

They Came to Play at Emma 2010

Leona Theis

“There’s a hole in the sky where the toys tumble down. Play!” Those words were written by poet Carla Braidek at Emma Unplugged 2010, a gathering in the boreal forest in Saskatchewan that brought together one hundred artists from around the world. The Emma Lake Collaboration traces its origins to woodturning symposiums that began in Saskatoon in 1982. Over the years the event has expanded to include metalsmiths, painters, book-makers, and artists who work with fabric, wire, clay, and stone. For the first time, six musicians and three writers were invited to join the visual artists. Carla’s words are part of a collaborative piece created at this year’s gathering. The words are stitched

“Unplugged” was the theme of the 2010 Emma Collaborative; artists were not allowed to use power equipment. Unlike previous Emma events, the atmosphere was quiet and relaxed. Ingenuity abounded. Need a hole in a piece of wood? Several options were available.

onto a kite-shaped stretch of canvas secured to an archway at one entrance to the grounds where the work—and the play—of the weeklong collaborative took place. The words capture the essence of Emma 2010.

Collaboration brings together not only a collection of artists, but also a collection of materials, allowing for

play among their properties—rigidity, flexibility, weight, whimsy. This mixing of materials complements the play among the talents and sensibilities of the people who work together on a piece. On the first morning of the collaboration, Lise Bech, a basket maker from Scotland, held two thin lengths of willow bark and showed a ▶



Soren Manesa-Burloiu drills a hole in a spoon carved by Zina Manesa-Burloiu and Del Stubbs. (Joe Fafard in the background.)



Graeme Priddle works on “A Boat” while serenaded by Jolene Higgins (with guitar) and Malika Sellami (playing spoons).



Emma Totem #2

group of onlookers how to twist the strips together to make a rope. Her hands moved in a quick rhythm, away from herself, toward herself, away, toward. "Listen to the feedback you are getting from your fingers." Over the following days, Lise's work was incorporated into a number of other creations. A length of

cordage she twisted using locally gathered rushes found itself coiled around and around to fill a recess made for that purpose on one leg of a three-legged table. The coil came to an end a few centimeters above a carved deer's hoof at the foot. The base of the table had been cut from a piece of seasoned trembling aspen that branched three ways to form the legs. On another leg, a length of braided copper wire from the "found objects" pile laced its way up and down, like a long embroidery stitch, through holes in the wood. The same table also incorporated a copper plate, fir, iron, and carved soapstone.

I sat in the shade with a group of artists one afternoon as they talked about the way the materials themselves influence what gets made and how. Anita Rocamora held a pale stalk

Soren Manesa-Burloiu carves a log.



of young willow that was stripped of its bark. We contemplated its shape. "The branch has its own agenda," Anita said, thus putting words to the fact that we collaborate all the time with whatever materials we use: a branch has shape and movement; fabric has its own way of taking a dye; wood has its grain; words take unexpected turns; metal, as I learned from the smith I'd sat beside at lunch that day, will move



Trent Watts, organizer of Emma Unplugged, helps Michael Hosaluk split a log.



Trent Watts splits another log while Russell Baldon looks on.



Harvey Fein perfects his skill with a spokeshave.



Michael Hosaluk adds a personal element to a totem. Michael created the concept of the Emma Lake Collaborative events.

in its own way. It isn't too much of a stretch to see collaboration with other makers as an extension of what is already happening between the maker and the material—leading, following, shifting as the project shifts. I lifted Anita's six apt words about the branch and its agenda, and they became the beginning of a poem. I folded the paper, hiding the first three words, and handed it to another writer, who wrote



Michael Mocho tries out a treadle lathe.



Solar Phases: Michael Hosaluk, Sorin Manesa-Burloiu, Greg Wilbur, Adrian Legge, 2010



Del Stubbs adds his touch to a totem while conversing with Ron Layport.

the middle of the poem. She, in turn, folded the paper to hide all but her own final three words. She passed it to a third writer, who ended the poem without knowing the beginning. The poem had its own agenda.

The Emma Collaboration is a place where one form of art will propel

another in unexpected ways. Early in the week, Greg Simm, a musician from Nova Scotia, stood watching a blacksmith and noticed how the fall of the hammer beat out a three-four rhythm. The rhythm stayed with him, and later in the week he composed a waltz. Emma is also a place to explore, a place where an artist will leap from one medium to another. Tai Lake, who typically works with wood, took a lesson in the forge and crafted a flowing door-handle from a length of iron. Anita Rocamora, who typically works in ceramic, teamed up with Megan Broner, who typically works in fine metal. I saw them working together on a piece that incorporated stripped willow branches and leather. I arrived at Emma as a novelist—I would shut myself in a room for years at a time in order to produce a finished piece—and by the end of the week I was a practicing poet. Given favorable conditions, creativity will turn on a dime.

Now that the Emma 2010 Collaboration and the fundraising auction are over, I have new art in my

house. One piece is called *Solar Phases*: Michael Hosaluk (Canada) turned the wooden bowl; Sorin Manesa-Burloiu (Romania) carved intricate patterns into the wood; Greg Wilbur (US) crafted a copper bowl that rests inside the wooden one; Adrian Legge (UK) forged a spiraling iron base. Another piece I brought home is called *The Emma Scepter*. It's a product of so many artists I can't identify all of their separate contributions in wood, metal, ink, soapstone, and carved detail. These are only two examples of the hundreds produced by those who came to play and work at Emma 2010. Additional images appear at the website, emmacollaboration.com. ■

All photos by Colin Wallace, integrityimages.ca

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Michael Hosaluk drills a hole.



Sandra Dunn and Peter von Tiesenhausen, two metal-smiths, "drill" a hole.