured elements in May’s sculpture encapsulates this co-dependence and raises the level of alert to its increasing fragility.

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