



Tale of a Fish Scale

Featuring the work of

Laura Grier

Erin Marie Konsmo

Ruby Sweetman

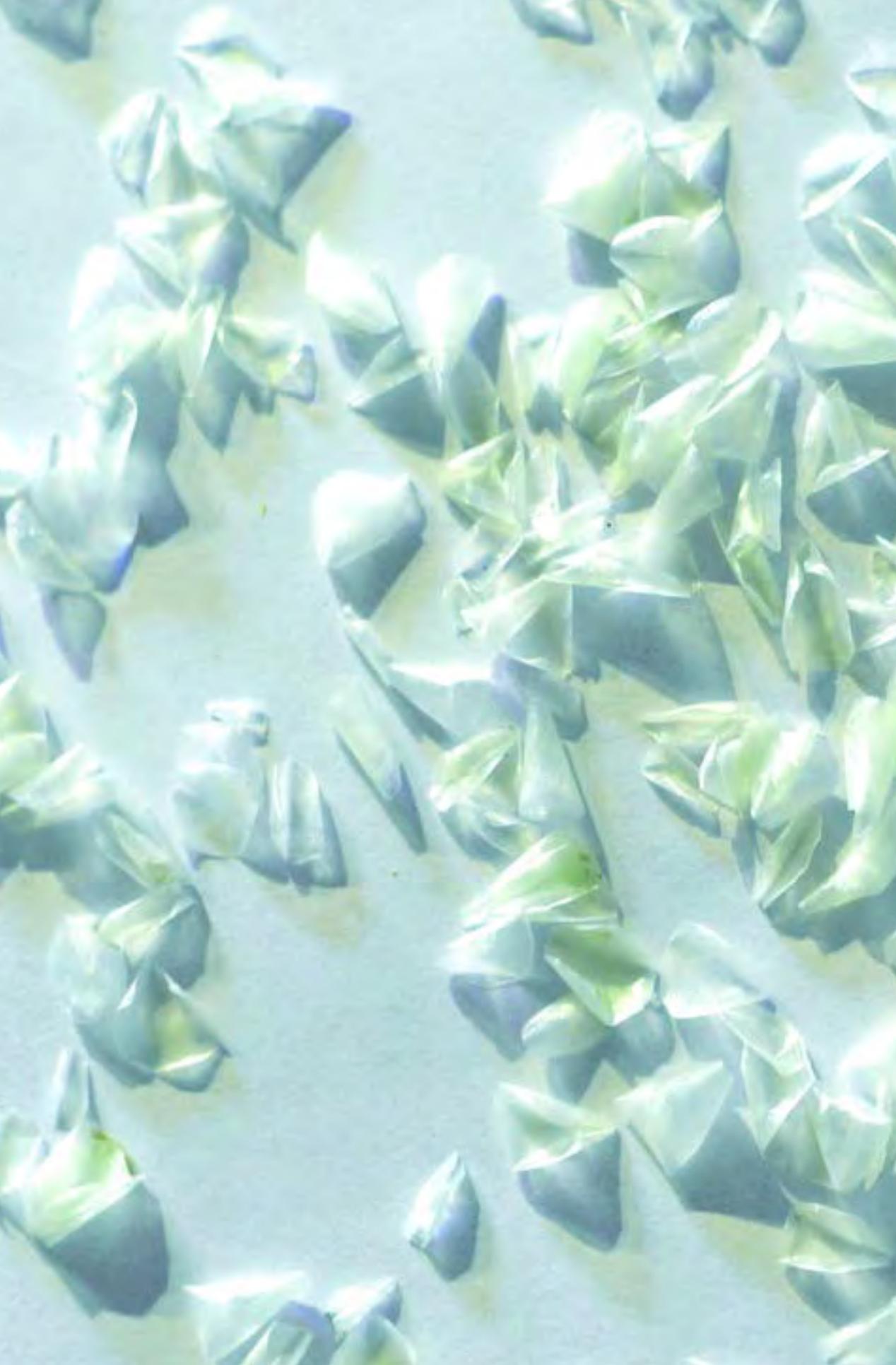


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Acknowledgments

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the Travelling Exhibition Program (TREX) acknowledge that the artistic activity we support takes place on the territories of Treaty 6, 7 and 8. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit who have lived on and cared for these lands for generations and we are grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers, Elders and those who have gone before us. We make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we reside on. We reaffirm our commitment to strengthening our relationships with Indigenous communities and growing our shared knowledge and understanding.

This publication was produced in conjunction with the TREX exhibition *Tale of a Fish Scale*. *Tale of a Fish Scale* will tour throughout Alberta to non-traditional gallery spaces from September 2021-August 2023. Visit www.trexsoutheast.ca to find out more about the program and locations of each exhibition.

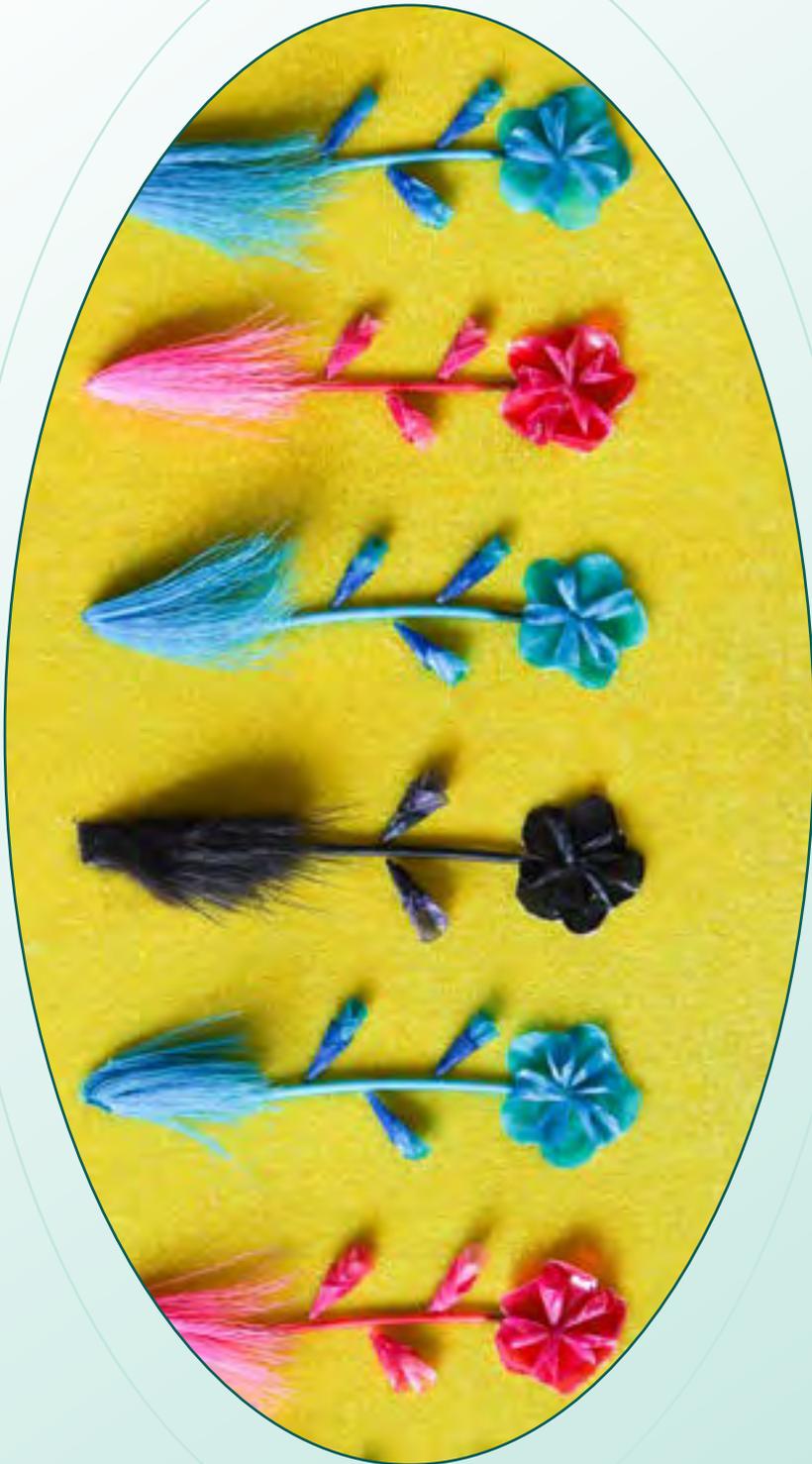
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Detail of Erin Marie Kosmo's *Yellow fish scale block*
made with fish scales, caribou hair, beaver fur
& porcupine quills, 2021



Curatorial Text

They say a good story is like a river. It begins somewhere far away and travels from one place to another, bringing life and pleasure to all along its path. In the exhibition *Tale of a Fish Scale*, our story begins deep within Alberta's lakes and rivers. Featuring three series of artworks made with and about fish from the province, the exhibition tells a story of gratitude, as seen through the fish scale art form, as well as a cautionary tale surrounding the health of this animal's ecosystem.

Fish Scale art is a unique art form developed and practised by Métis and Cree people living in Northern Alberta. In artworks by Erin Marie Konsmo and Ruby Sweetman, we see two generations of artists take on this contemporary art form using the large scales of whitefish netted in the region. With the philosophy of using every part of the animal, fish scales are arranged in varying patterns in conjunction with fish bones, porcupine quills and other naturally sourced materials.

Fish scales suitable for this art form are not available in the commercial market. Accordingly, there are few artists practised in this time and labour intensive medium. Artists must catch, clean and scale a fish before the individual scales can be dried and pigmented for later use. The artist Ruby Sweetman has been passing on her knowledge of this art form for over 30 years, particularly in her role as an educator at Portage College in Lac LaBiche. Her intricate, small-scale sculptures mimic natural elements such as flowers and prairie grasses. In the work of Erin Marie Konsmo, the fish scale art form is pushed into the digital realm. Konsmo employs macro-photography and composite imaging, layering four to five images on top of one another to create sharp, zoomed-in images of the fish scales. Combining photographs alongside their neon pigmented fish scale arrangements, Konsmo's work demonstrates curiosity and a sense of playful optimism.

The artist Laura Grier grew up around many lakes and rivers in the rolling hills of Hinton, Alberta. In their series of lithographic monoprints titled "ŁUE", Grier investigates how polluted waterways have affected a variety of fish found in Alberta. Toxic spills from pulp mills and oil sand mines into the Athabasca River where Grier grew

up have been a subject of concern for many in the area. Climate change causing blue-green algae to bloom in lakes, as well as run-off from farmer's fields and sewage leaks, are other concerns for many water bodies across the province. The resulting deformed, diseased and dying fish encountered in parts of the province are warning signs that greater attention and care need be given.

Tale of a Fish Scale reflects on the beauty and bounty of fish, as well as the responsibility we hold as stewards of the lakes and rivers they live in. The exhibition hopes to pass on knowledge of the fish scale art form while opening up important dialogues surrounding the preservation of Alberta waterways. The fish that inhabit these waters, the whitefish, perch and pike, are deeply tied to our leisure, diets and identity, and should continue to be a source of joy, health and art for generations to come.

Curatorial text by Genevieve Farrell





Laura Grier
Dechada
lithograph
2015
22" x 30"

Laura Grier

Artist Bio

Laura Grier is a D eljne First Nations artist and printmaker, born in Somba k e (Yellowknife), and based out of Alberta. Through the use of traditional print mediums, they instrumentalize the power of the handmade to reflect political sociology, culture, environmentalism and Indigeneity. Responding to lived experiences of being an urban displaced Dene woman through print, Laura's work is also inspired by the dynamism of Indigenous art practices and uses printmaking as a tool for resistance, refusal and inherent Bets'jne. They hold a BFA from NSCADU (K'jipuktuk) and an MFA from OCAD University (Tkaronto). They have exhibited at Xpace Cultural Centre, Harcourt House, DC3 Art Projects, SNAP Gallery and ArtsPlace in Alberta. Laura received grants and awards for their work, including Indigenous project grants from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, and was the 2018 RISE Emerging Artist recipient.

Artist's Statement

Like "canaries in a coal mine," the deteriorating health of fish and other wildlife speaks volumes about the need to clean up our waters. This ongoing series of stone lithograph and silkscreen prints explores our relationships to the environment and refers to our current way of life and its effects on living creatures. Influences come from real discoveries of deformed fish.

ABOUT

THE ARTISTS

Artist's Statement

Fish scale art is a contemporary Indigenous art form that uses the scales and bones from whitefish to create elaborate miniature florals. Whitefish are found in many of the lakes in Alberta, creating a connection between bodies of water, fish and the artist. The art form requires many steps to harvest and prepare the materials before the actual creation of works, solidifying a close relationship with the material itself.

Erin Konsmo's practice has been guided by experienced fish scale artists, and as a queer, new generation artist, they seek to queer the practice of fish scale art by using different forms and media. They also draw parallels between this water based sparkle and queer aesthetics of glitter and sequins.

Erin currently works with fish scales in multiple forms, including the more common florals in shadow boxes. More recently they have been working with fish scales using macro-photography. Macro photography allows them to manipulate the size and form in which we generally see fish scale art represented. Layering the physical form of fish scales over top of digital images of enlarged scales pulls viewers in to consider all the small details of this important material. While at first glance we may underestimate this form, macro photography is a way

Erin Marie Konsmo

to remind people of the beauty that exists on a single fish scale. The mix of both digital and physical forms also creates a tension between the fragility of fish in their physical form and the potential devastation of loss if we do not protect the waters that fish find home in.

Erin invites viewers to not only develop a relationship with fish through this form, but also consider their relationship as it relates to the "scale" of artistic pieces. Erin is interested in both fish scales and the scale of artistic works and how we give value and meaning based on the size of artistic works.

This series plays with dynamic colour sets and brings together both macro photography and fish scales.



Erin Marie Konsmo
Yellow scale burst
fish scales &
porcupine quills
2021
6 x 8"

Artist Bio

Erin Marie Konsmo is a Métis prairie queer who grew up in central Alberta and is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. Their arts practice currently focuses on fish scale art, an art form they are being mentored into by Métis artist Jaime Morse. Fish scale art is a land-based arts practice that includes catching whitefish, processing and cleaning the scales, then dyeing them to be manipulated into fish scale artwork. Most recently Erin was involved in the Wall-to-Wall Mural & Culture Festival in Treaty 1 territory (Winnipeg) and created a large scale digital art piece called "Fish/Scale". This piece played with the idea of scale by blowing up fish scale florals on a fish to a mural format that was 4 x 16 feet in size.



Ruby Sweetman

Ruby Sweetman
White Fish Scale Picture
porcupine quill stems
in wooden frame
2021
9" x 7"

Ruby Sweetman is of mixed Cree ancestry and is passionate about sharing her knowledge of traditional Indigenous arts and culture. Sweetman has been teaching at Portage College over twenty years where she instructs in the Native Arts and Culture Program. Using both traditional and contemporary techniques, Sweetman teaches in variety of course areas including: sculpt-mixed media sculpture, traditional Indigenous footwear, nature craft and design, and decorative arts. Sweetman is proficient in traditional beadwork, sewing and design. She is also one of only a handful of instructors in Canada that still teaches the ancient art of Woodland Cree hide tanning. Sweetman studied under master hide tanning instructor Metis elder Elsie Quintal where she learned this celebrated and time honored art form.

Sweetman has her teaching certification from Portage College in the Field of Native Arts and Culture, and teaches in non-academic Indigenous community settings and at Traditional ceremonial events.

Sweetman's art work has been exhibited in museums and galleries in Canada and can be found in various private, corporate, and public collections including the Museum of Aboriginal Arts and Artifacts and the Lois Hole Hospital Art Collection, Royal Museum. Sweetman is also a recipient of grants and awards from the Alberta Craft Council and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

Artist's Works



Ruby Sweetman
White & Red Flowers
fish scales, fish bones
& porcupine quills
2021
12" x 11"



Ruby Sweetman
White Fish Scale Picture
fish scales & porcupine
quill stems
2021
9" x 7"



Ruby Sweetman
Mixed Flowers
perch scales
2021
9" x 7"



Ruby Sweetman
Procedure of Creating Flo
blue fish scales
2021
15" x 11.5"



Erin Marie Koonsmo
*Yellow fish scales, caribou
hair, beaver fur &
porcupine quills*
2021
15" x 7"



Erin Marie Koonsmo
Yellow fish cones 1
fish scales, caribou
hair, porcupine quills
& macro-photography
2021
20" x 9"



Erin Marie Koonsmo
Yellow fish cones 2 & 3
fish scales, caribou
hair & porcupine quills
& macro-imaging
2021
6" x 8" each



Erin Marie Koonsmo
Yellow scale burst
fish scales &
porcupine quills
2021
6" x 8"

Laura Grier
Sahba
lithograph
2015
22" x 30"



Laura Grier
Dechada
lithograph
2015
22" x 30"



Laura Grier
Lú
lithograph
2015
22" x 30"



Laura Grier
?Ohda II
lithograph
2018
22" x 30"



Laura Grier
?Ohda
lithograph
2018
22" x 30"

Fish Scale Flowers

lesson plan by
Ruby Sweetman



Ruby Sweetman
*Blue Vase with twelve
White Fish Scale Red Roses*
2021



One jar of natural colored
white fish scales and one jar
of red died perch fish scales

Introduction

Native People try to use all that they take from Mother Earth for food, clothing and decorations. We make our traditional clothing and homes from the hides of animals and decorate using the animal's hair or porcupine quills. As is the case with the fish we catch to eat, their scales and bones can be saved and used to create artwork. Fish skin can also be used to make fine leather pouches and rattles. Nothing goes to waste!

Materials

- Washed fish scales
- Dyed fish scales & bones
- White glue
- Tweezers
- A plastic lid

Procedure

Step 1. Gather your materials: fish scales, white glue, a plastic lid (from a margarine container for example) and tweezers.

Step 2. Start by placing your glue on a small piece of white paper. We always use the end of the fish scale that was connected to the fish, which is the pointy end of the scale.

Step 3. Using your tweezers, pick up one fish scale and dab it in the white glue (using a small even amount on the back side of the fish scale which is the back of the curled scale). Now place the fish scale down on the plastic lid.

Step 4. Repeat this process until you have formed a circle.

Step 5. Forming the center of your flower is done in your hand. Pick up two of the curliest fish scales. Dab one scale in white glue (again, a small amount) and insert the glued scale inside the other scale by pushing the scale inside. Continue to do this until you have the shape of a small rose. Hold this flower in your fingers and keep squeezing the scales down inside each other for about five minutes or until the scales cannot slide out anymore.

Step 6. Add glue to the pointy end of the core you just made and adhere it into the center of the circle you made earlier.

Step 7. Fill in the space around the core by adding scales pointy-ends-in until you have the desired fullness.

Step 8. Dry the flower for about one hour. After this, you can push the plastic underneath the flower and it should pop off, then you can use a hot glue-gun and adhere it to whatever you want.



Summary Questions

Will you be doing more of this style of art?

Did you enjoy learning about the fish scale art form?

Will you be going out to do some fishing to gather your own scales?

Fish Scale Florals

lesson plan by
Erin Marie Konsmo

Introduction

Within the exhibit *Tale of a Fish Scale*, both Ruby Sweetman and Erin Konsmo use fish scales to create tiny intricate florals. As a practice, using different gifts from animals and fish that are harvested is a part of respecting their life. Fish scales are one of the gifts from fish. In this activity participants will create their own paper fish scale florals. The floral can either be turned into a fish scale flower or a hanging fish scale mobile. Create several of these florals and hang them in front of a window, on a door or from the ceiling.

Each fish scale is as unique as a person's fingerprint! No two scales are the same on a fish. The shape and size of a fish scale varies depending on the species of fish.

Fish scale art is a contemporary Indigenous art form that is practiced by Métis, Cree and Dene folks. It is commonly practiced across Alberta by these nations and is an art form taught by Indigenous artists and knowledge keepers.



Objectives

- Interact with a digital version of a whitefish scale.
- Learn about the importance of fish and the gifts they provide us.
- Learn how to create a five-petal floral using paper.

Materials

- Coloured or plain paper for the fish scale florals
- Photocopier or scanner for printing the fish scales - request this print out from TREX Southeast team at trex.se.space@gmail.com
- Scissors
- Glue-stick

Option 1

- Holepunch
- Paper hole reinforcement stickers
- Yarn or thread for hanging

Option 2

- Marker
- Posterboard



Step 1: Print out two copies of the 2-page fish scale document. Print double sided so that the scales are double sided. This will make the fish scale cones appear as a double-sided fish scale.

Step 2: Cut out the fish scales around the outside edge.

Step 3: Take five of the double-sided fish scales you have cut out and roll them on the bottom edge to make a cone. Apply glue with a glue stick to keep the cone shape. These will serve as the bottom of your fish scale floral.



Step 4: Glue the 5 flat fish scale together, slightly overlapping on the sides to make a 5-petal flower.

Step 5: Glue the five fish scale cones onto the flower. Place the cones where each of the fish scales overlap.



Option 1

Make a mobile fish scale floral

Step 6: Make a hole on one edge of a fish scale. Add thread through the hole and tie a knot so you can hang your mobile.

Note: You can add paper hole reinforcements on the front and back of the hole to make it sturdier.



Option 2

Make a fish scale flower

Step 6: Glue the flower onto a piece of poster board. Draw a stem with a marker below the flower and add two fish scale cones for the leaves.

Variation: Print off the fish scales on light coloured paper to change the colours of the fish scales. For example, a yellow, lavender or pale blue.



Plant Printing

lesson plan
by Laura Grier



Introduction

All around our urban places and homes there is life. No matter where we live and no matter what season, there is plant life. This workshop will teach you how to use different kinds of plants to create prints. Not only can we learn what kind of plants are around us, we can appreciate the natural essence and shapes that plants make. Participants will learn how to print plants and leaves found in or outside the home onto cards, post-cards and cloth.



Objectives

- Experiment and create prints using plants and flowers.
- Learn about the origin of the plants around you.
- Discover Indigenous names for some common urban plants.
- Create various patterns and images using plants and coloured paint.



Materials

- Water based SpeedBall Block Printing ink. Alternatively, use water based acrylic paint. Colours: magenta, blue/cyan, yellow.
- Pieces of 8.5" x 11" or smaller paper and other material (speed ball print-making paper, bond paper, cards, post cards, cloth or clothing).
- Paintbrushes.
- Cloth or wax paper (to protect your surface).
- Wear clothes that are okay to get dirty (water based ink is non-toxic and washable).
- Wooden spoon or rolling pin for printing (you can also use your hands).
- Paper towel, paper plate or palette to mix ink.
- Cup for water.
- Plants and leaves from a garden, park, or flower shop (picked with consent).

Step 1:

Depending on where you are, have participants go and gather plants, or instruct them to have gathered them previously. Have a printout from the internet of some of the plants found around the area and their origins. Go around and have participants tell a story or explain about the plants they gathered, and try to identify some from the printout.

Step 2:

Take a brush with ink on it and lightly paint the back side of plant or leaf.

Step 3:

Take a piece of paper or other material and place the plant ink side down. Take another piece of paper, or paper towel, and set it on top of the plant as backing.



Step 4:

Lightly roll up, down and across the paper using a rolling pin, spoon, barren or your hands.

Step 5:

Remove the backing paper and slowly lift the plant off of the paper.

Step 6:

Use a variety of colours to ink up plants and play with plant pattern prints. You can also print on different surfaces like cloth, clothing, post cards, and cards.

The Travelling Exhibition Program

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA) has supported a provincial travelling exhibition program since 1980. The mandate of the AFA Travelling Exhibition Program is to provide every Albertan with the opportunity to enjoy visual art exhibitions in their community. Three regional galleries and one arts organization coordinate the program for the AFA:

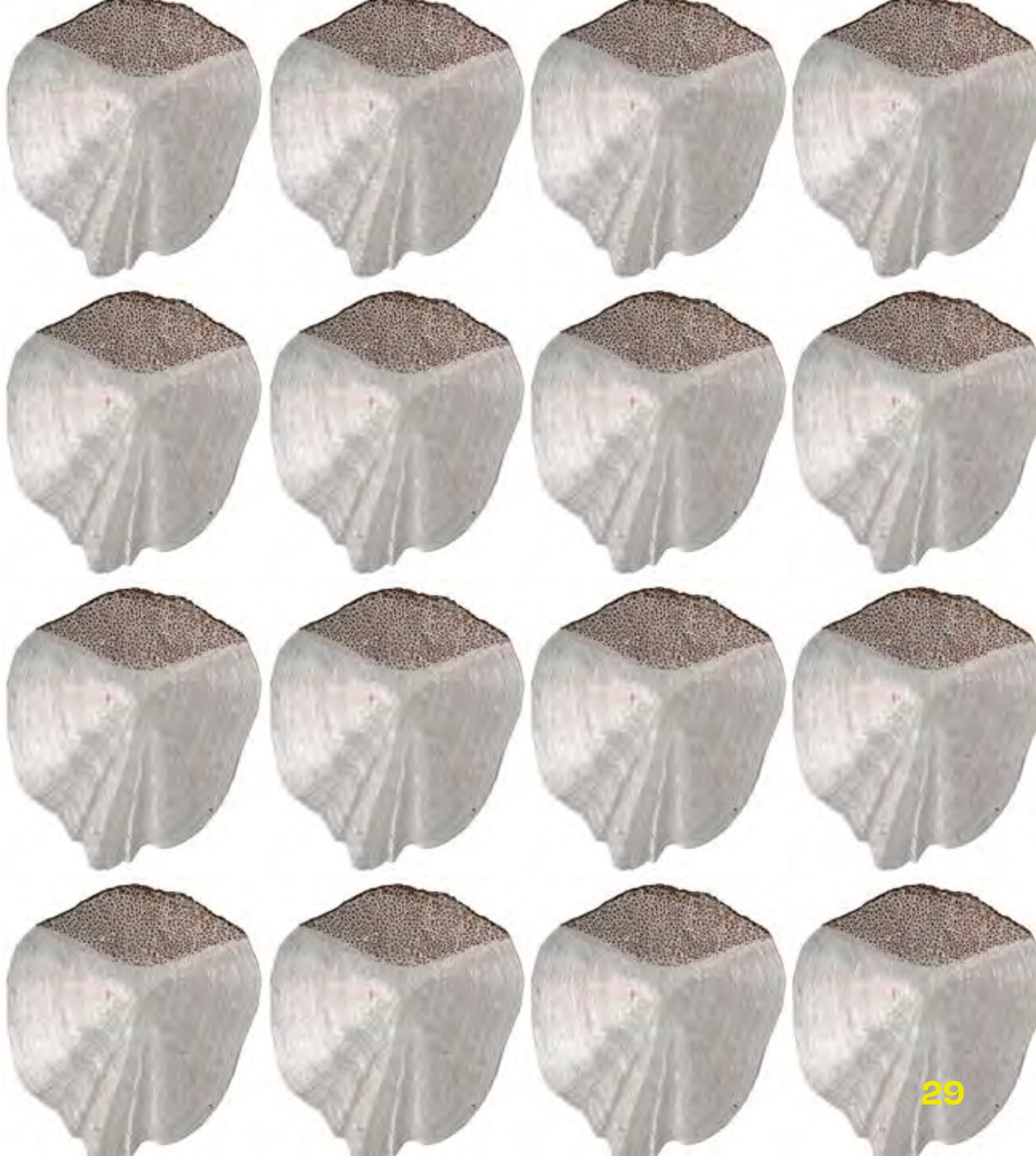
- TREX Northwest: Art Gallery of Grande Prairie, Grande Prairie
- TREX Northeast & North Central: Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton
- TREX Southwest: Alberta Society of Artists, Calgary
- TREX Southeast: Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat

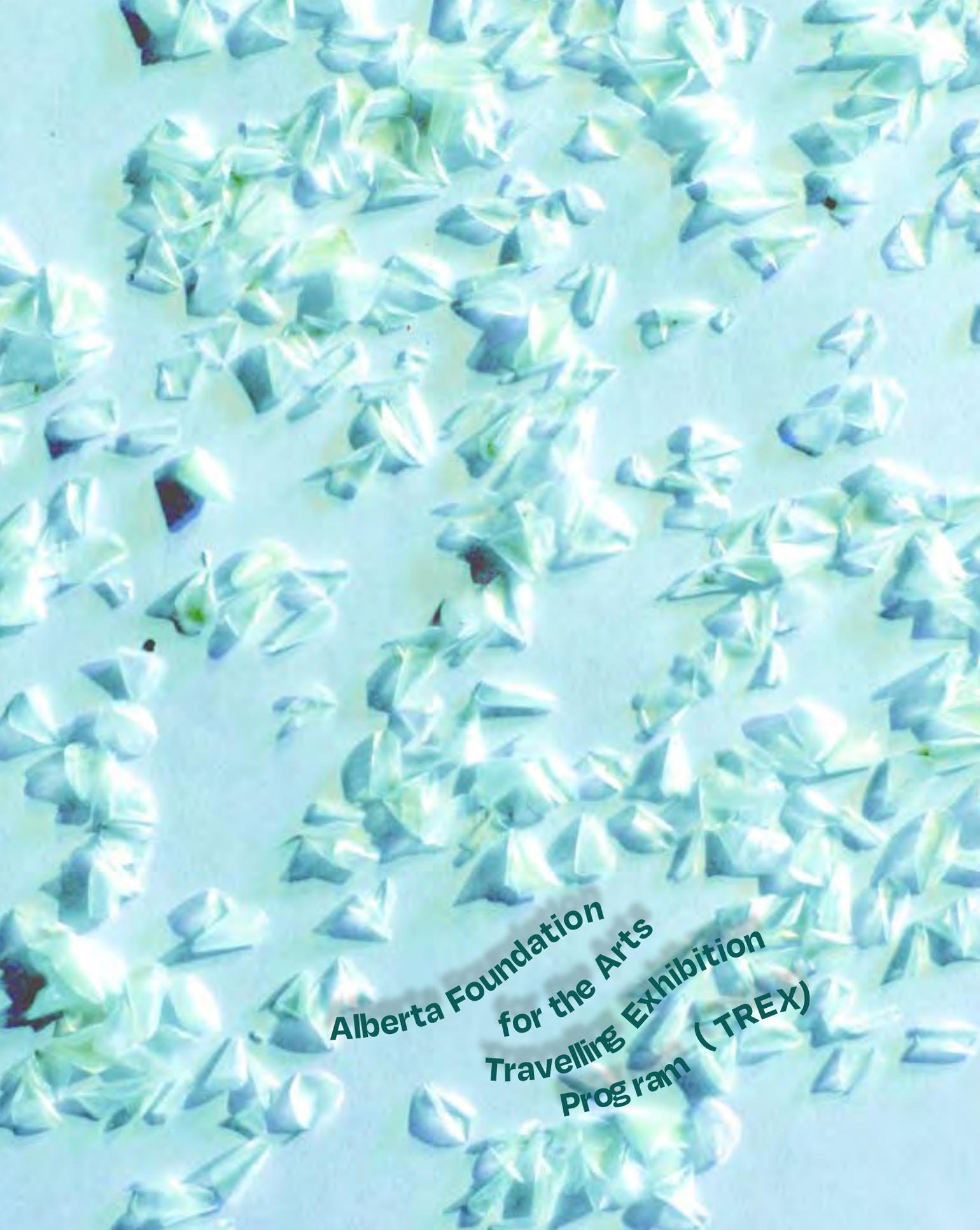
Each year, more than 300,000 Albertans enjoy many exhibitions in communities ranging from High Level in the north to Milk River in the south and virtually everywhere in between. The AFA Travelling Exhibition Program also offers educational support material to help educators integrate the visual arts into the school curriculum.

Exhibitions for the TREX program are curated from a variety of sources, including private and public collections. A major part of the program assists in making the AFA's extensive art collection available to Albertans. This growing art collection consists of over 8,000 artworks showcasing the creative talents of more than 2000 artists. As the only provincial art collection in Alberta, the AFA collection reflects the development of the vibrant visual arts community in the province and has become an important cultural legacy for all Albertans.

The Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre

The Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre is where the stories of our great collective culture are told through music and dance, painting and sculpture, plays and concerts, exhibitions and installations, artifacts and art, education programs and private events. The Esplanade opened in celebration of Alberta's centennial in 2005 and ever since, Medicine Hat has welcomed a steady procession of artists and audiences, storytellers and story-lovers from around the region and around the globe. The celebration continues today.





**Alberta Foundation
for the Arts
Travelling Exhibition
Program (Trex)**