



In This State

Ed Barna

This man who plants trees picks unlikely places

When Bristol artist Daniel Pittman travels around Vermont, he watches for unused smokestacks.

If his latest art project succeeds, Vermonters will eventually be watching those same stacks, to spot evergreen trees growing from the tops.

"The juxtaposition between the two opposite things," was what inspired him to use a volunteered crane to put a metal basket holding a potted tree inside the top of the disused chimney of the former Hood dairy plant in Burlington earlier this month.



"You have a chimney, which produces pollution, holding up a tree, which is producing fresh air."

Daniel Pittman

Vermonters as paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, calligraphy and photographs. All those, as well as found objects, can be part of an installation, which makes an environment that conveys values, attitudes, emotions, and more.

For instance, one of Pittman's works is a

"You have a chimney, which produces pollution, holding up a tree, which is producing fresh air," Pittman said recently. While some might see the evergreen as a sign of life in winter — a symbol of Christmas — his message is really environmental rather than religious, he said.

Those who see Pittman's current show at the Firehouse Gallery on Burlington's Church Street will find that the smokestack project fits right in with the rest of his work.

Pittman does "installations," as he terms them. This type of art may not be as familiar to

miniature boxing ring for which barbed wire serves as the ropes, and the bloodstained floor slopes toward a hole in the center leading to a bucket beneath. A sandbox with grass growing in it, that is covered with cement, is titled "Mother's New Dress," referring to Mother Earth.

Pittman grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. He was the kind of kid who drew constantly, he said, and when he got out of high school he headed for the nation's art capital, New York City.

There, he studied at the Art Students League, made money doing decorative architectural painting, and gained enough credibility to exhibit his work in group shows. And he began the Chimneytree Project.

It was in 1990, when he was 25, that Pittman got the idea of putting a tree in an unused chimney. The first two stacks were about a hundred yards apart on Kent Avenue in Brooklyn.

That was where he and a half dozen collaborators learned how to get potted trees into their

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Photo courtesy of Daniel Pittman

Bristol artist Daniel Pittman installed several trees in unused factory chimneys in New York City, such as the one at right in this postcard image. He now does similar work in Vermont.

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new homes, found out that blue spruces worked better than silver maples, and discovered some of the limits of doing such things without the permission of property owners.

For those two projects, which were about 60 feet up in the air, Pittman used iron climbing steps built into the chimneys. He assumed the iron and masonry were in good shape and were designed to carry a man carrying a wooden box of soil holding up a tree.

Yes, he was scared of

heights, he said, "but I got over it. I do some exterior house painting, so I've been on ladders quite a bit."

The first two trees didn't suit the owners of the properties. One went right away, the other lasted about five months, Pittman said.

This was liability-conscious New York City, he observed, and the idea of some stranger putting a hose up a chimney and returning to water the tree was even less acceptable than the idea of putting a tree there in the first place.

The third tree, the most visible, went into a stack owned by the Long Island Railroad, which had a rail yard at West 30th Street and 11th Avenue — just across from the Javits Center where many conven-

tions and trade shows take place. The Empire State Building watched not far away.

For this one, Pittman had to prop a 20-foot ladder against the 75-foot stack, from an adjacent building whose roof was close enough. But that attempt to green up Gotham was also removed, by the railroad police.

"It's very difficult when you're doing it illegally," he said. And "it was a little dangerous."

In July of 1999, Pittman moved to Vermont, which he knew from a vacation trip, along with his wife Sophia Pittman, a professional ballet dancer, and their infant son Dylanger. He realized he had a choice, he said: either keep playing the who-do-you-know

gallery game on the Lower East Side, or come to a state where he had already been impressed by the history, the people, and especially the absence of billboards.

As it turned out, Vermonters were less concerned about liabilities and more involved with environmental action. After noticing the Hood plant stack in Burlington, Pittman not only got permission to install a hardy variety of blue spruce there, but also found a lot of help to get it there. A nursery donated a tree, a welder put an iron chimney-top basket together for the container, and a concrete company loaned him a hose crane to get 550 pounds of tree nursery 50 or so feet up in the air.

Pittman has found an audi-

ence. Corey French, an assistant at the Firehouse Gallery, said, "A lot of people have seen it. Once they come in the gallery and see the information we have up about it, they really get it and are excited about it."

One of Pittman's main allies, gallery director Pascal Stengemann, said the project was a good example of how Burlington's artistic and industrial types can help each other. He tries to start such relationships, he said, because "good things always come of it."

For Stengeman, the Hood plant tree doesn't just carry an anti-pollution message. Lou Natale, the building's owner, has made the space available to a Buddhist center and some small design businesses, and

the tree fits right in, he said.

Now Pittman has his eye on other stacks, in a Winooski mill, near Middlebury's Battell Bridge and in the historic industrial area by the railroad yards in Rutland — to start with.

"It's very experimental," Pittman said of the initial chimney-tree. "I'm going to have a chance to keep it growing."

Growing, that is, to the point where limits on its roots will keep it small enough. Like a Japanese bonsai tree, the Hood plant evergreen could live a long time and never outgrow its container, he said.

Quite a few people want the tree to live, Pittman said. "If it doesn't, it's a whole different spirit — and that's happened."
