



Brian Collier, Associate Professor of Fine Arts in Art and Design, as well as Curator and Director of the McCarthy Art Gallery at Saint Michael's College, devotes himself to a dizzying and inspiring array of impressive personal and professional projects (many of which are viewable at briand-collier.net). All of Collier's work centers on issues of ecology and the environment, along with close examination of human interventions that either suppress or support the natural world.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Ecology, Art, and Environment at Saint Michael's College

Collier's primary current project is Unlawning America (unlawningamerica.societyrne.net), which focuses on educating others on the value of not mowing. He hopes to get people to think deeply about their reasons for mowing spaces that are not needed for sports or play. While people in the United States often keep mown areas simply because of cultural aesthetics and social conditioning, Collier reports, lawns do a great deal of ecological damage and are detrimental to animals, insects, and wild plants.

As Collier has spread the adage of "If you don't use it, don't mow it!" throughout the community, Saint Michael's College has become more receptive to the idea and has set aside a couple of "no-mow" meadows on campus. Collier encourages people to go even further if possible by planting native plants to support local wildlife. An additional step can be taken by planting a garden. As Collier points out, this action can be a particularly important part of solving global food supply issues; establishing small-scale, organic agriculture areas all around the places that people live and work could supply much of the food needed on the planet.

Collier has become involved with the "no-mow" movement because, as he says, "we

haven't yet seen a shift where it's more normal to unawn than to mow," and he would like to help facilitate this paradigm change. The goal, however, is not to take away space people use; it's to get people to reconsider maintaining lawns that aren't used for other purposes. Unlawning saves time and money and sharply reduces pesticide use. What's required is a shift in people's thinking—a cultural shift. Such shifts, as Collier points out, happen all the time, and artists are often crucial to the process. Collier spreads the unlawning message through community presentations, and he encourages people to do what they can to unawn in small and big ways.

The Collier Classification System for Very Small Objects

Another of Collier's ongoing projects, The Collier Classification System for Very Small Objects—launched in 2004—was designed so that people could think about closely investigating and noticing small items. The collection responds to the ways that the natural world is defined and represented in natural history settings, and it challenges existing taxonomic systems. Collier calls the collection an "archive

of the wonder of little stuff." Collier did define a new taxonomy for this project which can be used by anyone to assign new names to things they find.

The collection, viewable online at www.verysmallobjects.com, has also been presented as a traveling museum. For an exhibition at the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum, Collier—who is also an accomplished fine furniture maker—created cherry wood cabinets with glass fronts, reminiscent of old library cases, to house and exhibit the collection.

Initiatives at St. Michael's

Collier's converging interests in art and ecology have found a wonderful outlet for expression in Saint Michael's 340-acre natural area. Declan McCabe, Professor of Biology and Natural Area Coordinator at Saint Michael's, discusses the variety of opportunities for truly integrative liberal arts projects. McCabe wholeheartedly supports—and is delighted by—the majority of Collier's ideas for art projects in the natural area. Students in Collier's classes create ecological art that is designed to compost so it doesn't need removal. For example, the signs they create are made from local plants. In one project, McCabe



"UNLAWNING AMERICA: A CALL TO INACTION" EXHIBITION IMAGE AT BURLINGTON CITY ARTS, BURLINGTON, VT
(ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS, BOTANICAL SPECIMENS, WOOD PLANTER, SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO) 2017.

reports that the students gathered milkweed seeds, then created a video of scattering them. In another project, students filled their footprints with compost and wildflower seeds. McCabe did have to re-direct Collier's idea of placing bat houses in the natural area since the type of bat that would be drawn to them would compete with the bats in the woods; the bat houses were installed on campus instead.

Collier has worked with the Saint Michael's Center for the Environment to set up a pollinator garden between the student center and dining hall, along with other "pollinator pods" with student-designed informational signage. The goal is to present this type of space, along with the "no-mow" meadows, as models of positive ecological function that are good and normal.

Work as a Professor

Collier brings his expansive energy and creativity to his courses, as well. Heather Ferrell, Curator and Exhibitions Director at Burlington City Arts (BCA)—where Collier serves on the advisory committee—admires how Collier teaches students to integrate art and sustainability. Ferrell also loves to bounce around ideas for shows and artists with Collier, and

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she appreciates the ways he is "always thinking about how to bring in other viewpoints" to the McCarthy Art Gallery. Nathaniel Lew, Chair of Fine Arts and Professor of Music, says that Collier does excellent work as Curator and Director of the McCarthy Art Gallery, which is housed in the performing arts building. Lew admires Collier's strengths as a teacher and colleague—strengths such as his spirit of collaboration, his creativity, and his "quirky activist spirit." Lew particularly looks forward to one annual project that students in Collier's sculpture class complete: inflatables made from

garbage bags, plastic sheeting, and tape. Lew points out that this project forces students to think in an entirely different way about design. The fragile constructions and the fans that inflate them are carefully set up in a central area for viewing by the campus community—for one day. Lew says it's a "highlight" of the year, and he makes sure to rush over between classes to enjoy the show.

Collier's student and advisee, Celeste Matte—who will graduate in 2022 with degrees in Elementary Education as well as Art and Design—really appreciated Collier's innovative



approach to teaching sculpture remotely when the class had to go online during the pandemic. To replace the second big project planned for the second half of the course, Collier assigned one small sculpture a day for thirty days, each focusing on a sculptural term such as "texture," "additive," "subtractive," etc. The students worked with supplies they had at home, such as pieces from board games or clothes, so they all worked with different media, then submitted pictures of the completed sculptures for group critique. Matte says that this activity is a great example of the sort of freedom Collier provides to his students as they develop their work. As a future educator, she appreciates Collier's pedagogical model which affords students both support and autonomy, driven by his desire for each student to succeed to the best of their ability.

Sense of Humor

Collier's sense of humor shows up throughout his work and activism. Will Mentor, Associate Professor of Fine Arts at Saint Michael's tells the story of a time Collier was in graduate school and noticed a groundhog at a construction site. Collier ringed the hole with official fencing and signs, and no one disturbed the area until late in the project. This story shows Collier's interests in interactions with the environment at the edge of human-dominated spaces, along with his playfulness

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"TEACH THE STARLINGS"
EXHIBITION IMAGE AT ARTSITES,
RIVERHEAD, NY (AUDIO-RIGGED
NESTBOX, AUDIO RIGGED SUET
FEEDING STATION, FIBERGLASS
STARLING SCULPTURES,
PLASTIC MEGAPHONES) 2010.

in exploring those interactions. Another wonderful example of both Collier's work and sense of humor is his "Teach the Starlings" project (teachstarlings.societyrne.net). In this, one of many bird-related projects he has developed, Collier teaches the history of how European starlings were introduced in North America. He then encourages people to teach starlings—who have strong, innate mimicry abilities—to say "Schieffelin," which is the name of the man who introduced them in North America.

"Don't be just one thing"

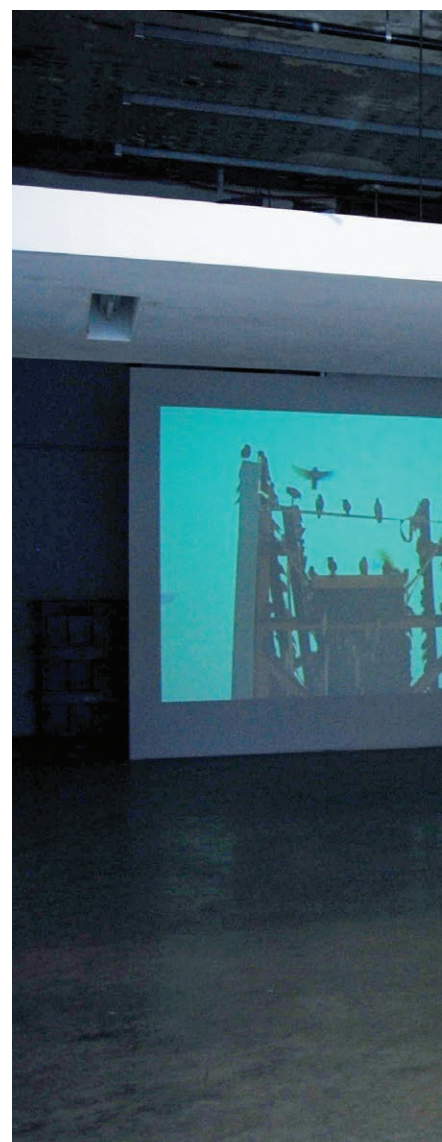
In his many projects, Collier strives to meld visual strengths, writing skills, and an "awareness of environmental stuff"; his guiding principle is "Don't be just one thing." Collier's colleagues and students are impressed with this range of talents. As Will Mentor, Associate Professor of Fine Arts at Saint Michael's says, "Brian can build a beautiful piece of furniture and teach digital tools. It's incredible—few people have that range of skills." Mentor goes on to say that Collier "could teach any class" in the art department "and do it well."

Mentor points out the ways that Collier's teaching, research, and activism are completely intertwined and seamless, saying that it's a "real pleasure" to work with someone who is so deeply committed to all of the aspects of his work. Ferrell points out Collier's many strengths, calling attention to his talent as an artist, his ability to engage students as a professor, and his well-roundedness, saying that she continually learns from him. McCabe, pointing out that Collier recently completed the Vermont Master Naturalist program, appreciates that Collier continues to learn and develop skills outside of his discipline, where he has already accomplished so much. Lew notes the importance of Collier's work, saying "For him, art is art and also engagement."

As Collier puts it, "I just want to change things—that's my motivation."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.



▲ **"TEACH THE STARLING IN KANSAS CITY"** EXHIBITION IMAGE AT PARAGRAPH GALLERY, KANSAS CITY, MO (WALL MURAL, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS, SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO, PRESERVED STARLING SPECIMEN, FIBERGLASS STARLING SCULPTURES) 2008.

► **"SOME PROPERTIES OF WATER, PHASE 2: EVAPORATION"** EXHIBITION IMAGE AT ARTEMISIA GALLERY, CHICAGO, IL (WOOD, GLASS BOTTOM EVAPORATION TRAYS, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINTS, WOOD COLLECTION BOX) 2003.

►► **"NATURE STUDY NO. 10"** (WAX PRESERVED NATURAL SPECIMEN, WOOD, INK AND WATERCOLOR DRAWING) 1998.

