Considering the theme of this conference—wide-open spaces—has prompted me to think about my life history in terms of landscape/environments: the first eighteen years of my life were spent in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is set in the gently rolling Grand River Valley of western Michigan; the next four years were at Swarthmore College, amidst the narrow winding roads and lush vegetation of suburban Philadelphia. In the mid-60s I spent two and one-half years at nineteen thousand feet in the spectacular Bolivian Andes, as a Peace Corps volunteer art teacher (I'd never seen mountains before the summer we left for Bolivia, but I had a double dose that year, since our two-month training site was at the University of Washington, Seattle, in the shadow of Mt. Rainier). During the 70s and 80s, a good number of Christmas holidays were shared with parents-in-law in the big-sky country of rural Oklahoma, just outside the grand metropolis of Kremlin, not far from what was once the Chisholm Trail. But (aside from relatively brief travel in Europe, Latin America and India) a large part of my life over the last 30 years has been lived in or near Chicago. For the first ten of these years I was located on the top floor of various three-story walkup apartment buildings. (I came to take this arrangement more or less for granted until the eight year-old daughter of a friend of mine from
Eau Claire, Wisconsin, came to visit and couldn’t stop exclaiming about our upstairs kitchen! The concept of living all on one floor was completely alien to her.)

Indeed I’m acutely aware of the influence of context or cultural background on perception; but my professional focus was originally on the power and the possibilities of pictorial space. In graduate school (at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology) I was profoundly influenced by the exquisite modernist work of my advisor Aaron Siskind, then by my teacher at IIT (and later colleague at University of Illinois at Chicago) Joseph Jachna, as well as visual wizards like Harry Callahan, and others who carried on the new Bauhaus experimental tradition. I’m sure as artists or art educators you too have explored the space of the frame, notions of figure/ground and the optical illusions which toggle foreground/background.

What I try to stress now, as a teacher, is that such formal/spatial qualities: foreground/background, light/dark, broad/narrow, horizontal/vertical, smooth/rough, sharp/blurred, etc. are inseparable from content; and indeed have a profound psychological and political dimension. Today I will be sharing some recent work with you that explores certain formal and ideological connections in relation to horticulture.

But first let me show you some earlier work that grew out of my experience in Latin America. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the 60s I made photographs, not of the people I worked with in the town of Sucre, Bolivia, but rather of campesinos or exotic indigenous people, people with whom I never spoke.

On the other hand, in the late 80s and early 90s the work shifted. I was influenced by close personal and cultural ties with a number of Latin American artists and photographers. I used digital photomontage with text in an attempt to reveal the roots of power relationships operating in this hemisphere.

A 1927 photograph of U.S. Marines in Ocotal, Nicaragua, training members of the Nicaraguan National Guard, (this was after years of U.S. military occupation fighting the Nicaraguan nationalist hero Sandino) represented for me the paradigm image of North-South power relationships. Enlarged, pixilated, fragmented, and replicated within the shape of hemispheric maps, that photograph became the matrix image for the installation series titled The Monroe Doctrine: Theme and Variations. You can see this (and some of the other works related to Latin America) in more detail on the dif website, http://www.art.uh.edu/dif/ published by Manual (Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom), based at the University of Houston.
My high school textbook acquaintance with the Monroe Doctrine had not revealed such blatant claims of hegemony as those I later discovered and incorporated into the piece bearing that name. For example, in 1820 Secretary of State Henry Clay declared: "It is in our power to create a system of which we shall be the center and in which all South America will act with us." In 1906, Secretary of State Elihu Root pronounced: "Nearly everywhere the people are eager for foreign capital to develop their natural resources and for foreign immigration to occupy their vacant land." The assessment of "vacant" land in Latin America seems to have been similar to our perception of wide open, i.e. empty or underutilized spaces in the North American continent as we enacted our "manifest destiny" to reach the Pacific coast.

The pixilated matrix image of the soldiers in The Monroe Doctrine functioned as a kind of low-resolution warp on an electronic loom, into which details of text and photographs could be woven. I was fascinated with the perceptual shifts occasioned by changes in resolution, scale, and viewer position and their metaphoric implications: Just as the overall image is indecipherable at close range; likewise our absorption with the day-to-day details or "current events" of our lives means that we may fail to see—or are discouraged from seeing—the historical pattern of which they are a part. That same concept operated in the 1990 unfolding exhibition Define/Defy the Frame, which compared two distinct perspectives on the Nicaraguan revolution, emerging from a variant on the pixilated map/matrix of The Monroe Doctrine.

And finally let me give you a brief glimpse of two subsequent works which also digitally interweave distinct historical periods and perspectives. Text and images representing European colonial attitudes toward the New World are subverted or challenged when placed in juxtaposition with images I had taken representing the dynamism and variety of contemporary populations in New World countries, in this case Cuba.
A Thousand Centuries combines two images: a stereograph of the purported tomb of Columbus in Havana, Cuba, with a photograph which I took on the streets of Old Havana in 1984. The second image, At the Margin, is generated in part from a statue (rather than a tomb) of Columbus. Keep in mind the predominance of Columbus statues in the central square of virtually every Latin American capitol at the end of the 19th century. I discovered stereographs of these statues when researching images of Latin America at the California Museum of Photography. Incorporating them into my early 90s work, through layering, partial blending or erasure, was a way of questioning the master narrative (to use a perhaps hackneyed phrase). At the very least it was a way to balance the single heroic male European figure, with attention to some of the anonymous folk at the base of the monument.

But let's leave the Quincentennial debates or clash of perspectives for now, and let me talk about elm trees. I'll start with a question and a return to the title of this talk “When the Bough Breaks.” Why were we soothed with the rather menacing lyrics of what the Annotated Mother Goose calls “the best-known lullaby in English”?

“Hush a by Baby
On the Tree Top,
When the Wind blows
The Cradle will rock;
When the Bough breaks
The Cradle will fall,
Down tumbles Baby,
Cradle and all.”

In my case, growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the 40s and 50s, perhaps I was lulled by the tenderness of my father's cantorial baritone. Perhaps, even as children—or especially as children—we need stories and songs that acknowledge our nightmares, at the same time that they offer comfort. As an artist I am interested in this kind of duality—celebrating beauty while recognizing danger; honoring anger and mourning while insisting on understanding and analysis. I'll let you be the judge of how effectively that happens in my work.

In any event, when I was a youngish mother in Oak Park, Illinois, a large branch of a magnificent elm in our yard snapped to the ground during a thunderstorm. This was July of 1978. It was a field day for the neighborhood kids, an instant intricate jungle. It was also probably the death knell for the tree, increasing its vulnerability to Dutch Elm disease, which was rampant in Oak Park during the 70s. The disease didn't manifest in our tree, whose enormous crown had shaded our entire house, until the early 80s. Pre-emptive injections didn't help. In 1982 it had to come down.

This loss coincided with a personal blow, the impending breakup of our nuclear family. Making a detailed black and white photo-documentation of the tree's toppling and dismemberment served a healing function for me. I had no particular plans for these images. They lived in the drawers of my vast archive of dormant negatives.

Yet grieving the elm (ours and the many others that reduced Oak Park's population from 16,000 in 1970 to barely 3000 at last count—not to mention losses in many parts of the country and the world), grieving that elm, and mourning the loss of my traditional family unit, gave way over time to a curious and critical look at certain traditions, or what I've come to call “the hazards of monoculture”—the fragility inherent in planting a single species or in promoting a single “lifestyle,” or family model.

In 1998, thanks to a fellowship at the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, I was able to pull together these earlier images, plus new material, into a two-part exhibition titled Canopy: A Meditation on the Demise of the American Elm. One phenomenon which I've encountered
repeatedly during my elm research is the pairing of before-and-after scenes—with “before” showing homes or buildings gracious under the shade of a generous elm canopy; and “after,” showing houses unprotected under a glaring sky. The unquestioned assumption seems to be that life under an open sky is bleak and hostile, as if we were cast out of a dappled Garden of Eden.

A 1937 pamphlet (distributed by the Massachusetts Agricultural Experiment Station) titled “The Dutch Elm Disease: A New Threat to the Elm” (note that the disease had not been found in Massachusetts at that time) contained photographs that showed a current scene in a Massachusetts village (that is, in 1937) contrasted with the projected impact of Dutch Elm Disease, shown in a rather crudely altered photograph. Closer to my home in Chicago is a circular that was published by the Illinois Natural History Survey, probably in the late 60s or early 70s. The caption reads:

The stately American elms that formed a cathedral-like arch over the University of Illinois boardwalk in Urbana are gone. The area has been replanted with other species of deciduous trees.

This gives us a vivid contrast, but not such an alarmist perspective. In yet another comparison, two students studying the living collection of Harvard Yard in 1989 digitally removed all the trees in front of Holworthy Hall, thereby visualizing a landscape which they described as like a penitentiary or a military parade ground.

Yes, indeed we do need stories—and images!—that acknowledge our nightmares—and our realities. On September 11 we experienced a ghastly fulfillment of this scenario of erasure. I’m sure that many of you have seen the “ghost limbs” of the memorial which appeared on the September 23rd cover of the Sunday New York Times magazine, as well as the numerous paired photos (before and after) which have formed part of an anguished effort to comprehend the absence of the World Trade Center towers.

Let us return for the moment to Canopy: A Meditation on the Demise of the American Elm. We begin this virtual tour of my 1998 Bunting Institute by toggling between two images. They are yet another example of before and after elm decimation. You can find them as thumbnail photos on the current Elm Research Institute website (www.forelms.org) (I’ll talk more about the Elm Research Institute later).

The first part of my exhibition was titled, Preserve/change the Character of Our Village. It referenced the tension between our profound human instincts toward preservation or restoration of the familiar, and our powerful, also human impulse toward change or modification, the creation of new patterns and paradigms.

Upon entering the gallery on the ground floor of the Institute, the viewer encountered a seemingly idyllic canopied street. This digital mural was, in fact, generated from a slide of the Oak Park block where I lived for 17 years (Oak Park, by the way, is a near west suburb of Chicago, quite urban, and tied into the Chicago Transit Authority; it’s best known to some as the home of Ernest Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright). As one approached the walls of the gallery, the photographic reality dissolved into a landscape of pixels. It also became apparent that the continuity of the street image was an illusion, since the wall “surface” was actually composed of 38 panels, eleven of which were light boxes in varying degrees of relief. Translucent images at the side of the light boxes were only revealed as one stood near the intersecting walls—or, in other words, at the vanishing point of the canopy. (You may notice a strategy similar to that of the Monroe Doctrine, in the sense of different realities rendered at different scales & resolutions, and therefore visible at different distances)
Each translucent light box strip contained a sequence of 21 frames. The two strips to the left of the corner represented the cutting down of our elm tree [1982]. The nine strips to the right of the corner were less explicitly linked to the elm loss. Rather each was intended to evoke a shifting configuration of relationships among family and friends. These images were recorded through still photography or video over the course of almost two decades, for the most part without any intent of using them in this context. The first strips have an elegiac tone; others are more prosaic, or even celebratory.

Turning yet another corner in this gallery space, one encountered a vertical sequence which reiterated what I would call the redemptive narrative implications of the light box strips. By “redemptive narrative” I’m referring to a progression from tradition or homogeneity, through loss, to healing and diversification. The amputated stump which remained in our yard at first as a brutal reminder of absence, decayed over time into the burgeoning life of the garden.

As with the installation, the central image of the poster (especially if you encounter it in folded form) is the sheltered canopy of my Oak Park street. Like the wall, at sufficient distance it looks almost photographic; close-up it is almost an abstraction. However, erupting through the pixels you find both large and small images signaling change. The most visible line of text (“preserve/change the nature of our village/family/nation”) marks the tensions engendered by these changes. The texts were taken from local newspapers published between 1935 and 1997. In the process of choosing excerpts I’ve constructed a kind of historical portrait of Oak Park which is, of course,
selective—as is all representation. The quotes (drawn from articles, editorials, or letters to the editor) trace pride in the elm-lined avenues of Oak Park, and subsequent alarm at the appearance of Dutch Elm Disease. I found another kind of uneasiness as well: fears of racial change in the village began to surface about the same time as Dutch Elm Disease (the first case was reported in 1955). At first, both biological and demographic (i.e., racial) changes were conflated as invasions, through use of the term “urban blight”. In the late 80s and 90s the threat (especially in the eyes of certain conservative religious groups) was extended to include the increasing presence and activism of gays and lesbians in the community.

Here are a few excerpts from these quotes: The first group (left side) dates from the 1940s and 50s:

* “Oak Park is famed for its vistas of elm-lined streets.”
* “The drive to conserve the values of Oak Park as a residential and commercial suburb of the highest type seems to be picking up momentum.”
* “After the desired standards have been firmly set up...constant civic pressure must be exerted to prevent any letdown.”
* “Deterioration, blight, and slums are easier to deal with before they have made important headway.”
* “Report suspicious elms.”

The quotes on the right date from the late 1990s:

* “Left unchecked, this aggressive and lethal disease could forever alter the character that Oak Park is known for.”
* “As Oak Park deliberates a Registry for same-sex domestic partners, we, the undersigned clergy and leaders...wish to speak out...While some, because of their religious convictions, do not support the recognition of alternatives to the traditional ‘family,’ there is no unified religious voice in this matter.”
* “Decisions made on behalf of the village’s urban forest now could ensure elegant, elm-lined streets for years to come.”
* “We mourned the loss of our elms in 1974, but the village replaced them with...maples, ashes, lindens, ginkgo, locust, coffee tree, euonymus, dogwood and others. I love the variety. I sit on the front porch and glory in the beauty around me.”

This last eloquent quote was from a resident who wrote to the local paper in September of 1997. He may or may not have been speaking metaphorically about the diversity of Oak Park’s population. But it seems clear to me that most contemporary scientific opinion now recognizes the botanical folly of a monoculture. For example, Peter del Tredici, curator of collections at the Arnold Arboretum (affiliated with Harvard University, but located in Jamaica Plains, MA) claims that, “The desire to bring back the American elm is basically a romantic (i.e. emotional) ideal” (1996, p. 7).

In the popular literature on elms, the unspoken assumption always seems to be that if one could only solve the disease resistance problem, then one could recreate the grand, elm-lined streets of the past. This idea is biologically unsound. Because of the dynamic nature of the interaction between host and predator, disease resistance must always be considered a relative phenomenon—always in flux, rather than a fixed genetic trait. Historical accuracy notwithstanding, it is not in anyone’s interest to bring the American elm back at its former position of landscape pre-eminence. (del Tredici, 1996, p. 7)

Yet attachment to this pre-eminent American elm canopy, both as a physical phenomenon and as patriotic symbol, dies hard. For example,
the contemporary Elm Research Institute mentioned earlier, based in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, is an outspoken American elm chauvinist. It continues to promote the American Liberty Elm:

not to be confused with European and Asian hybrid elms ... as a focus of patriotic inspiration, ... a green and growing tribute to the birth of freedom in America, and ... a rare specimen that will help restore yesterday’s elegance to (our) neighborhood(s). (retrieved 1998, http://www.forelms.org/)

As much as I love the elms, I question such efforts to reestablish past glory. Yet I heartily support a careful look at the past. What are the cultural roots of our horticultural fixation on elms. What is the origin of this romantic ideal?

To answer that, we have to look further back historically. As you may know, one of the great figures in 19th century American landscape design was Frederick Law Olmsted. We could easily spend weeks discussing his prolific interests and projects in this country. Suffice it to say that he (along with Calvert Vaux) was the master planner for New York’s Central Park in the mid-19th century. Central Park was famous for its Grand Mall of elms, which in turn undoubtedly influenced the planting of Chicago’s Grant Park, as well as numerous small town locations such as Oak Park.

Olmsted, in turn, had been influenced by the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing, America’s pre-eminent landscape designer of the mid-19th century, who was a leading proponent of the English naturalistic landscape style. Downing expressed unabashed chauvinism, even racism, through his horticultural opinions (you’ll see what I mean shortly). As editor of The Horticulturist magazine as well as author of the influential Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening adapted to North America (first published in 1844), he did not hesitate to chide his fellow citizens of New York state regarding

their landscape practices, (or lack thereof), comparing them unfavorably with New Englanders.

At the same time Downing lashed out against the trendiness of certain “foreign” species, such as the ailanthus. Please excuse the offensive racist language; I only quote it to make a historical point about the conflation of xenophobia and horticultural practice:

(the ailanthus’ has come over to this land of liberty, under the garb of utility, to make foul the air, with its pestilent breath, and devour the soil, with its intermeddling roots—a tree that has the fair outside and the treacherous heart of the Asiatics, ... But we confess openly, that our crowning objection to this petted Chinaman or Tartar is a patriotic objection. It is that he has drawn away our attention from our own more noble native American trees, to waste it on this miserable pigtail of an Indianam. (1844, pp.311-13)

While we clearly have a more sophisticated appreciation of the wisdom of plant diversification, nevertheless, the notion of the elm as touchstone for stability, civility, and grace persists. Melvin Kalfus (1990), one of Olmsted’s biographers and a self-described psycho-historian, sees both Downing’s and Olmsted’s writings as casting the elm in the role of a bisexual symbol—the trunk of the tree personifying the (so-called) masculine virtues of solidity and nobility, while the graceful leafy boughs of the tree represent the (supposedly) feminine attributes of beauty and nurturance. Kalfus claims that the elm functioned therefore as an integrating and restorative symbol of self-acceptance, particularly for Olmsted in a Victorian society that vigorously differentiated between masculine and feminine qualities.

In the course of my research, I’ve become aware of these and a whole range of other emotions and metaphors associated with the elm. In fact, I incorporated some of them into a second poster made in conjunction with the Bunting exhibition. These phrases, culled from
numeous articles, essays, and histories about the American elm, alternate with a column of text which runs the length of the poster, obsessively repeating the elm's Latin species name, Ulmus americana.

monarch among plebes
imperial supremacy among the lesser forest growth
Olympian majesty
perfect message of the reigning monarch
towering grace
stately dignity
God's first temples
cloistered grandeur
arching vista
one of the noblest works of creation
most magnificent vegetable of the temperate zones
largest and most graceful tree of the Northeast
extreme elegance of the summit
Medusa-like branches
serpentine branches
dean of shade bearers
lattice-like shade
exquisite dapple

Given the elm's generally benign image and historic importance, it's not surprising that (according to Arthur Plotnik's The Urban Tree Book, 2000) "elm" is the 13th most common street name in America. But the dissonance between naming and reality in the urban landscape can be acute. For example, "Elm Street" passes through what's left of Cabrini Green, a public housing project in Chicago. The title for movies such as Nightmare on Elm Street (which seems to be set amidst the palm trees of southern California) also builds on that irony in reverse—the
	notion of rot or threat at the core of tradition or suburban normality, which has been the subtext of any number of films or stories.

A more recent movie, The Virgin Suicides (Coppola, 2000) is quite fascinating in its explicit reference to elm loss linked to economic decline, pollution, and teen alienation. Apparently set in a Detroit suburb, it opens with the following lines: "Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry."

I created a video which weaves excerpts from the films The Virgin Suicides (Coppola, 2000) and American Beauty (Mendes, 2000) together with my own footage of elm-cutting on a particular block of Oak Park (i.e., the 600 block of Taylor Street which lost six trees during the summer of 2000). This juxtaposition is not intended to suggest that harsh sunlight leads to suicide, nor to spiritual and economic malaise. Landscapes in West Texas, for example are valued for their "big skies" and wide open spaces—conditions distinctly different from my Midwestern and New England experiences. However, I trust you can relate to the notion of an artist who is rooted in the personal, the particular and the local; but expands beyond that to broader issues—questions of loss and change, of native and foreign, of homogeneity and diversity, of restoration and innovation. I emphasize the "and" hoping to avoid false polarities.

Earlier I asked that you to keep in mind the Columbus statues formerly dominating the central square of virtually every Latin American capitol. The analogy with trees is limited. Nevertheless, I'd like to suggest that, just as we have enriched our historical understanding by attending to alternative narratives, likewise we may enrich our horticultural panorama by shifting our attention away from monumental trees, or structures; and focusing our attention, our nurturing, on the more modest growth or activity at their base. An excerpt from Adrienne Rich's 1977 poem "Transcendental Etude" expresses this idea far more eloquently than my words:
I've sat on a stone fence above a great, soft, sloping field of musing heifers, a farmstead slanting its planes calmly in the calm light, a dead elm raising bleached arms above a green so dense with life, minute, momentary life - slugs, moles, pheasants, gnats, spiders, moths, hummingbirds, groundhogs, butterflies - a lifetime is too narrow to understand it all (Rich, 1978, pp. 72-77).

I conclude by showing you sketches from work-in-progress on the exhibition When the Bough Breaks.

Returning to the Taylor Street block in Oak Park where six trees were lost in one summer, I want to commemorate the stunning absence of fallen trees through memorial rubbings of the remaining stumps, they reveal traces of each year's growth, as well as the overbearing marks of the saw's blade, and the subtler but unavoidable marks of my own digital recording and printing process.

I want to evoke the singular glory and infinite preciousness of the American elm, the unique value of each remaining tree, even of every seed, every hair on each seed, every serrated notch on each leaf. But at the same time I want to question the fetishizing of the American Elm—its conflation with patriotism, its promotion as uniquely representative of our history, our liberty, and our cherished traditions. Through creative dialogue I hope to stimulate imaginative alternative visions of what may flourish in our neighborhoods, both our private gardens and our public parkways.

References


Craven, Wes (Director) (1984). Nightmare on Elm Street. [Film].


Critical Creativity:
On the Convergence of Medium Education and Media Education

Michael J. Emme

My son, Paul, had the mixed fortune to be the firstborn to ‘older’ parents (we were in our 30’s when he arrived in our lives). He was between 3 and 4 when the Mutant Ninja Turtles were the hot cartoon on TV. As earnest, engaged and peace-loving parents, we redirected our son’s viewing to videotapes of what we judged to be quality ‘educational’ children’s programming and copies of Canadian National Film board animated shorts. Paul had a little playmate who came over to visit and dig in the sandbox almost everyday. This friend wore Ninja turtle costumes and brought little plastic figures with him most of the time. Not surprisingly Paul became fascinated by all of the toys and the stories and began to bug us to let him watch the Ninja Turtles. Well, we were new parents, so our determination to protect our son from everything evil in the world hadn’t developed many cracks yet and for reasons that are not terribly clear to me now, the Turtles TV show was on the other side of our own personal good/evil divide. Paul was persistent but we were resistant and then a funny, wonderful thing happened. I was sitting within earshot of the two boys and heard Paul start to tell a story to his friend. He was describing a heroic little bird who came to the rescue of someone. Of course this was no ordinary bird. This bird had a costume and a personality and powers (all of