

Shawn Skabelund's latest installation, 'Their Largeness Passes Through Me,' brings unnoticed into light

By Ash Lohmann

From growing up in Idaho to living in Flagstaff for 25 years, artist Shawn Skabelund is no stranger to ponderosa pine trees. Though rather than make the beloved trees the mere subject of his artwork, Skabelund's new installation in downtown Flagstaff's HeArt Box gallery, "Their Largeness Passes Through Me," takes a more intimate approach.

As an artist, Skabelund said his creative process involves collaborating with a place, a term that involves taking a deep dive into a place's history, economy, ecological concerns and more in order to create something that engages audiences.

Jill Sans, HeArt Box owner, said she remembers encountering Skabelund's work at Coconino Center for the Arts when she had to approach him suggesting he show his work in the gallery sometime.

"His use of natural materials was so simple and beautiful, yet there was so much more to it that was almost unseen," Sans said.

"Their Largeness Passes Through Me" utilizes natural materials like Skabelund's other works, however, the artist said this installation stands out from his others because it is a deeper dive into his own mind.

"I'm not really focusing on a place," Skabelund said. "Unless that place is between my two ears—my mindset, that landscape within myself."

In his artist's statement for "Their Largeness Passes Through Me," Skabelund discusses his mental health challenges and how, while mountain biking to clear his mind, he made a discovery.

"While riding my bike down a trail at the bottom of a ravine, I noticed several logs that had been cut by the Forest Service," Skabelund's statement read. "Those logs had once stood vertically, part of a third-six-inch diameter ponderosa pine that helped shade the ravine, until a fire swept through."

The statement details how for six months, Skabelund retreated to the ravine in isolation to clean and sand the logs in preparation to be seen by a wider audience. Eventually, all but what Skabelund managed to carry out had been swept away in a storm, it explained.

"The ravine and all that it offered, and specifically this tree, had done its part, to heal and mend—its largeness passing through me," the statement finished.

Sans said it feels special to have Skabelund share more of his internal world and himself with the outside world in this installation.

"I felt honored to hold space for that in a space that is a HeArt Box," Sans said. "You hear him talk about these materials, these objects. They're like friends. It's just a different way to see his work and get to know him and understand the deeper connection to his pieces and how he relates himself to a tree and his journey. It's just been cool to see."

Skabelund said this installation also differed from many of his other works. He had to make a major pivot toward the end of his process.

"We had to take out the two ponderosa pine trees that I was going to put in because of the weight of them," Skabelund said. "I had to quickly come up with a new exhibit basically within one week."

Most of Skabelund's installations are developed over the process of years, he explained. Though, in "Their Largeness Passes Through Me," Skabelund ultimately developed an installation that was still representative of his artist statement and was created utilizing almost every portion of a ponderosa pine tree.

Skabelund said he chose to focus on using ponderosa pine as much as he could for this installation because they were the trees that he isolated himself among while navigating his mental health challenges.

One way the tree is on display in "Their Largeness Passes Through Me" is in the casted pairs of hands in the installation. One set of hands are holding a one-and-a-half-inch Ponderosa seedling, Skabelund said. Another set of hands were created using the pine pitch, Sans explained.

The installation also exhibits Skabelund's use of pine pollen, squirrel-chewed pinecones and twigs, as well as large pieces of ponderosa pine tree trunks that had once been engulfed in the Schultz Fire's flames.

"There are about 18 log ponderosas pine trees in the show that were burnt in 2010, and they were burnt by the fire. But they still stood," Skabelund said. "Over the course of 12 years, the wind blew and weathered these trees to the most beautiful, surreal forms that you'll ever see, at least in this part of the world."

The artist explained that eventually, had he not discovered the trees, they would have fallen down and eroded, and no one would have realized or appreciated their beauty.

"Part of my vision as an artist is to collect stuff in the landscape that people live in and bring it into a gallery and share it with them so that when they're out there, they can start noticing things themselves," Skabelund said.

"They are perfectly the way he found them, but they're so sculptural and just striking," Sans said.

Skabelund said he noticed that many—even those who have spent most of their lives around ponderosa pine trees in Flagstaff—don't notice the nuances of their surroundings.

"What is a squirrel stick? They don't even notice them when they go hiking," Skabelund said. "These little white, bone-like sticks that squirrels drop from the trees."

He said a large goal of his work is to bring those unseen elements to light.

“To share with people the beauty of stuff that they would see if they would just open their eyes,” Skabelund said.

“Their Largeness Passes Through Me” is on display in the HeArt Box gallery through August 3. Those interested in seeing it in person can consult the gallery website at theheartbox.space, where viewing hours for the installation are posted.